

# Erving Goffman, Fateful Action, and the Las Vegas Gambling Scene

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## Abstract

This paper explores Erving Goffman's research on gambling, the historical context within which he articulated his views on risk taking, and the contribution he made to our understanding of gambling as a stigmatized social activity. Drawing on the large database assembled in the Erving Goffman Archives, the article traces Goffman's footprint in Las Vegas and shows the personal as well as scholarly dimensions of his interest in betting practices in entertainment venues and risk taking in society at large. The argument is made that the theory of fateful action presented in the seminal study "Where the Action Is" remains a potent if underutilized theoretical, methodological, and political resource. The paper concludes with reflections on the commodification of risk and the role of chance in distribution of rewards in our society.

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Let me show character once, and I will change my  
fate over night. Character is what matters the most.

Dostoyevsky

When you lose your money, you lose nothing.  
When you lose your health, you lose something.  
When you lose your character, you lose everything.

Meyer Lansky

And these are the occasions and places that show respect for  
moral character. Not only in the mountain ranges that invite  
the climber, but also in casinos, pool halls, and racetracks do  
we find places of worship; it may be in churches, where the  
guarantee is high that nothing fateful will occur, that moral  
sensitivity is weak.

Erving Goffman

All life is a gamble and most of us are natural gamblers  
because we have within us the quality which makes us  
willing to risk our comfort, security and present happiness  
for a result that seems more worthwhile... And it is how  
the fate is faced that counts [since] those who confront their  
“Moments of Truth” with grace and dignity are the heroes to  
most of us.

Hank Greenspun

### Introduction

The 1960s proved to be the most productive period in Erving Goffman’s scholarly career. After Anchor Books issued his instant classic *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman published in quick succession *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1961), *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (1961), *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (1963), *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-face Behavior* (1967), and *Strategic Interaction* (1969). With his national reputation on the upswing and tenure decision behind him, Goffman was casting about for a new project to mount during his first sabbatical. The results of the study he conducted during his leave from Berkeley were published in 1967 under the heading “Where the Action Is,” a lengthy essay collected with a few other papers in a slender volume *Interaction Ritual*.

Every indication we have points out that the published results were preliminary, that Goffman was hatching a book-length study on institutionalized gambling which promised to be a milestone in his intellectual career. In 1969, *Time* printed an unsigned article based on an interview with Goffman where a staff writer noted that the prominent sociologist “is also at work on another book that will apply his own experience as a Twenty-one dealer in Las Vegas to the social milieu of a gambling casino” (Exploring a Shadow World, 1969). In *Strategic Interaction* published two years after Goffman’s seminal essay he put his readers on notice that “Comments on casino gambling are based on a Nevada field study in preparation” (1969:122n). Seven years later Goffman applied to the Guggenheim Foundation, which awarded him a fellowship for what the

Foundation's Vice President described as "A Study of Casino Gambling," yet this high-powered and well funded project never produced a requisite publication (André Bernard, personal communication, April 22, 2015). Meanwhile, rumors continued to swirl about Goffman's exploits as a casino dealer, his knotty career as a card counter, his ban from the Nevada gambling halls, and his much anticipated monograph. Alas, Goffman died in 1982 without bringing out the heralded book, the fate of the final manuscript unknown.

Until recently, Goffman's footprint in Nevada remained shrouded in mystery. What little information entered the public domain was of uncertain provenance and questionable veracity. In 2007, the UNLV Center for Democratic Culture started an online project – Erving Goffman Archives (EGA), which helped correct several misconceptions and fill important gaps in this riveting story. The present study owes much to this collaborative venture. Drawing on the newly discovered documents and interviews with his relatives, colleagues, and friends, I examine the traces of Goffman in the Silver State and the study of casino gambling he undertook in the 1960s. Colorful and illuminating as this man's sojourn in Nevada turned out to be, it is not the main focus of this study.

The 73rd president of the American Sociological Association and perhaps the most quoted American sociologist of all times, Erving Goffman entered the gambling scene when Las Vegas was undergoing a spectacular expansion. The 1950's marked "the Las Vegas Strip's greatest growth period as it became a wondrous, neon-lit, beckoning sight" (Friedman 2015:2). The building boom continued into the 1960s when Goffman secured a job as a dealer in a downtown casino. With some 80% of hotels and casinos on the Strip controlled by the mob and the gambling moguls on the defensive about their public image, the advocates for Nevada's main industry stepped up their campaign to legitimize the sordid trade with fresh ideological fodder. "Society judges gambling as a human weakness, but still the great industries of the nation have been built by gamblers in Wall Street," declaimed Hank Greenspun in his eulogy for Nick the Greek (1966). "How do we know that gambling isn't a true spirit of adventure... the pioneers of this country who were the greatest gamblers gambled with oil leases, railroads... but nevertheless integrated into our orderly society and built its most enduring landmarks?" Goffman's sympathetic look at players defying odds and dealers working in tough environments should be understood in the context of this struggle to ground gambling in a venerable American idiom.

Another notable stirring blew across the Silver State at the time when Goffman entered the fray. The new breed of advantage players flooded Nevada eager to break the house with the help of the bestselling book penned by Edward Thorp (1962), a mathematician-turned-card-counter who developed a system for playing blackjack that promised the savvy player a chance to beat the dealer. "Blackjack is the only casino gambling game today where *you* can consistently have an edge," assured Thorp his enthusiastic readers who came to Nevada in droves to test the system and try their luck (1962/1966:4). Goffman was not only the direct beneficiary and avid practitioner of this system; this enterprising sociologist managed to wrestle from the celebrity mathematician some private tips on winning strategies in blackjack.

In 1967, Goffman published his ground-breaking essay "Where the Action Is" (WAI) in which he theorized "gambling [a]s a prototype of action" – a willful rendezvous with destiny for which modern society provides a shrinking number of outlets but which remains central to the functioning of a dynamic, morally astute society (Goffman 1967:186). To understand the origins of his theory, we need to examine its historical roots, contemporary sources on which Goffman built his analysis, and the creative way in which he transformed the current ideas into a conceptual system of his own.

Goffman's investigation is also notable for its methodology, for its imaginative use of participant observation. While ethnographic studies are common in gambling research (Hayano 1982; Browne 1989; Sallaz 2009; Li 2008; Parke and Griffiths 2008; Marksbury 2010), projects where a trained social scientist assumes the role of a dealer are rare. Two inquiries stand out in this respect: Erving Goffman's "Where the Action Is" (1967) and Jeffrey Sallaz's *The Labor of Luck* (2009). Scholars assuming the role of a croupier face methodological challenges and ethical conundrums that invite scrutiny.

Several authors paid close attention to Goffman's theory of action, and those will be dealt with in relevant sections (Smith and McGuirrin 1985; Rosecrance 1986; Holtgrave 1988; Sallaz 2009; Cosgrave 2008; Istrate 2011; Lyng 2014). My treatment differs from prior work in its emphasis on the interfaces between biography, history, and theory (Shalin 2008, 2014). I start by documenting the origins of Goffman's interest in gambling which he shared with Eastern European immigrants. After outlining the competing narratives about commercial gaming at the time when Goffman entered the scene, I trace Goffman's career as a blackjack dealer and examine the circumstances under which he was banned from Nevada casinos. Next, I discuss the intellectual sources and main precepts of Goffman's theory which sought to remove stigma attached to gambling while acknowledging the darker side of casino enterprise. I conclude with thoughts on mixing the personal and the professional in Goffman's research, the commodification of risk and the role of chance in distribution of rewards in our society, and the shifting line separating business startups enjoying the protection of the law from those forced to operate underground.

### **Gambling as a Pastime, Career and Research Endeavor**

Games of chance held a peculiar attraction for immigrants coming to North America from the Old World. Whether they settled on the Lower East Side of New York City, in Chicago slums, or Canadian Manitoba – gambling was a cherished pastime, especially among Jews hailing from Eastern Europe (Fried 1994; Alexander 2001; Pietrusza 2011). The rapid secularization Jewish immigrants underwent in America facilitated the process by removing the stigma attached to gambling. While tolerating games of skills played for their own sake, Jewish law condemned games of chance. Mishnah repudiated dice players as people who waste time rather than do their duty of repairing the world. Betting on a chance outcome with an eye to gaining a material advantage wasn't strictly a crime in the Talmudic era, but it was judged a sinful act and treated harshly (Elon 1994; Galston 2009; Alexander 2001; Cohn n.d.). Sanhedrin disqualified known gamblers from taking the witness stand in a court of law. Rabbis considered a skilful gambler akin to a robber who may be refused burial services and banned from the community. A wife of an incurable gambler could petition the authorities for divorce. So when Jewish immigrants indulged in gambling, it was in the context of their lost religious moorings and a bitter intergenerational conflict.

In his popular short stories, Damon Runyon conjured up a gallery of colorful dice players, card sharps, number runners, racetrack bookies, and all-purpose bettors hailing from the Lower East Side and eager to savor the offerings of the Roaring Twenties. Most were small operators and neighborhood crooks but some graduated to the major league, setting up storefronts in Manhattan and adopting glamorous life styles inimical to their parents' somber mores. One recurrent character in the Runyon storybook, Armand Rosenthal, was modeled after the real action figure Arnold Rothstein, the gambling king of the Jazz Era, who quarreled bitterly with his father (Runyon 2008:152-63). Abraham Rothstein – a pious Jew, community leader, successful businessman – was despondent about his son dishonoring the family name and the faith of his ancestors. While his older brother Harry embraced his father's piety, the adolescent Arnold pawned his father's clock to support his gambling habit (Pietrusza 2011:211). Arnold Rothstein shunned religious education, dropped out of high school,

and after his Bar Mitzvah announced that he would have nothing to do with religion. Rothstein Junior grew to be a high-roller whose lifestyle became synonymous with Gilded Age panache and flair.

Meyer Lansky also honed his gambling skills over his father's objection. The young lad used to sneak away from the tool-and-die-shop where the father found him a job to the nearby Delancey Street where he observed players shooting craps and teaming up to fleece an unwary mark. Having figured out a shill in the audience, Meyer would wait till the last moment before the loaded die was cast to place money on the winning number divulged by the shill's bet (Lacey 1991:33). Soon, he joined forces with Bennie Siegel, Charlie Luciano and other New York City toughs to form a team of his own that would blossom into one of the most powerful operations in the underworld. Meyer's father, Max Lansky, watched in pain his wayward son installing a Christmas tree in his house, neglecting to Bar Mitzvah his children, mixing with wiseguys, and becoming a criminal authority. The senior Lansky must have felt ambivalent, though, since a posh residence in Brooklyn where he and his wife moved in later years could not have been obtained without the ill-gotten money supplied by Meyer and his brother Jacob, another Lansky who traded his father's humble trade for the life of commercial gaming and rum running.

Erving Goffman didn't grow to be a professional numbers man, yet he shared with the career gamblers distaste for religion and fascination with the game. According to Tom Goffman, his father "signed off at 18 from the family. His family was full of Jewish (sic) rituals. He hated them. He hated rituals period" (personal communication, January 8, 2008). Actually, Max Goffman and Anne Averbach who had immigrated to Canada from Russia in the early 1900s did not practice Orthodox Judaism. They arranged for their son's Bar Mitzvah, but the family didn't observe Shabbat consistently, shunned dietary strictures, and apparently took things in stride when Erving married a gentile. Max Goffman who owned a haberdashery store, played cards with his buddies and was reputedly good at it. He also had a knack for playing in the stock market and investing in real estate, which he took up full time after the family moved from tiny Dauphin to metropolitan Winnipeg in 1937. According to one relative, Max Goffman "was now a millionaire living in a truly remarkable house in Winnipeg with beautiful willow trees on the banks of the Red River. He made his fortune by investing in Winnipeg real estate using funds he got from the sale of his Dauphin dry goods store" (Syme 2011a:42 and 2011b; cf. Zaslov 2008; Katz 2010).

Erving was exposed to other role models as well. Uncle Mickey, a card sharp and a professional bookie, was a likely influence. This is how Uncle Mickey is described in the Averbach Family Reunion Album (2011): "Frequent visitors to Winnipeg were Mickey (Averbach) Book, who married Elsie Jones and moved to Edmonton, Alberta, and Anne Goffman. Mickey and Elsie ran a restaurant for a time; in the back of the store Mickey operated his 'bookie' activities. He also ran card games, was handsome, dapper and charming" (cf. Zaslov, 2008; Besbris, 2008). Little more is known about Mickey's racket; some reports relay that his wife's parents owned a traveling circus which, along with the usual attractions, provided an outlet for some heavy action (Marly Zaslov, personal communication, July 22, 2015). A welcome guest at his parents' house, Mickey Averbach (sometimes spelled "Averback" or "Auerbach") must have cut an imposing figure in this close-knit circle comprised of eight brothers and sisters and their families. Judged by the photos, Erving bore a striking physical resemblance to Uncle Mickey.

Yet another intriguing nexus exists between Erving Goffman, the Averbach clan, and professional gambling. Irving (Itzik) Averbach, Goffman's cousin, was a son of Jacob (Yankel) Averbach, owner of the Chicago Kosher Meat Packing Plant and Oscar's Delicatessen, a successful kosher meats outlet in Winnipeg. The Chicago Kosher ran into trouble when local rabbis discovered that it sold non-kosher meat under the label "Kosher" (Ha'ir and Lockshin 1970). After the business was sold, Irving Averbach invested in offshore gambling where he made a name for himself. Relatives remember

him as a dashing handsome, meticulously dressed, globe-trotting operator who used to visit Singapore, Hong Kong, the Middle East, and other exotic destinations, and who did time in jail after running afoul of the law. Some family members convinced by Irving to invest into an ill-fated commercial gambling scheme lost a bundle and never forgave their relative for that (Esther Besbris, personal communication, June 14, 2015; Marly Zaslov, July 22, 2015).

It is unclear when Goffman took up cards in earnest but the life-long interest started at home: “And of course, Goffman’s dad was a huge card player. He loved to play cards. So Goffman would have picked this up as a young child very early on, and he became a really hard gambler, so much so that they thought he had an inside information. I don’t think it is random that he created these concepts of main involvement, side involvement, dominant involvement, subordinate involvement – it probably comes out of card playing” (Albas 2012).

In 1945 Goffman enrolled at the University of Chicago where he excelled in academic subjects and card playing, his smarts duly noted around the campus. Gladys Lang (2009) reports that “those who knew Erving before me saw him as a genius in terms of card playing or whatever he was doing.” The stakes among students were usually small, Joe Gusfield tells us. “No one can lose more than three dollars. Callahan had a slide rule that she used to determine the ratios” (2008). More than money was at stake in such encounters, however. Elizabeth Bott, who dated Erving in Toronto and Chicago, recalls gatherings at her place or the apartment occupied by her friends Pearl and Jack Warn where a group of friends would come to socialize, share gossip, and play cards. “I remember [there] were poker games, sometimes in Pearl’s flat, sometimes in mine. I remember she and I were once sitting on the bed in the next room and Pearl said, ‘What a game! It’s not for money, it’s for blood!’” (Elizabeth Bott-Spillius, personal communication, March 28, 2010).

The Goffman Archives harbor numerous reports showing that Erving’s fascination with cards extended beyond graduate school where students welcomed diversions from their studies. The first time Joan Huber, the 80<sup>th</sup> president of the American Sociological Association, laid her eyes on Goffman, the 73<sup>rd</sup> ASA president, he was dealing blackjack near the ballroom where William Goode, the 63<sup>rd</sup> ASA president, was about to deliver his presidential address (Huber 2009). Gusfield (2009) recalls how Erving and their mutual friend Herman Piven used to bet on whatever came up next as they watched TV shows. Irving Piliavin, Goffman’s colleague at Berkeley, remembers a group of friends assembling for a regular game of poker. An accomplished gambler who won poker championships and was barred from casinos in Vegas and London for counting cards, Piliavin was struck by one episode where a local poker celebrity, Freddy Lisker, joined the circuit of mostly Berkeley professors and cleaned everybody’s clock. “He could have taken us for everything we were worth,” remarked Goffman rapturously. “From what you know by now about Goffman, he did not say reverent things about most people” (Piliavin 2009).

Ironically, Goffman was not good at games of chance. He was a poor poker player, according to Neil Smelser, who offered this recollection:

For a year or two Erving and I were in a poker group with a number other individuals – Irving Piliavin, Henry Miller, Bill Kornhauser, Hal Wilensky, David Matza, for a while Ernest Becker, and a couple of others. We played every two weeks. Erving turned out to be a very poor poker player. Most of the time he lost money in our friendly game. An ironic twist was that he also turned out to be very unimpressive as an impression-manager. He was far from being a poker-face. I used to joke that if he were dealt as much as a pair of deuces his hands would begin to tremble and his face would begin to flush. Given his work and his pride in his insights about the manipulation of human situations, one would have expected Erving to be a Mr. Cool, a good bluffer, and a good strategist (Smelser 2009).

Irving Piliavin's wife is convinced that Goffman's curiosity about casinos was far from purely scholarly: "I truly think this was one of the reasons he wanted to study gamblers in Vegas. It is because he was not good at it and he wanted actually to figure out how these people did those things he could not do" (Piliavin 2009).

While Goffman failed to affect a poker face, he excelled in blackjack, a game that leaves room for memorizing and counting. That's the game he favored on his trips to Reno and Las Vegas, which came with increasing frequency in the early 1960s. Those close to Erving took note of his growing involvement with gambling. His wife Schuyler (Sky) commented on her husband's indifference to home-made food after his trips to Vegas where he availed himself of all-you-can-eat casino fair which made him gain 10-15 pounds (Schuyler Choate Goffman to David Schneider, June 2, 1962). "Goff," as his Canadian friends called him, was now "fitting between the heads in the Hebrides and the gambling tables at Los Vegas where they barred him because he was much too smart for them" (Brownstone 2009; cf. Kurt Lang 2009; Clark 2009; Gusfield 2008). Before long, trips to Las Vegas evolved into family outings, with Erving's wife and son joining the Nevada incursions. "My folks taught me how to count cards," recalls Tom Goffman. "They made a bundle before getting photographed by the casinos [and] frozen out of the action" (personal communication, January 8, 2008).

Nevada trips were rough on the child, not yet a teenager. Here is a recollection of Tom's wife: "Tom told me that he remembers being kept in the kids' room with no windows, not even knowing if [it was day or night]. It was like being thrown into jail, he couldn't get out. He . . . was a baby [cooped up there] for hours, days even. He said sometimes for twenty four hours . . . the sun would come down and the sun would come up but he couldn't see how many days passed cause there were no windows" (P. M. Goffman, personal communication, January 18, 2013).

It isn't certain when Erving's private interest merged with his professional agenda, but he was ready to study gambling in earnest on the eve of his sabbatical leave when he enrolled into a dealers' school and applied for a license to operate blackjack tables. On December 13, 1960, Goffman dispatched a letter to Everett Hughes, his University of Chicago mentor:

Until Christmas I'll be in the field, and return for 9 months in August, the field in this case being the city of non-homes, Las Vegas. Tomorrow I get my police card "to go on the slots," and after a few days of that I'll start training to deal 21.

About the same time, Goffman asked his friend Melvin Kohn, another ASA president in the making, to send a reference on his behalf to the Las Vegas sheriff who needed a confirmation of Erving's fitness for the job as a casino dealer (personal communication, January 11, 2007). Thus began a chapter in Goffman's life that would have far-reaching personal and professional repercussions. Before we trace Goffman's steps in Las Vegas, we need to take a close look at gambling as a national pastime and commercial institution.

### **Gambling as a National Idiom**

America's engagement with gambling can be traced back to its very beginnings, with the Nineteenth century witnessing a spike in gaming opportunities, but it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that games of chance evolved into a national pastime (Thompson 2001; Schwartz 2006; Wolfe and Owens 2009). Damon Runyon is our authority here.

In his 1921 column "Your Neighbor – the Gambler," Runyon spotted "the gambling fever" spreading from the underworld to well-heeled society. The fever started during World War One and reached epidemic proportion in the postwar years when everybody was "seeking action for their money. Men and women had become accustomed to big prices, in everything, and they gambled big. Some played the market. Some went to races. Some shot craps. Others played cards" (Runyon 2008:591). The symptoms appeared new but the disease was an old one, opined Runyon, himself an avid gambler. "The average American seems to be born with germs of the gambling fever in his blood. Sometimes the germs remain dormant throughout the lifetime. Again they take on early manifestations in the reprehensible form of marbles for 'keeps'. Most of us, I think, have experienced moments when the germs were stirring violently" (Ibid 594). Waldo Winchester, a fictional character modeled on famed journalist Walter Winchell, observes in one tale that "many legitimate people are much interested in the doings of tough guys, and consider them very romantic, and he says if I do not believe look at all the junk the newspapers print making heroes out of tough guys" (Ibid. 70).

Gambling interests in the United States experienced a setback in the 1930s when Thomas Dewey mounted his campaign against organized crime in the New York City. Nevada's reputation was sullied by the proceedings of the Kefauver Committee, its final report on organized crime issued in 1951 painting Las Vegas in unflattering light. Bad press did nothing to slow down the buildup in Nevada gaming industry, which in 1952 surpassed mining and agriculture as the state's largest revenue producer (Thompson 2001; Schwartz 2013; Schumacher 2014). Negative publicity spurred soul-searching among Las Vegas boosters who set out to rehabilitate the trade dominated by underworld syndicates. Two competing narratives battled for public attention at the time, each offering a plausible rationale for Las Vegas as the nation's gambling and entertainment Mecca.



*The Green Felt Jungle*, the 1963 bestseller written by investigative journalists Ed Reid and Ovid Demaris, put the casino industry and its main sanctuary in particularly unfavorable light:

Las Vegas is a city in statistics only. In every other respect, it is jungle – a jungle of green-felt crap tables, roulette layouts, and slot machines in which the entire population, directly or indirectly, is devoted to fleecing tourists... There are eighty-one places of worship in Las Vegas, but there is only one god – *money*... It is a live-and-let-live society. That is, you let the hoods live the way they want to live and maybe they'll let you live. There is no question about it. The town belongs to the Mob... Nevada has the highest crime rate in the country. Both Reno and Las Vegas have police forces three times larger than other communities their size. The ratio of suicides in Las Vegas is the highest of any city in the world (30.1 per 100,000 as opposed to the national average of 1.9); the state's rate is frequently double the average for the rest of the nation. Divorce is a \$6 million annual business and quickie marriages take in \$9 million... Prostitution, the world's oldest profession, is second in income only to the world's oldest business, gambling (Reid and Demaris 1963:1-11).

“Extortion,” “machination,” “contract murder” – these are the defining traits of Las Vegas, claimed the authors, who made much of the town's link to Murder, Inc. If Las Vegas is the premier gaming destination in the country, it is because Benjamin Siegel, Meyer Lansky, Frank Costello, Moe Dalitz, Joe Adonis, Longie Zwillmann, Sam Giancana, and other gangland notables wanted it this way. The volume includes an appendix listing major casino properties, their owners and shares, up to April 1, 1962 – a useful tool for Las Vegas history buff s. You will be hard pressed to find anything redeeming in this present-day incarnation of Sodom and Gomorra as depicted in *The Green Felt Jungle*.

The counternarrative painted a starkly different picture of Las Vegas, the city bathed in a warm glow, suffused with community spirit, and bristling with excitement about the town's unlimited possibilities. The memories of old Las Vegas grew ever more rhapsodic with the passage of time:

During this glamorous era, Las Vegas showrooms and restaurants were filled with men in well-tailored suits and women in elegant evening gowns and furs. For pleasure seeking adults, the Strip was America's naughty playground, the only place in the country with legal 24-hour gambling and drinking, readily available call-girls, and the greatest entertainers in the thrilling era of the diner nightclub and showroom. This uninhibited paradise was visited almost exclusively by serious gamblers and rounders, men and women escaping the responsibilities and humdrum realities of everyday life (Friedman 2015:2).

Equally nostalgic if a bit more circumspect are the memoirs of those who observed the scene from the ground up. Elaine Campbell, an aspiring dancer, came to town in 1958 when, as they used to say, “The mob ran the place.” “Las Vegas was still small and intimate. It wasn’t the giant it’s now become. There was an interconnection between all the hotels. A brotherhood. There was a camaraderie between the performers” (Campbell 2010:1). Campbell regales the stories about her personal encounters with, or glimpses of, Tony Bennett, Sammy Davis, Jr., Bing Crosby, Jack Carson, and her special friend Nick the Greek, a legend in his own time. Nicholas Andreas Dandalos, a.k.a. Nick the Greek, reigned as the king of gamblers after Arnold Rothstein’s assassination in 1929. “It was remarkable, really, to watch him in action,” writes another Vegas old timer (Jimmy the Greek 1975:196). “He attracted people like fish to a flashpan, people who begged him to play with their money. It was the legend and the charm and, no doubt, the idea of sharing with Nick the Greek. He was beautiful with women. He made Omar Sharif look like a truck driver.”

Nick the Greek was on the verge of becoming a household name already in the days of Damon Runyon who popularized this gentleman-gambler as a paragon of cool and sophistication (Runyon 2008:39, 83, 587; see also Thackrey 1968; Rice 1969; Schwartz 2003). Hank Greenspun worked hard to inject Nick the Greek into the Las Vegas mythology, first in his *Collier’s* article “Of Dice and Men” he co-wrote with a colleague (Donovan and Greenspun 1954), then in a soaring oration he delivered at Nick’s memorial. In the *Collier’s* piece, Greenspun salutes “the undisputed king of the world’s highrolling independent gamblers,” the man who remains serene during the heat of penultimate horserace, reads Sappho’s poetry and Plato’s dialogues in the original Greek, dazzles tourists with his uncanny ability to draw the winning card at the right moment, spurns lucrative deals to represent hottest hotel properties, and “regards the most abrupt transitions from pinnacles of wealth to the limbo of the busted – transitions other men have thought catastrophic enough to kill themselves about – as stimulating and beneficial changes in the humdrum of everyday” (Donovan and Greenspun 1954:64-71).

Greenspun went further still in the obituary he recited at Nick’s memorial where he seized the occasion to enshrine the famous gambler in the national pantheon alongside the founding fathers.

The leaders of the American Revolution... were noble gamblers, working for the welfare of their fellows. And perhaps... it too can be said of Nick the Greek [who] worked for the welfare of his fellows... Betcha Million Gates’ was a gambler who built railroads while some of the countries’ greatest fortunes were amassed gambling on fluctuations of Wall Street... fortunes which later went towards the building of universities, hospitals, libraries, cultural centers, churches and places for kids... There are those who look upon gambling and gamblers as inherently evil... but they fail to consider that chance is part of the human equation and that taking risks is a distinctly human quality, [for] if taking risk in life is evil, then indeed this nation was built on such premise... And if the noble gamblers who built the nation and if a man like Nick the Greek can make the transition between gambling and an orderly and useful life... why can’t Las Vegas meld much of the good and a little of the bad, if necessary, into a useful, constructive society? (Greenspun 1966).

This spirited defense of gambling as a metaphor for the free enterprise America can rival Pericles’ funeral oration conjured up by Thucydides straining to prove the superiority of liberty-loving Greeks over the authoritarian Spartans. In the early 1950s, when Greenspun was muscled out of his share in the Desert Inn, he sounded a lot more ambivalent about the mob influence in this company town, but in the 1960s he was bursting with pride defending Las Vegas against its detractors and touting the city’s success as a shiny example of the American dream in action.

Both narratives described above left their mark on Goffman's writings. In WAI, he makes a passing reference to "the Murder Incorporated Mob" (183), tips his hat to Runyon's "world of endless betting possibilities" (200), glosses Bet-a Million Gates's betting prowess (253), wryly notices the casino management's willingness to arrange "[p]roximity to what some might consider the gangster element" (198), spotlights "the mining tradition of the state [that] can be defined as very chancy indeed," and echoes an opinion that "since the economy of the state was itself founded on gambles in the ground, it is understandable that casino gambling was never viewed with much disapproval" (158). Goffman knows the social cost of making it in the Silver State with its "relative ease of divorce and marriage; the presence of a very large number of persons who have failed occupationally; a frontier tradition of asking no questions about a person's history or current livelihood; the clear possibility of getting an equivalent job across the street after being fired; the high visibility of a large number of casino employees known to have worked recently in better jobs in other casinos; the fact that sporadic bouts of big play mean sporadic realization of the ideal experience of a culture, such that however long and lean the days between bouts, this use of one's money may be the best that Nevada has to offer" (194).

At the same time, Goffman is solicitous about the people of Las Vegas, casino employees in particular, whose life and work are subject to sudden reversals. "In contrast to the middle-class perspective that tends to define occupational position as something only deservedly acquired and deservedly lost, occupational situation for the casino workers tends to oscillate very rapidly between 'having it made' and 'blowing it,' neither of which state is seen as particularly warranted. The perspective has extended to other areas of life, and a dealer may speak of having blown his marriage or his chance at a college education" (1967:193). Goffman is sympathetic to casino dealers who "must face the hard intent of players to win, and coolly stand in its way, consistently blocking skill, luck, and cheating" (1967:182-183). One senses here an empathy born of hard-won experience only a fellow dealer can acquire.

And then there is the professional gambler, a Nick-the-Greek-like character, showing "cool nonchalance when a large sum of money is at stake," engaged in "fateful action" and "character contest," ready to face down the house (WAI:85). Here Goffman speaks as an advantage player, the cool operator who mastered the card counting strategy enough to challenge the house and get himself barred from the casino. Curiously, we find no reference to this side of the sociologist's experience in his 1967 essay. Edward Thorp's book that Goffman studied with diligence and profit is not even mentioned. Nonetheless, there is no denying that Las Vegas was swarming with system players at the time, each one stalking the American dream on his own terms.

Advice on winning strategies in the games of chance has been furnished for centuries, scientific and otherwise. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the mathematician-gambler Gerolamo Cardano wrote a treatise on gambling-centered probability, which was further improved by the great mathematicians like Pierre de Fermat, Blaise Pascal, and others, who had some useful lessons for dice throwers and card players. Books on gambling strategies geared to dedicated players appeared with growing frequency in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After World War II, several treatises promising to improve the player's odds gained prominence in the United States, none sufficient to give the player a consistent advantage but still brimming with worthy tips (MacDougall 1944; Scarne 1949; Culbertson, Morehead, Mott-Smith 1952; Crawford 1953). It was with the publication of a landmark paper "The Favorable Strategy in Twenty-One" that Edward Thorp (1961) managed to produce a strategy that gave blackjack players an even chance, and eventually an advantage, over the house. Thorp acknowledged his debt to an earlier study spearheaded by Roger Baldwin, "The Optimum Strategy in Blackjack," which claimed to have found "a general solution to the player's problem of standing pat with a given hand versus drawing additional cards" (Baldwin, Cantey, Maisel, and McDermott 1956:429). The authors did manage to improve on standard manual's advice (e.g., with regard to the

recommendation to “double down on soft 12 when the dealer shows a five,” the newest analysis demonstrated, counter-intuitively, that it is better “to split the aces” under the circumstances, 438). Thorp was able to take advantage of the MIT high-speed computer that allowed him to calculate the player’s percentages for “arbitrary sets of cards” – his predecessors lacked this capacity because they relied on handheld calculators to do the math. Thorp exploited the fact that casinos used a single deck, which transformed blackjack into a “conditional probabilities” from an “independent trials process.” With these advancements, Thorp came up with a set of rules that promised to reduce the house odds against the player from .061 vouched by Baldwin to .021% – assuming that casino operates with a single deck and the player is able “to take into account cards that become visible during play, a feature which is essential for the determination of any winning strategy” (Thorp 1961:110). Further improvements in what Thorp called “basic strategy,” especially the application of Kelly’s money management and betting rules (Kelly 1956), raised the players’ odds to as high as 15% under certain favorable conditions. All players could now upgrade their performance by keeping in mind that small cards favor the house while big ones are good for players, with cards valued “ten” being particularly favorable to the player and “fives” most advantageous to the house.

Thorp’s discoveries came to public notice in late 1961 when he presented a paper “Fortune’s Formula: A Winning Strategy for Blackjack” in Washington DC at a math conference, an event heavily attended by scholars and covered by journalists. He became a national sensation the following year after *Beat the Dealer* landed in bookstores (O’Neil 1964). Thorp tried his system in Nevada casinos, with increasing success, and quickly became so good at it that casino managers, who initially treated Thorp with bemused contempt as yet another system player – “Why we send a cab to pick them up” they taunted Thorp (1966:65) – banned him from the premises, but not before he made serious inroads into the house bankrolls. Financed in part by a grant from the U.S. Air Force, Thorp’s study so impressed the U.S. Treasury Department that it solicited the mathematician’s help in checking the house intake for evidence of skimming (Ibid. 167). Thorp’s study drew to Nevada crowds of would-be advantage players who poured over Thorpe’s gambling bible and betted against the house with the help of tear-out charts helpfully inserted in his book’s second edition. One beneficiary of the new system was a rising sociological star, Erving Manual Goffman.

### **Goffman in Las Vegas: Assembling Pieces of the Puzzle**

There is a good deal of confusion about the venue and the timeline of Goffman’s work in Las Vegas. The fact that he was backed off the casino properties for card counting makes the story murkier still. According to Jeffrey Sallaz, Goffman resorted to the dealer ploy after he lost playing privileges: “Banned from his research site, Goffman, like any good ethnographer, found another path of entrée. No longer able to beat the dealer, he joined them by training as a croupier and obtaining employment at a well known Las Vegas casino” (Sallaz 2009:2). This timeline is dubious, for Goffman learned to count cards from Edward Thorp’s book *Beat the Dealer* that came out in 1962, and as his letter to Hughes indicates, started training as a dealer in 1960 with an eye to landing a casino job the following summer. It is unlikely, also, that he would be cleared by the police for a casino job in the town where he was barred as card counter.

Equally problematic is the venue where Goffman plied his trade as a dealer. The place often cited in the literature is the “Station Plaza Casino” (Manning 1998; Fine and Manning 2000; Manning 2004; Hirschi 2012), but my search failed to locate such an institution in Las Vegas or anywhere else in Nevada. David Schwartz confirmed that no casino under this name ever existed in this state (personal communication, February 20, 2015). Plaza Club in Reno sponsored action between 1954 and 1961, but the timeline and location make it an unlikely venue, given the particulars of Goffman’s heads-up to Hughes. Union Plaza later renamed Plaza Hotel & Casino comes to mind,

yet it opened its doors in 1971, three years after Goffman left Berkeley for Penn, with an all female cast of dealers – and nearly four years after the publication of *WAI*. Peter Manning, whom most authors credit with the lead on Goffman’s place of employment, cites Marvin Scott, EG’s student and author of *The Racing Game*, as his source. Contacted for information, Scott remembered how in the early 1960s a fellow student working as a dealer tipped him about a research opportunity at a casino, which tip he passed to his teacher, but he disclaims any knowledge on whether Goffman followed up on this tip (personal communication, December 15, 2015). Nor could Jeff Sallaz clarify which “well known Las Vegas casino” Goffman worked at (personal communication, April 20, 2015). I solicited advice from Lt. Stavros Anthony, who took my class at UNLV while working on his Ph.D. Lt. Anthony referred me to the LVMPD Department of Information, which didn’t have any relevant data. Inquiries sent to the LVMPD Fingerprint Bureau, Nevada Gaming Control Board, and UNLV Library Archives turned up no leads – hardly a surprise given how far back Goffman worked in Las Vegas and how few landmarks of that era survived.

Some clues can be gleaned from Goffman’s writings, for instance, when he recounts this story: “I once was present when a fire broke out in a downtown Las Vegas casino. From the second floor smoke and smell began to pour down, fire sirens were heard, firemen rushed in and ran upstairs with equipment, more smoke came down, eventually the firemen left, and all the while on the first floor the dealers continued to deal and the players continued to play” (Goffman 1974: 208). Assuming this happened at a place where Goffman dealt cards, I scoured the Internet for the casino fires that broke out in the 1960s, yet nothing came up that fit the description. And once the UNR library tracking casino fires was unable to pinpoint the occasion, the trail went cold.

Some tell-tell signs crop up in Goffman’s correspondence. Indicative though they are about the environment Goffman worked in and the attitudes he harbored at the time, these signs are insufficient to dispose of the venue issue. “The establishment I’ll start out in goes in heavy for roof mirrors behind which an invisible man watches the employees. To remind them that they are being watched he sends down daily chits reminding them that their shoes need polishing, etc. Of course he is hated... The girls complain they can’t straighten their bra without his knowing it, let alone sit down. If a player wins, the House gets sore at the dealer (or so he feels); and if a player loses, then he gets sore at the dealer; dealer gets it either way. A nice place to study the service relations and the frayed edges of American civilization” (Goffman’s Letter to Hughes, December 13, 1960). Any number of Las Vegas gambling halls would fit this generic description.

We should bear in mind that once Goffman started his job, he had reasons to conceal his identity and whereabouts lest he be recognized by the acquaintances who stumble upon the familiar face at a blackjack table. “He didn’t tell them his name or anything,” recalls Goldie Frankelson (2009), “he told my aunt [Goffman’s mother] that if anybody of the family was going to Vegas not even look at him or acknowledge him, because he didn’t want anybody to know who he is. He wanted to write a book, but he wanted to be a dealer first.” Friends and colleagues must have been issued similar warnings. Some knew about the difficulties Goffman encountered in finding a casino job. Gusfield (2008) recalls Goffman complaining that “he wanted to become a dealer, but he couldn’t do it. They wouldn’t accept him... they didn’t trust him. [Not that they feared he] was going to take money but that he had some other motive [like] studying gambling.” An application from a Berkeley professor looking for a casino job must have raised red flags. Chances are Goffman deliberately scrambled the name of the casino he worked for.

Nor do we have enough information about the circumstances under which Goffman lost his privileges as a casino guest. We know from Erving’s son that his parents were advantage players whose exploits got them banned from Las Vegas casinos: “Both my parents were card counters. EG used a quarter on the felt to measure how many face cards had been dealt. My mother just remembered every card and had a hollow leg. So they bounced EG first; it took them a long time to figure out my mother.

Me, I'm not a gambling man and impressed that Nevada has a school with a sociology department" (Tom Goffman, personal communication, April 4, 2010). Robin Room (2009) corroborates the story, placing Goffman's wife in the same environment: "[T]he Goffmans and a couple of other people used to go up to count cards at Lake Tahoe casinos, and they made a lot of money. I remember Sky came back after one weekend with a bright red Jaguar XK-E which was the proceeds from counting cards in black jack at Reno, or actually at the Tahoe casinos" (see also Lang 2009; Besbris 2009). Walter Clark (2009) supplies information about Goffman's partner, Ira Cisin, a statistician at Berkeley, the two men teaming up to play blackjack. One day, remembers Clark, "while Ira and Erving were counting cards religiously... a couple of biggest men he ever saw walked up behind them and said, 'We don't want your play, partner.'" Ira Cisin's obituary mentioned that he was barred from casinos for card counting (Harrell, Miller, and Wirtz 1987:17-18). In a discrete footnote, Goffman volunteers this piece of information: "Here and elsewhere in matters of probability I am indebted to Ira Cisin" (WAI:150n).

Dan Cisin, Ira's son, supplies more details (Cisin 2015). He remembers his father telling him how he and Erving banded together "shortly after Edward O. Thorp's 1962 book, *Beat the Dealer*." The two "made a number of trips to Nevada to play blackjack, and I remember that Ira would come home with pockets full of silver dollars which he would give to the kids. In those days, the casinos used silver dollars rather than \$1 chips. As I understood the venture, Ira was a faster counter and was able to disguise the fact that he was engaged in card counting. Because Erving was not as fast, and was too obvious, Ira actually did the playing when the two were together. Ira was able to do the basic Thorp system of tens/non-tens, as well as also keeping track of aces and fives. Erving was the money man of the team (my understanding was that he was wealthy, and we were not), and Ira was the player. I remember occasions when my father would ask me just to deal cards as fast as I could so that he could practice counting." The two men formed an odd couple: "Ira was fairly tall and heavy, and I assume Erving was shorter and slender, because I heard them described as a 'Mutt and Jeff' team. Apparently they were easily recognizable as a team, and eventually got barred from all the big casinos. They tried playing the smaller places for short while, but soon decided that the venture was no longer viable." Dan adds that Goffman and his father "did it more for fun than to actually make a lot of money," that they hadn't "made a huge amount of money, but did make enough to pay for all the trips."

My email exchange with Edward Thorp (April 12, 2015) confirmed that Goffman knew basic strategy and consulted with its author soon after *Beat the Dealer* came out. "What I remember of the conversation," Thorp wrote to me, "is that he had a lot of questions about card-counting, some practical and some theoretical. He said that he was a professor at UC Berkeley, which also helps fix the time frame."

So, this is what we know about Goffman's sojourns in Nevada and Las Vegas. He started visiting casinos in Reno, Lake Tahoe (where Goffman and his wife had a house), and Las Vegas in the late 1950s. In December of 1960, Goffman enrolled into a dealers' school, possibly in northern Nevada, obtained a police card, and was planning to start work as a dealer in a downtown Las Vegas casino the following summer as part of his sabbatical research. He probably completed his stint as a croupier in 1962, or 1963 at the latest. Once Thorp's research became public – either as an article published in 1961 or, more likely, as a book that came out in early 1962 – he teamed up with Ira Cisin to play blackjack, using basic strategy as a guide. He and his companions were barred from casinos as card counters sometime between 1962 and 1964. Goffman continued to play with his wife until both were photographed and barred from casinos. Esther Besbris (2009) relates in her memoir that her cousin “worked as a dealer to gather information for what he was going to write. And Sky went out to visit him... Sky could count cards [and] after a while they wouldn't let her play in the casinos anymore.” This raises the possibility that Sky was playing cards while her husband was dealing at a blackjack table.

One more tidbit about Goffman in Las Vegas is buried in a footnote of Jeff Sallaz's book *Labor of Luck*: “It is believed that Erving Goffman first broke into the Las Vegas casino scene via a distant personal connection to Moe Dalitz, a notorious Cleveland syndicate boss” (Sallaz 2009:279n). Sallaz attributes this information to Yves Winkin, a student of Goffman at Penn, who has been researching his teacher's life and work (see Winkin 1988, 1992, 1999). Winkin made public this information during his talk at a Symposium of Symbolic Interactionists held in Las Vegas in 1999. I attended this meeting but, sadly, missed the presentation, which predated my engagement with the Goffman Archives (attempts to contact Winkin failed). I met with Suzanne Dalitz, Moe's daughter, who was intrigued by the Moe-Erving connection but knew nothing of it. She promised to search her father's papers but nothing came up so far.

After stumbling on this tip-off, on a lark I typed into an internet search engine “Erving Goffman and FBI” and was rewarded with the link to the database of FBI files accessible – in theory – under the Freedom of Information Act (FBI RIDS Dead List, [http://www.governmentattic.org/2docs/FBI\\_RIDS\\_DeadList\\_2009.pdf](http://www.governmentattic.org/2docs/FBI_RIDS_DeadList_2009.pdf)). Along with a host of familiar names, I found in this treasure chest the name “Erving Goffman.” By itself, this listing doesn't tell you much. FBI kept files on several prominent sociologists, including Du Bois, Burgess, Ogburn, Parsons, Sorokin, Blumer, Stouffer, Mills, and Sutherland (Keen 2004). Most of these files had been initiated because some informer sent a missive to the FBI regarding the person's presumed ideological infraction. At the start of 2015, I petitioned the FBI to release Goffman's file under the Freedom of Information Act. So far, the agency refused to confirm or deny the existence of such a file. I will put off a full account of my dealings with FBI for another occasion. Meanwhile, a few conjectures are stated below.

Assuming Goffman got a foot in a door courtesy of Moe Dalitz, he had every reason to cover his tracks, sanitize his essay, and delay his main publication. In his 1967 article, Goffman glosses over institutional issues germane to the casino enterprise, even though one would expect detailed organizational analysis from the author of *Asylums* who took on mental institutions after his fieldwork at St. Elizabeth's and who communicated in 1960 his intention to study casinos as an example of “service industry.” Instead, Goffman focuses on casino gambling as a model for risk taking in American society. Only faintest references are made to the mob presence in Las Vegas, the card counting craze, and the treatment casinos management accorded to system players. With the passage of time, Goffman felt comfortable to bring up sensitive issues bespeaking his inside knowledge. He filed a grant application with the Guggenheim Foundation, signaling his readiness to restart the casino project. In *Frame Analysis* (1974:76-7), we find a page-long memorandum describing the casino skills' duties (e.g., “Don't toy with money or touch it unnecessarily,” “Stack chips in piles which the 'eye' can read easily,”

“Do not split or double down or take ‘insurance,’” “Hit all soft hands except soft 17 and stay all stiff,” “Cut the cards, change seats, or leave on request of the dealer.” A lengthy footnote on page 180 reveals the author’s familiarity with the Thorp system (“During the early sixties in Nevada when computer strategy for twenty-one had become available and casinos had not yet taken effective countermeasures, it was possible to beat the game. Since the strategy was an extremely academic matter, it was largely graduate students and college teachers who acquired the skill...”). Casino routines are described here in some details, with special references to suspected cheaters, fooled dealers, employee relations, collusions between personnel and customers, and such (Ibid. 50, 118-19, 121, 180-81, 250, 255, 361, 366, 374).

Goffman’s reticence about his experiences during his stint as a casino dealer and/or card counter is understandable in light of the violent treatment that suspect dealers and sometimes guests faced in those days (see Reid Demaris 1963:44; Smith 2005:209). That Goffman had reason to be personally apprehensive came to the surface at a seminar he had given after his engagement with Nevada casinos tapered off. Travis Hirschi attended this seminar:

I recall two words from a well-attended brown bag he gave upon his return from an extended stint in Las Vegas: “evil” and “crisis.” Evil expressed his assessment of the gambling enterprise. A crisis was a condition of the social order that justified suspension of one’s scholarly efforts. Goffman had seen evil. That was it. There was nothing more to say. A master of detached irony and insight could not go on to document such a conclusion (Hirschi 2012).

In subsequent years, Goffman calmed down enough to resume his work in this area. Two years before his death he brought up his Las Vegas project in an interview with Jef Verhoeven (1993:338), “I still have to write up a study I did of casino activity.” Something must have shaken him at the time, however. We may never know whether Erving Goffman suspended his study because he was repelled by the evil ways of casino industry (unlikely given his fascination with backstage realities), because he had to heed “friendly advice” from the mob (a plausible scenario), or because he was barred from Nevada casinos (quite likely). Future research and the FBI files may shed more light on this tale.

### **Goffman on Gaming: Some Intellectual Sources**

Goffman began articulating his ideas about gambling as soon as he started his fieldwork in Nevada. Besides taking notes on his casino outings, he talked to students who worked in the industry and collected “tidbits from everybody about their experiences in gambling houses” (Clark 2009). Relevant materials began to show up in his class lectures as early as 1961 (Hirschi 2012). In *Encounters*, he dissected the notions of “play” and “game,” using card playing as one example (Goffman 1961). In *Stigma*, he struck against the condescending view of prostitutes, drug users, gamblers and other outcasts as inherently deviant (Goffman 1963). In the mid-1960s, he made presentations on casino gambling at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (Manning 2009) and the University of Chicago (Schneider’s Letter to Goffman, June 11, 1965). And in 1967, Goffman published *Interaction Ritual* with his signature work on gambling, “Where the Action Is.” This essay cites ads and columns published in the *Las Vegas Sun* and *San Francisco Chronicle* as recently as October 1966, indicating that the author continued working on his paper right before it was published.

Goffman isn’t always explicit about the pedigree of his ideas, at least in his early works (Shalin 2014). Still, we can figure out the intellectual movements that stimulated his sociological imagination. Two works in particular should be singled out as early influences – Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1944/1955) and Caillois’ *Man, Play*



*and Games* (1958/1961). Historians studying the history of gaming recognize these pioneering efforts, although they pay little attention to their impact on Goffman (Reith 1999; Cosgrave 2006; McMillen 1996). One exception is Gerda Reith who points out Goffman's "unacknowledged debt to writers like Huizinga and Caillois" (Reith 1999:4; cf. Scher 2009). This statement is only partially correct. Indeed, Goffman doesn't systematically join issue with these precursors, but he credits their contributions and commends Caillois "for his very useful paper" (1961:17n; see also 70, 73; 1974:104n, 381). Goffman quotes from an article published a year before Caillois' book appeared in English (1957:70n, 73); he also cites his French original but makes no reference to the 1958 English translation of the book.

Huizinga's landmark study and Caillois' extension of it accord games a special place in the history of humanity. To play a game is to lose oneself in a world governed by its own logic, marked by a sense of community, and generating a peculiar mood characteristic of ritual gatherings. Human culture emerged from the playgrounds of the bygone era where men and women engaged in playacting, staged theatrical performances, mounted sporting events, performed magic acts, and conducted religious ceremonies – the earliest forms of playful conduct. In the broadest terms, play is "an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow" (Huizinga 1955:132).

In similar fashion, Goffman describes games as "world-building activities" and talks about "a world of meanings that is exclusive" to a playful exercise (1961:26-7). He borrows from Huizinga selectively, endorsing the notion that play "promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means" while parting company with Huizinga over the latter's assertion that gambling is incompatible with the spirit of play which is "connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it" (Huizinga 1955:13). Caillois' sensibilities are closer to Goffman's, for they encompass games of chance and skill and make no exception for profit-minded gaming.

An elegant classification proposed by Caillois divides games into four types: agonistic, aleatic, mimetic, and vertiginous. "In *agon*, the player relies only upon himself and his utmost efforts; in *alea*, he counts on everything except himself, submitting to the powers that elude him; in *mimicry*, he imagines that he is someone else, and he invents an imaginary universe; in *ilinx*, he gratifies the desire to temporarily destroy his bodily equilibrium, escape the tyranny of his ordinary perception, and provoke the abdication of conscience" (Caillois 1958:22). When carried to the extreme, games of a given class beget characteristic perversions. Thus, societies with strategic mindsets whip up the agonistic impulse to conquer and dominate; those worshipping fate throw themselves into reckless gambles and count on providence to achieve a favorable outcome; drama obsessed cultures invoke magic powers and have apocalyptic visions; and certain sensual cultures crave vertigo-inducing gambits and succumb to intoxication. With this conceptual framework in place, Caillois proceeds to diagnose civilizations according to their favorite play activities and reigning perversions. Goffman has little interest in such speculations. He does make use of the proposition that "[t]o gamble is to renounce work, patience, and thrift, in favor of a sudden lucky stroke of fortune which will bring one what a life of exhausting labor and privation has not" (Caillois 1958:115), and he is intrigued with the vertigo-stalking games that result in "voluptuously experiencing fear, a shudder, a sense of stupor that momentarily causes one to lose self-control" (Caillois 1957:107, quoted in Goffman 1961:70n). The epigraph to WAI – "To be on the wire is life; the rest is waiting" – should be read in this context. Such ideas were coming into vogue at the time of Goffman's research on gambling, not only among social scientists like Frederic Thrasher, Ned Polsky, Walter Miller, Albert Cohen who zeroed in on thrill

seeking and spontaneous protest as motives behind law-breaking conduct in marginalized groups, but also in such iconic cultural figures as Norman Mailer valorizing “the existentialist... the psychopath... the saint and the bullfighter and the lover. The common denominator for all of them is their burning consciousness of the present, exactly that incandescent consciousness which the possibilities within death has opened for them” (1957).

Another ferment stimulated Goffman’s thought – “labeling theory.” This critical current in sociology rejected the prevailing approach to “deviance” as a quality inherent in a person or a group. According to labeling theory’s liberal outlook, devious traits do not reside in misfits or criminals; rather, they are assigned to humans by societies that successfully impose a system of invidious classifications on subordinate groups, e.g., Jews in Nazi Germany, dissidents in Soviet Russia, gamblers in the United States, or homosexuals in the Arab countries. Criminologists Edwin Sutherland and Frank Tannenbaum sounded kindred themes as far back as the 1930s, but it was after World War II that these ideas jelled into an ambitious research program championed by Howard Becker, Edwin Lemert, Kai Erikson, Edwin Schur, David Matza and other scholars trained in or sympathetic to the Chicago tradition in sociology. According to this emergent tradition, “social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label” (Becker 1963:9).

Goffman’s sensibilities were shaped by this intellectual movement and in turn helped advance it through his influential theory of “stigma” or “spoiled identity” according to which “social deviants, minority members, and lower class persons are all likely on occasion to find themselves functioning as stigmatized individuals, unsure of the reception awaiting them in face-to-face plight” (1963:146). Goffman casts his net widely in defining the categories of people branded deviant in contemporary America. “Prostitutes, drug addicts, delinquents, criminals, jazz musicians, bohemians, gypsies, carnival workers, hobos, winos, show people, full-time gamblers, beach dwellers, homosexuals, and the urban unrepentant poor – these would be included. These are the folk who are considered to be engaged in some kind of collective denial of the social order. They are perceived as failing to use available opportunity for advancement in the various approved runways of society; they show open disrespect for their betters; they lack piety; they represent failures in the motivational schemes of society” (Ibid. 143-44). Notice “full-time gamblers” on Goffman’s list. A few years later, this stigmatized group would emerge as the main focus of WAI, just as mental patients were treated earlier as mislabeled deviants in *Asylums* and women would be recast later on as a stereotyped group in *Gender Advertisements*. Contrary to the common view, gamblers, drug addicts, beach bums and the like are no victims of circumstances or never-do-goods failing to integrate into the social order – these are people of character deliberately flaunting social norms in search of fateful action and authentic experience. “Addicts seldom, if ever, get a store that will last more than a day. It may not be the drug as much as ‘the game of getting it.’ Each day an achievement. Each day the chase can be resumed. Each day has to be planned... There are no moments of truth in routinized, honest life... Criminals often think ‘sneaky’ work doesn’t involve enough risk or pressure. [They admire crimes which] show that you’re strong, fearless, sexually attractive. Part of the attraction of socially deviant groups is that you can justify the fact that you don’t have a future by the simple fact that you have a present” (Goffman 1961, cited in Hirschi 2012).

Two more concepts central to Goffman – “fateful action” and “character contest” – have a long pedigree which Goffman sought to upend. In *Encounters*, he followed his predecessors in defining game routines as “a field for fateful dramatic action, a plane of being, an engine of meaning, a world in itself different from all other worlds” (Goffman 1961:26). Neither “fateful” nor “action” had been used at this point in the technical sense the terms would acquire in his essay on gambling. In WAI, Goffman

offers a theory of action that radically departs from his predecessors, notably from the theory of social action and personality developed by Talcott Parsons (1937/1951). The opening sentences put readers on notice that the author follows the usage favored by “those urban American males who were little given to gentility [and who employed the term “action”] in a non-Parsonian sense in reference to situations of a special kind, the contrast being to situations where there were ‘no action.’ Very recently this locution has been taken up by almost everyone, and the term itself flogged without mercy in commercials and advertisements” (WAI:149). Goffman pokes fun at Parsons, Merton, and other structural functionalists postulating a system of community-wide norms imparted to each member who are socialized to pursue certified goals and reproduce the status quo in the process. “Once you get the beast to desire the socially delineated goals under the auspices of ‘self-interest,’ you need only convince him to regulate his pursuits in accordance with an elaborate array of ground rules” (258-59).

Parsons’ theory, Goffman shrewdly observes, is a secularized version of Protestant ethics rooted “in John Calvin and ascetic Puritanism” with its avowed hatred of unproductive activities like playing, dancing, drinking, or gambling (180). Rejecting this “Calvinistic solution” to the problem of social order (175), Goffman advances a view of action that valorizes self-determination, risk-taking, and fatefulness – the qualities bestowing on men of action the reputation for character and moral fiber. Goffman is undeterred by the fact that *Dictionary of Underworld Lingo* defines action as “criminal activity” (188). He goes out of his way to blur the line between mainstream and deviant occupations, between “persons whose situation is constantly fateful, say that of professional gamblers or front-line soldiers” (181). The strategic question Goffman raises in his essay is why “we have become alive to action at a time when – compared to other societies – we have sharply curtailed in civilian life the occurrence of fatefulness of the serious, heroic, and dutiful kind” (193).

One last intellectual current to be mentioned here is the game-theoretic approach to decision making formulated by Thomas Schelling, a noble-prize laureate in economics who offered an ingenious way to analyze the behavior of parties locked in strategic conflicts where one of the options is mutually-assured destruction and the others leave the winner with less than the whole pot (Schelling 1960, 1966). Alternative outcomes are weighed here according the parties’ “tolerance for risk,” the intentions gauged by the “credible commitments,” and the cost-benefit calculations based on a “payoff matrix” of possible outcomes. This game-theoretic approach gives negotiating parties the tools for clarifying their strategic options, calibrating their offers with a measurable precision, and assessing the tipping points beyond which the proposed settlement is ill-advised. Goffman used this game-theoretic schema extensively in *Strategic Interaction* to analyze mind-games that spy masters, generals preparing for war, and leaders negotiating global treaties are forced to play in pursuit of domestic and international interests. In WAI, Goffman taps Schelling’s insight into the nature of chanciness in situations where agents calculate whether a gamble is worth taking, and then make a credible bet signaling they are buying into an action. “For chanciness to be present, the individual must ensure he is in a position (or be forced into one) to let go of his hold and control on the situation, to make, in Schelling’s sense, a commitment. No commitment, no chance-taking” (WAI:152).

After Goffman read *The Strategy of Conflict* (1960), he sent reprints of his papers to the famous game theorist, who was so impressed that he invited Goffman to spend his 1966-67 sabbatical year at Harvard, an arrangement underwritten by the Ford Foundation Fellowship program Schelling had administered at the time. The two scholars developed an intellectual rapport, each holding the other in the highest regard. Thomas Schelling offered this assessment of his colleague: "I've read, I think, all of his books – I have eight of them – and I consider him one of the two or three greatest social scientists of his century. I've often remarked that if there were a Nobel Prize for sociology and/or social psychology he'd deserve to be the first one considered. He was endlessly creative." (Schelling 2015).

With these antecedents in mind, I now turn to Goffman's theory of action.

### **Where the Action Is: Character, Practical Gambles, and Moral Fantasies**

As many essays penned by Goffman, WAI is a rich tangle of arguments, examples, and asides that handsomely repay the reader's time. The following reconstruction picks several major strands in Goffman's study, focusing in particular on the concepts of *action*, *fatefulness*, *practical gamble*, *character contest*, and *moral fantasies*.

Although WAI is based on the fieldwork in casinos, it is by no means limited to this venue. "Gambling," Goffman makes clear, "is a prototype of action" but its incarnations are ubiquitous in society at large. Everyday life is full of chanciness and opportunities for action – practical ventures undertaken by someone willing to take a chance in search of authentic existence, material gain, or moral payoff. To buy into the action is to gamble on a consequential outcome: "This is the gamble's *consequentiality*, namely, *the capacity of a payoff to flow beyond the bounds of the occasion in which it is delivered and to influence objectively the later life of the bettor*" (159-60). It is not enough for a gamble to be consequential – it must be problematic as well. A gamble that is problematic but inconsequential or consequential but unproblematic does not meet the definition. A winning bet that doesn't expose you to the possibility of failure is no action, nor is a losing proposition whose outcome is entirely predictable. A venture that is "problematic and consequential," explains Goffman, "I call fateful, although the term eventful would do as well... By the term *action* I mean activities that are consequential, problematic, and undertaken for what is felt to be their own sake" (164, 185),

Goffman draws a line between "the recreational chance-taking and real-life gambles," the former deliver mild chanciness and modest thrills, the latter sport momentous uncertainty and potentially life-altering outcomes. "Two boys together find a nickel in their path and decide that one will toss and the other call to see who keeps it... [They] are not engaged in quite the same type of chance-taking as is unenjoyed by two survivors who have mutually agreed that there is no other way than to toss to see who will lighten the raft" (149, 161). Fatefulness is endemic to the human condition. We know how to spot it and assess it; more often than not we evade it, but not when it is woven into our professional lives or impinges on our principles, in which case we may choose to face the challenge head-on. "Instead of awaiting fate, you meet it at the door. Danger is recast into taken risk; favorable possibilities, into grasped opportunity. Fateful situations become chancy undertakings, and exposure to uncertainty is construed as willfully taking a practical gamble" (171).

Goffman surveys a range of occupations where fatefulness is pervasive and often eagerly sought (172-74). Individuals employed in the financial sector – stock market investors, real estate speculators, money managers – hold jobs that "are financially dangerous or at least unsteady, subjecting the individual to relatively large surges of success and failure over the short run." Fatefulness is routine in the work of "test pilots," "well cappers," "miners," and certain type construction workers facing

elevated fatality rates. There are “‘hustling’ jobs in business enterprise where salesmen and promoters work on a commission or contract-to-contract basis under conditions of close competition. Here income and prestige can be quickly gained and lost due to treacherous minor contingencies.” Politicians, stage actors, and live entertainers strutting their stuff in public “must work to win and hold an audience under conditions where many contingencies can spoil the show and endanger the showman’s reputation [and where] any let-up in effort and any minor mishap can easily have serious consequences.” The jobs held by soldiers, police officers, and undercover agents “make the incumbent officially responsible for undergoing physical danger at the hands of persons who intend it.” Then, there are spectator sports “whose performers place money, reputation, and physical safety in jeopardy all at the same time: football, boxing, and bullfighting are examples, [and] recreational non-spectator sports that are full of risk: mountain climbing, big game hunting, skin diving, parachuting, surfing, bob-sledding, spelunking.” In a characteristic move, Goffman adds to his list of people in fateful occupations scowflaws whose life “yields considerable opportunity but continuously and freshly subjects the individual to gross contingencies – to physical danger, the risk of losing civil status, and wide fluctuations regarding each day’s take. ‘Making it’ on the street requires constant orientation to unpredictable opportunities and a readiness to make quick decisions concerning the expected value of proposed schemes – all of which subject the individual to great uncertainties.”

People in fateful occupations develop personality traits that set them apart (182-83). Soldiers, test pilots, undercover agents know their own value and regard low-risk work as inferior. “They have a more or less secret contempt for those with safe and sure jobs who need never face real tests of themselves. They claim they are not only willing to remain in jobs full of opportunity and risk, but have deliberately sought out this environment, declining to accept safe alternatives, being able, willing, and even inclined to live in challenge” (182). Street hustlers and thieves embrace a similar ethos: “Talented burglars and pickpockets, whose skill must be exercised under pressure, look down, it is said, on the petty sneak thief, since the only art he need have for his calling is a certain-low cunning. Criminals may similarly disesteem fences as being ‘thieves without nerve.’” Casino workers, pro gamblers, card counters exhibit some of the same traits. “Nevada casino dealers may come on shift knowing that it is they who must face the hard intent of players to win, and coolly stand in its way, consistently blocking skill, luck, and cheating, or lose the precarious reputation they have with management. Having to face these contingencies every day, they feel set apart from the casino employees who are not on the firing line. (In some casinos there are special dealers who are brought into a game to help nature correct the costly runs of good luck occasionally experienced by players, or to remove the uncertainty a pit boss can feel when a big bettor begins to play seriously... Skilled card and dice ‘mechanics’ understandably develop contempt not only for non-dealers but also for mere dealers).”

With constant exposure to fatefulness come “little rituals of propitiation and control” aimed to ingratiate fate, a host of credulous customs that help calm down the nerves if not ensure winning (177-80). “Gamblers exhibit similar, if less religious, superstitions. Clearly, any realistic practice aimed at avoiding or reducing risk – any coping – is likely to have the side effect of reducing anxiety and remorse, is likely, in short, to have defensive functions. A person who coolly resorts to a game theory matrix when faced with a vital decision is reducing a painful risk to a calculated one. His frame of mind brings peace of mind.” Those facing mortal danger may fall back on “the belief in fate, predestination, and kismet – the notion that the major outcomes regarding oneself are already writ down, and one is helpless to improve or worsen one’s chances. The soldier’s maxim is an illustration: ‘I won’t get mine ‘till my number’s up so why worry.’” Daredevils of all stripes play mind games that help them face winning and losing with equanimity:

When we look closely at the adaptation to life made by persons whose situation is constantly fateful, say that of professional gamblers or front-line soldiers, we find that aliveness to the consequences involved comes to be blunted in a special way. The world that is gambled is, after all, only a world, and the chance-taker can learn to let go of it. He can adjust himself to ups and downs in his welfare by discounting his prior relation to the world and accepting a chancy relation to what others feel assured of having. Perspectives seem to be inherently normalizing... it will be the rises not the falls that are seen as temporary (181).

The payoff matrix that action figures contemplate is more complex than it seems. Material rewards are entangled here with moral considerations, reputational gains and losses are geared to set reference groups, gambles with long odds might be preferred if they vouch for the agent's probity. "Evidence of marked capacity to maintain full self-control when the chips are down – whether exerted in regard to moral temptation or task performance – is a sign of strong character" (217). Goffman compiles a list of praiseworthy characteristics an action figure can earn (218-27). They include *courage* – "the capacity to envisage immediate danger and yet proceed with the course of action that brings the danger on"; *integrity* – "propensity to resist temptation in situations where there would be much profit and some impunity in departing momentarily from moral standards"; *gallantry* – "the capacity to maintain the forms of courtesy when the forms are full of substance [as] when Douglas Fairbanks, in the middle of a cinematic duel to the death, retrieves his opponent's fallen sword"; *poise* – "a capacity to execute physical tasks (typically involving small muscle control) in a concerted, smooth, self-controlled fashion under fateful circumstances"; *composure* – "the capacity to contemplate abrupt change in fate – one's own and, by extension, others' – without loss of emotional control"; and *stage confidence* – "the capacity to withstand the dangers and opportunities of appearing before large audiences without becoming abashed, embarrassed, self-conscious, or panicky." Intelligence, kindness, civility, sound work habits, and many other worthy qualities that Goffman calls "primary" can be attested in routine situations, but "the qualities of character – in the aspects considered here – emerge only during fateful events, or at least events subjectively considered to be fateful... [I]t is during moments of action that the individual has the risk and opportunity of displaying to himself and sometimes to others his style of conduct when the chips are down. Character is gambled; a single good showing can be taken as representative, and a bad showing cannot be easily excused or reattempted" (218, 237).

Action figures are not the only ones vouching for themselves as persons of character. Every member of society in good standing is expected to exhibit some of these qualities, even if only in a diluted form. When somebody treats you contemptuously or tramples on someone else's rights in your presence, you may feel compelled to take a stance, and if you do so, a "character contest results; a special kind of moral game," "moral combat... with properties of character brought into play as something to be lost and gained" (240, 244). Defending one's honor, helping restore another person's dignity, vindicating a cherished principle draws you into a character contest the purpose of which is to defend the interaction order decent people are keen to uphold. If you decline to take up such gamble, you may incur a serious moral cost. The situation is particularly volatile when someone throws you a gauntlet, when "one person is providing a field of action for another [and] that other can in turn use the first individual as his field of action. When this reciprocity of use is found and the object is to exercise a skill or ability of some kind, we speak of a contest or duel. What occurs at these scenes might be called *interpersonal action*" (207). Those who retreat from action or blow one's cool in such situations lose moral grounds and diminish themselves in their own and other people's eyes (240). Goffman reviews a range of situations where fatefulness stares you in the face and cries for action and where the opportunity presents itself to show whether you are a coward or a noble person. Boldly, he goes on to assert that people on the margins of society possess

these valued characteristics and sometimes show more valor than their safety-minded citizens:

Careful, prudent persons must therefore forego the opportunity to demonstrate certain prized attributes; after all, devices that render the individual's moments free from fatefulness also render them free from new information concerning him – free, in short, from significant expression. As a result, the prudent lose connection with some of the values of society, some of the very values that portray the person as he should be... And so, on the edges of society, are puddles of people who apparently find it reasonable to engage directly in the chancy deeds of an honorable life... Their alienation from our reality frees them to be subtly induced into realizing our moral fantasies (260, 267).

People luxuriating in safe harbors indulge in moral fantasies too, only they chase action in the commercial arena where they can purchase a commodified gamble and packaged thrill. Las Vegas is the Mecca for individuals eager to devour vicarious action they shun at home, the booming market for “commercialized action, wherein the appearance of fatefulness is generated in a controlled fashion in an area of life calculated to insulate the consequences from the rest of living. The cost of this action may be only a small fee and the necessity of leaving one's chair, or one's room, or one's house. It is here that society provides still another solution for those who would keep their character up but their cost down: the manufacture and distribution of vicarious experience through the mass media” (262). Goffman cites examples of commercial fatefulness gleaned from the Las Vegas gambling scene where every display cues visitors to a not-to-be-missed opportunity for action (185-94). Here is *The Las Vegas Sun* touting “bridge action” at Riviera Hotel for female players and commending Shirley Jones' dancing at the Flamingo as “the most explosive bit of action since Juliet Prowse.” *The San Francisco Chronicle* promotes “Whiskey a Go Go Where the Action Is.” Elsewhere, the media hypes a salon “Where the Beauty Action Is,” invites the trend-conscious to “Check the Fashion Action” or visit the Buick car dealership where the “Accent's on Action.” Tourists in casinos are encouraged to trade “dollar action for big action,” check the pit catering to “real action players” or try an establishment featuring “heavy action.” Rookie dealers are removed because they “can't deal to the action” and replaced with the veterans fit “to take the action.” Up and coming casino managers can be offered “a piece of the action” through share of ownership while the advantage player is shown the door with the warning, “We don't want your action.”

For budget conscious visitors there are “Lotteries, the ‘numbers,’ and casino keno [which] are commercialized expressions of long-shot gambles offered at a very small price. The expected value of the play is, of course, much smaller even than the price, but an opportunity is provided for lively fantasies of big winnings” (269). Joy rides for thrill seekers let the daring rev up their senses and experience mind-expanding emotions. “The ‘vertigo’ rides at fairs and amusement parks nakedly resolve our dilemma concerning action by providing danger that is guaranteed to be really not dangerous” (196). Arcade strips proliferating in urban areas and resort towns present yet another occasion for the customer willing to pay a nominal fee to “be the star performer in gambles enlivened by being very slightly consequential. Here a person currently without social connections can insert coins in skill machines to demonstrate to the other machines that he has socially approved qualities of character. These naked little spasms of the self occur at the end of the world, but there at the end is action and character” (268-269). And for daredevils hungering for psychedelic action, “there is currently available through L.S.D. and other drugs a means of voluntarily chancing psychic welfare in order to pass beyond ordinary consciousness. The individual here uses his own mind as the equipment necessary for action” (201).

Less packaged but no less sought after is “fancy milling,” the term suggested to Goffman by Howard Becker and signifying a range of on-the-premises exercises that allow customers to “obtain a taste of social mobility by consuming valued products, by enjoying costly and modish entertainment, by spending time in luxurious settings, and by mingling with prestigious persons – all the more if these occur at the same time and in the presence of many witnesses” (197). Popular culture and mass media sell other forms of vicarious fatefulness for the consumers who are tired of exploring things on foot or traveling to fancy destinations. To quench your thirst for action you can pick up Ernest Hemingway’s novel, read Norman Mailer, or check out the latest James Bond movie: “James Bond takes a room at a plush hotel at a plush resort in a plush part of the world. James Bond makes the acquaintance of an unattainable girl and then rapidly makes the girl, after which he shows how coolly he can rise above her bedside murder. James Bond contests an opponent with cars, cards, copters, pistols, swards, spear guns, ingenuity, discrimination of wines, judo, and verbal wit. James Bond snubs the man about to apply a hot iron. Etc.” (262n).

Why this mad dash for action and commodified fatefulness in popular culture? According to Goffman, the very security of modern life makes humans long for action surrogates. You can buy life and health insurance from a credible company, drive a car with improved safety, call in the law enforcement to fend off a looming menace, and use other options to foster uneventful living modern life has to offer. “In this way the cost of possible trouble can be easily spread over the whole course of the individual’s life, a ‘converting of a larger contingent loss into a smaller fixed charge.’ Systems of courtesy and etiquette can also be viewed as forms of insurance against undesired fatefulness, this time in connection with the personal offense that one individual can inadvertently give to another” (176). And yet, something valuable has been lost in this civilizing process, something that shrunk the space for full-blooded action and spawned the demand for its commercial substitute. “Whatever the reasons why we consume vicarious fatefulness, the social function of doing so is clear. Honorable men in their scenes of fatefulness are made safely available to all of us to identify with whenever we turn from our real worlds. Through this identification the code of conduct affirmed in fateful activities – a code too costly or too difficult to maintain in full in daily life – can be clarified and reasserted. A frame of reference is secured for judging daily acts, without having to pay its penalties” (266).

Goffman makes a passing gesture to “positively valued qualities of character earned by sticking to an undramatic task over a long period of time” (233), but such Protestant virtues, which he embodied in his own scholarly pursuits, fail to satisfy him. He is irresistibly drawn to the life of action that leaves ample room for humans willing to test themselves against the forces of nature and affirm their moral character. Goffman concludes his analysis with a wistful statement echoing the ritual significance of lot throwing and divination stressed by Huizinga and Caillois as he expresses hope that moderns will continue visiting the shrines of action and making sacrifices at the altar of fatefulness:

And these are the occasions and places that show respect for moral character. Not only in mountain ranges that invite the climber, but also in casinos, pool halls, and racetracks do we find places of worship; it may be in churches, where the guarantee is high that nothing fateful will occur, that moral sensibility is weak (268).



### **Goffman's Theory of Action: Critical Assessment and Agenda for the Future**

Looking back at Goffman's work on gambling, we can see how he anticipated future inquiry and opened intellectual horizons still waiting to be explored. We can also identify the areas where his views call for revision. This final section offers an assessment of Goffman's action theory, its implications for understanding capitalist society, and prospects for further development.

Erving Goffman's enduring contribution to the study of gambling owes much to his determined effort to breach the wall between betting practices in entertainment venues and risk taking in society at large, the former traditionally associated with vice and the latter with virtuous conduct. Goffman went against the common wisdom by applying the same standard to all areas of life marked by uncertainty and hazard. Across societal domains, he insisted, humans face risks and opportunities, balance chance and skill, and cut a figure bespeaking moral qualities. To be sure, there is a difference between *gaming* understood as a challenge enjoyed for its own sake, *gambling* associated with betting a value on a chancy outcome, and *calculated risk taking* in society at large one hazards to fulfill an obligation or get ahead in life. Nevertheless, there are continuities, notably when it comes to fair play or cheating. By bringing into one continuum risk taking in all its sundry forms, Goffman underscored the fact that honorable qualities are found among gamblers just as shady practices abound among risk takers in general. Correct are the scholars who maintain that Goffman "lifts gambling out of the moral abyss into which successive generations of commentators and reformers have consigned it" (Downes, Davies, David and Stone 1976/2006:107; cf. Rosecrance 1986). One should not stop there, however, and drive home the point central to Goffman's analysis, namely that everyday life is full of practical gambles that expose risk takers to opportunities, temptations, and hubris.

Meyer Lansky prided himself on honesty and commended character as a virtue to his children (see epigraph to this paper, quoted in Lacy 1992:388). Biographers fully alive to the dark side of his business marvel at the apparent paradox, "[A]s with bootlegging, Meyer Lansky found himself in an illegal [casino] enterprise where enduring success depended 'on being honest'" (Lacy 1992:86). Clearly, he and his fellow immigrants brought up on the Lower East Side skirted the law. They did so for various reasons, in no small part because the sanctified avenues for advancement were clogged, because they "sought to break down the barriers still excluding them from so-called legitimate society, barriers which they regarded as hypocritical and spurious" (Fried 1994:109). On the way to the top, underworld capitalists developed a business acumen matching that of their legitimate counterparts. The entrepreneurs from the hood were getting ahead in rum running not by being more brutal than their rivals but because they were more efficient in the shipping business; they succeeded in casino ventures because they were more reliable and customer-friendly; and they survived in the cut-throat Vegas environment by being street-smart judges of character (Lacey 1992; Pietrusza 2011; Friedman 2015).

We may or may not agree with Sandra Lansky that "the main difference between Meyer Lansky and his old Prohibition friend Joe Kennedy was Kennedy's rosary and his Harvard degree," that if her dad and his partners "had had those degrees (forget the rosaries), they probably would have ended up on Wall Street [and] that without them, they ended up in Havana and Las Vegas" (Lansky 2014:19). Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss without reflection Sandra Lansky's contention that theirs "were small infractions compared to the felonious exploitation, as Daddy saw it, of the workers, poor immigrant people like the Lanskys, by the fat-cat capitalist owners, the establishment that would never let them in" (Ibid.183). Historians provide ample fodder for this conclusion. A good many businessmen operating above ground sported the hardboiled virtues and some of the thuggish customs for which underworld capitalists were notorious, just as hoodlum millionaires sought to boost their image through community projects and philanthropic

ventures. “[T]he aspiring neighborhood vice lord and gangster hardly differed from the aspiring neighborhood capitalist: both accepted the premise assumed to be quintessentially American, that life was war between competing exploiters for dominion” (Fried 1994:43). “And in the crowded slums, [there was] the gangster. He was a man with the gun, acquiring by personal merit what was denied to him by complex orderings of a stratified society. And the duel with the law was the morality par excellence” (Bell 1953:133). A long-time observer of the Vegas scene voiced a kindred opinion about a successful casino operator, “one part shark, one part psychologist [who is] far more like the classic titans of American business than some of the nation’s more successful capitalists care to admit” (Smith 2005:379). No wonder the public romanticized the gangland and developed what Walter Winchell called “‘the underworld complex,’ in which the world of criminal violence and shady dealings seems more exciting and attractive than the pedestrian world of ordinary life” (Schwartz 2008b:623).

The difference between the capitalists from the under and over worlds is even harder to tell if we go back to the Robber Barons Era (Josephson 1934/1962; Beaty 2008; Fraser, Steve 2015). Jay Gould, builder of Union Pacific, used dirty tricks to get ahead of the competition, his favorite swindle being watering down the stock and dumping it on the market with devastating impact on small investors. Collis Huntington and his colleagues seized public land in Arizona to build a private railroad knowing full well that government officials would approve the transaction after the fact with inducement of hefty kickbacks. To win federal subsidies, Leland Stanford offered U.S. senators preferred stock in the future company while his colleagues in South Pacific bribed Congressmen with free railroad passes and favorable loans. In 1881, the State of California established the Railroad Commission to curtail a widespread abuse in the industry while letting Stanford and Huntington, railroad magnates, appoint two out of three commissioners. When Standard Oil executives couldn’t persuade competitors to sell their refineries, they would work behind the scene to have their competitors’ tariffs raised, and if that tactic failed, arranged “little industrial accidents” at the rivals’ shops to drive them out of business. After a bitter dispute arose between the Ramsey-Morgan group and James Fisk over the control of the Albany section of the state railroad, the parties vying for supremacy recruited hundreds of thugs who went at each other with weapons drawn in a manner that could have impressed the organized crime professionals. Reminiscing about the business ethics of that era, a notorious financier let the public in on the fix: “It matters not one iota what political party is in power, or what President holds the reins of office. We are not politicians or public thinkers; we are the rich; we own America; we got it, God knows how; but we intend to keep it if we can by throwing all the tremendous weight of our support, our influence, our money, our political connection, our purchased senators, our hungry congressmen, our public-speaking demagogues into the scale against any legislation, any political platform, any Presidential campaign, that threatens the integrity of our estate” (F. T. Martin, quoted in Josephson 1934/1962:352).

Frederick Townsend Martin, who grew disillusioned with the mores of the rich and powerful he knew firsthand, had reasons to overstate his case. We shouldn’t draw a moral equivalency between the two breeds of capitalists; crime syndicates had more violent psychopaths in their midst than the mainstream industry; but evasion of laws and predatory practices were widespread on either side of the divide. Hank Greenspan cheering the casino moguls’ risky business got it half right – the part of the equation he hadn’t surveyed was the methods the captains of industry used to secure their interests, methods that were downright criminal at times. Matthew Josephson, a noted student of Robber Baron capitalism, flipped the coin neatly to make this point about Jay Gould: “At all times, from his position of vantage, he would be as one who deals out marked cards in the game of buying and selling capital, since he would be fully able to foresee the ‘nature, magnitude and incidence’ of all the risks he created. His system could no more fail than loaded dice” (Josephson 1934/1952:195; for a different perspective on Robber Baron capitalism see Folsom 1987). “Crooked gambler” as a metaphor for a capitalist shark

became a common place in the Progressive era after Ida Tarbell published her *History of Standard Oil Company* where she indicted John D. Rockefeller as a captain of industry who spurned “fair competition” and “systematically played with a loaded dice” (Tarbell 1904:670). Such indeed was the era, the traces of which have not been erased, when for a price, the police offered protection to the owners of speakeasies and gambling joints, judges looked the other way when their favorite hotel-casino operators ran afoul of the law, politicians fueled their campaigns with money from crooked businessmen, presidential candidates solicited help from mafia bosses, and the head of the FBI, one J. Edgar Hoover, who for decades denied the existence of organized crime in America, indulged in favors from mobsters turned capitalists: “Hoover’s longtime friendship with known mobsters [was no secret]. He gambled at their racetracks, and casinos, stayed for free at their hotels, and profited from timely tips on stocks, oil leases, real estate and other ventures” (Newton 2007:172).

In time, the capitalist gamblers managed to increase their control over the market by setting up the monopolies which took some of the chanciness out of the capitalist enterprise, but the consolidation spearheaded by the Rockefellers, Carnegies, and Du Ponts did little to improve the opportunity structure for the great unwashed who compensated their sagging fortunes by dabbling in underground commerce and betting on propositions promising a sudden reversals of fortunes. Goffman doesn’t articulate this side of the gambling boom. As usual, he is reticent about the macro-implications of his findings. This is where more recent research helps fill the gap by showing how gaming practices vary according to the bettors’ income, education, and occupation and explaining why blue color workers frequent OTB bars while women with low education crowd bingo parlors, all praying for a lucky strike (Zola, 1963; Abt, Smith, and McGurrian 1985; Dixey 2006; Allen 2006).

Already in Caillois we find an understanding that games of chance make it easier for the disadvantaged to manage their lot. “Recourse to chance helps people tolerate competition that is unfair or too rugged. At the same time, it leaves hope in the dispossessed that free competition is still possible in the lowly stations in life, which are necessarily more numerous. That is why, to the degree that *alea* of birth loses its traditional supremacy and regulated competition becomes dominant, one sees a parallel development and proliferation of a thousand secondary mechanisms designed to bring sudden success out of turn to the rare winner” (Caillois 1958:115). Randomizing the outcomes in life’s gamble, even at the risk of losing what little one had, seems rational when life chances are rigidly stratified and proposals for democratizing opportunity dismissed as a left-wing conspiracy. Modern researchers echo this theme: “If one is already on the low end of the totem pole, it is better to risk a complete loss of what one takes for the possibility of sudden gain than to face the grim predictability of one’s place in an economic system far more calcified and ‘fixed’ – in the multiple senses of the term – than the American ideology of upward mobility and opportunity for all would imply” (Tanner 2009:238). Pierre Bourdieu, who knew Goffman personally and learned from him a great deal, spelled out the structural implications of risk management in the modern world: “Capital in its various forms is a set of pre-emptive rights over the future; it guarantees some people the monopoly of some possibilities although they are officially guaranteed to all” (2000:225). The point is that chanciness unevenly affects social strata. Those at the bottom of the economic order are left to fend for themselves by their employers who have the power and political influence to cut workers’ benefits, ditch their pension obligations, withhold health insurance protection, cripple trade unions and undermine collective bargaining – all that on the premise as optimistic as self-serving that the market will deliver the overworked and underpaid from the vagaries of life (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992, 2004; Lupton 1999; Cosgrave 2006). Meanwhile, those on top of the world enjoy the fruits of commodified risk while looking for ways to privatize the profits and socialize the losses. Subprime mortgage and securities vendors take unwarranted chances, bundle and resell the risky financial products to other

institutions, and when the latter go belly up rely on the public to bail them out. A skeptic is entitled to ask if this is not the case of socialism for the super rich and capitalism for everyone else.

In the language of Ulrich Beck (1992), we live in a “risk society” where more and more responsibilities for bad outcomes are passed on to the individual and the mounting scope of technological disasters is threatening us all. This, according to Giddens (1991:109), is the generic feature of our times: “To live in the universe of high modernity is to live in an environment of chance and risk, an inevitable concomitant of a system geared to the domination of nature and the reflexive making of history.”

There is a problem with this line of reasoning insofar as it traces its roots to Erving Goffman (Giddens 1991; Cosgrave 2008). Although the author of “Where the Action Is” was among the first to spot the increase in appetite for risk taking and commercialized gambling, he linked this trend to the diminished fatefulness in modern society which better insulates the common folk from daily hazards than the earlier social orders. Students of risk society should reexamine WAI to see where their arguments diverged from Goffman’s and how his theory must be updated in light of the recent changes. Commodification of risk and marketing of fatefulness is an area where students of gaming can make a vital contribution.

Another influential research current owes Goffman some of its inspiration. It is spearheaded by Stephen Lyng and his colleagues who study voluntary self-endangering or “edgework” (Lyng 1999; 2005, 2014; Smith 2005; Miller 2005; Holyfield, Jonas, and Zajicek 2005; Zwick 2006). Scholars working in this tradition explore the macrosociological implications of Goffman’s theory. They aim to show “how institutional arrangements that give rise to ‘alienation’ (Marx) and ‘oversocialization’ (Mead) are implicated in edgework” (Lyng 2005:5). Their starting premise is that bureaucratic rationalization is endemic to modern life, that “routine work and quotidian activities wither our creative and expressive forces” (Zwick 2006: 32). To compensate for the loss of agency, “we seek out extraordinary and unique experiences in the leisure activities we pursue and the substances we consume.” The name for this deliberate effort to inject fatefulness into one’s life is “edgework [which] functions as an antidote to our existence in a disenchanting world” (Ibid.). Edgework, for Lyng, is a vertiginous exercise that presupposes “a clearly observable threat to one’s physical or mental well-being or one’s sense of ordered existence. The archetypical edgework experience is one where the individual’s failure to meet the challenge at hand will result in death” (Lyng 1990:857). While acknowledging Goffman’s influence, Lyng excludes gambling from his early analysis because “a pure gamble is an entirely chance-determined enterprise [that] offers no opportunity for exercising control over the outcome” (1990:872). This account underestimates the extent to which professional gamblers such as card counters and poker players mix chance and skills and experience powerful somatic-affective transformations in the course of play. And when financial fortunes are at stake, pro gambling appears to fall under the category of edgework. Lyng had revised his position in his later works where he conceded that “gaming and gambling, chance-taking in criminal activities, physically dangerous occupations, ‘hustling’ enterprises, professional soldiering and police work, and high risk sports” meet the definition of edgework (2014:445). Understanding the historical, structural, and phenomenological underpinnings of edgework is a promising avenue for research, and it invites a closer look at the vertigo-inducing games (Caillois’ *ilinx* class of play) and the fatefulness among marginalized groups (Goffman’s *action* in urban settings).

Much work remains to be done on the images of fatefulness and packaging of risk in popular culture (see Smith 1996; McMullen and Mullen 2001; Gross and Morse 2007). Goffman’s insights in this area are of signal importance. Comparing the portrayal of fateful action in today’s mass media with what Goffman scrutinized in WAI would make for a fine study. Momentous changes that have transformed the entertainment and gaming industry call for further investigation into the evolving status of fateful action.

The proliferation of tournaments for professional gamblers, the increased availability of off-track betting, the dominance of slot machines in American casinos, the expansion of video game markets, the explosion of extreme sports – these developments of the last few decades had an impact on gaming behavior (McMillen 1996; Cosgrave 2008; Sallaz 2009; Kingma 2010). The ubiquity of slot machines in the entertainment markets makes some researchers wonder how relevant Goffman’s analysis is today. “Most individuals who gamble in the various legalized settings are not the seekers of action that Goffman discussed – a trend that is revealed by the extent of public participation in lottery play compared to more skilled forms of gambling, and the extent to which casino gambling is oriented to mechanical and electronic games of chance” (Cosgrave 2008:86). The impact of technology on gaming is an area where Goffman’s ideas need updating (e.g., opportunities for card counting drastically diminished after the introduction of continuous shuffling, see Zender 2008).

Goffman is careful to stipulate that “In this essay action will be considered chiefly in the context of American society,” that while “every society no doubt has scenes of action, it is our own society that has found a word for it” (WAI:192-93). How unique are American practices? As Clifford Geertz’s study of Balinese cockfight reveals, gambling is central to understanding other societies as well (Geertz 1972). Cultural differences in gaming preferences is a subject undertheorized by Goffman (see Kingma 2010). How productive this line of inquiry is could be seen in Jeffrey Sallaz’s comparative study which showed that Goffman’s generalizations based on his Las Vegas fieldwork do not readily apply to the gambling scene in the tribal area casinos of South Africa (Sallaz 2009). Fascination with gambling as a ceremony, a pastime, and a vocation has multiple sources. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many professional gamblers lost their religious beliefs, that a disproportional number of casino managers in North America were individuals of Jewish descent, that gambling styles vary from culture to culture. More research is needed to document the religious, cultural, and ethnic differences in gaming practices and occupational preferences.

Goffman’s gambler is a man eager to take chances with an eye to achieving reputational and experiential gains. Holtgraves calls this “a self-presentational view of gambling” (1988:78). Needless to say, players are propelled into action by other reasons as well, reasons that resist self-scrutiny. Blaise Pascal (1656/1941:51-2) marveled at gamblers’ true motives when he observed that neither material payoff nor ephemeral excitement are the gambler’s sole concerns: “Give him each morning the money he can win each day, on condition he does not play; you make him miserable. It will perhaps be said that he seeks the amusement of play and not winning. Make him then play for nothing; he will not become excited over it, and will feel bored” (Pascal 1941 51-2). It is the wretchedness of human condition, Pascal surmised, that drives gamblers into action, the existential void no earth-bound betting could fill. (Hence, “Pascal’s wager” – sacrifice mundane pleasures, bet on the world to come, and you will enjoy infinite happiness in heaven and graceful living on earth). Disentangling motives that compel people to gamble proved to be a hazardous task. Smith and Preston (1984) identified eleven motives for gambling, including inter alia relaxation, sociability, showing off, thrill-seeking, testing one’s skills, self-punishment, and material gains (for a different motivational schema see Commission of the Review of a National Policy toward Gambling 1976). Leisure and recreation turned out to be the most common reason cited by out of town Las Vegas casino visitors (91% of the respondents), avoiding boredom came second (41%), followed by financial gains (39%), pursuing new experience (32%), and testing one’s skills (30%). While only 9% of the participants owned up to “monitory profit” as their primary reason for gambling, 42% thought this to be the chief reason behind other people’s wagering. The most interesting result of this study was the 86% of the respondents who claimed to have broken even (58%) or getting ahead financially (28%) by the end of their journey to Las Vegas – a highly implausible outcome that casts doubt on self-reporting as a basis for evaluating gamblers’ conduct. This is an old

conundrum – do we derive behavior from values or deduce values from overt conduct? Some of the gamblers, we know from experience, succumb to delusions and develop self-destructive habits which Goffman failed to articulate. One can understand why Goffman is mum about compulsive gambling – such a notion has stigmatizing implications. Still, this is a serious gap in the paradigm of fateful action, which needs to square off with the question, “Why do some players continue gambling to the point of losing jobs, families, and on occasion, their lives?” (Browne 1989:3-4; cf. Langer 1975; Kingma 1997; Cosgrave 2008; Walker 2014). We need to be weary of sociological reductionism, too. While Arnold Rothstein excelled in the underworld numbers racket, his brother Harry became a pillar of the community and a model of Jewish piety. Biographical trajectories in the gambling world admit of individual variations as much as in other occupations.

One last problem area where Goffman made an enduring contribution concerns the ethics of risk taking. He has illuminated the special role of character as a backbone of the interaction order and organizational life, both rewarding the steadfast not only with material rewards but also with the reputation for integrity, courage, composure, and other virtues attributed to successful risk takers. Skeptics may wonder if modern corporate culture with its worship of greed and preoccupation with the bottom line leaves enough room for the virtues that used to connote class. As usual, Goffman finds these qualities in unexpected places: “Composure in all its different dimensions has traditionally been associated with the aristocratic ethic. In recent years, however, a version of this quality has been strongly touted by raffish urban elements under the label ‘coolness’” (WAI:227). The image of a classy gambler who takes winning and losing in stride goes back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the nobility consumed chance conspicuously and waged huge sums to show class. The vestiges of this image survived into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the characters like Nick the Greek who dazzled admirers with his indifference to the gamble outcome. As Nicholas Andreas Dandolos liked to say, “[T]he greatest pleasure in my life is gambling and winning. The next greatest pleasure is gambling and losing. So how can I be nervous or sad?” (Rice 1969:125). Hubert Howe Bancroft expressed the same sentiment nearly a century earlier, “Next to the pleasure of winning is the pleasure of losing” (1864/1881:81), and Lord Byron beat Bancroft to it by a few decades when he observed in Canto XIV of *Don Juan*, “In play, there are two pleasures for your choosing / The one is winning, and the other losing.” This aristocratic ethos crumbled with the onset of the bourgeois economic order when the enterprising courtiers like Marquis Dangeau armed themselves with the rudimentary knowledge of probability and commenced to play in earnest to the horror of the genteel class (Reith 1999:67-8).

Fyodor Dostoevsky, a lucid commentator on casino mores, noted the diverging motives for casino action manifest in “two kinds of gambling, one – a gentleman’s play, the other – a plebian, mercantile play that befits ruffraff.” Denouncing the “plebian desire to win,” he praised those who gamble for “entertainment” and take losses in stride as befits “an aristocratic temper” (1866/1973:216-17). Alas, his own habits fell decidedly short of the noble standard, causing Dostoevsky and his family much grief. In an autobiographical novel, Dostoevsky sounded a familiar theme: “Let me show character once, and I will change my fate over night. Character is what matters the most” (Ibid. 317). While Dostoevsky gained firsthand experience of casino life in Western Europe, his countryman Nikolai Gogol observed the local scene when aristocratic sentiments had already yielded to the mercantile spirit and unsavory characters came to dominate the action. In his play “Gamblers,” Gogol chronicles a hilarious rivalry between two teams of card sharps pretending to cooperate while looking for ways to “outcon” the other side. The new ethos shines through in this soliloquy of a professional gambler: “You can pull a cheap trick in a minute, whereas it takes practice and art to do what I do. Even if it is cheating – who can do without it? . . . Any fool can get by, but to live with subtlety, to live artfully, to trick everybody without being tricked – now that is a higher accomplishment” (Gogol 1843/1949:184-85).

A son of Russian immigrants, Goffman was familiar with this literature, as was his sister, a professional actress who read the Russian classics and performed their plays. By the time Goffman wrote his treatise on gambling, the figure of a gentleman gambler steeped in fair play, sporting cool demeanor, and losing serious money without showing strain was largely an anachronism. Not even cool cat Nick the Greek could withstand scrutiny on this score. His girlfriend recalls how after a particularly big loss, Nick turned “pale” and seemed “trembling and in deep emotional pain” (Campbell 2010:72). Another Greek who made Vegas his home reports how the illustrious Nick asked him to help rip off a mutual acquaintance in a game of poker (Jimmy the Greek 1975:196-97). Nicholas Andreas Dandalos didn’t always live up to the image he carefully cultivated.

Had Goffman romanticized men of action? It seems so. His paeans to action echoed the urban romantics of his time who counseled the hipsters that “one can hardly afford to be put down too often, or one is beat, one has lost one’s confidence, one has lost one’s will, one is impotent in the world of action.” That’s the language of Norman Mailer (1957), the writer Goffman admired, “whose novels present scenes of fateful duties, character contests, and serious action; his essays expound and extol chance-taking, and apparently in his personal life he has exhibited a certain tendency to define everything from his marriages to his social encounters in terms of the language and structure of the fight game” (WAI:268n; cf. the combative communication style Goffman sported in his own daily encounters, Shalin 2014). In a similar vein, Goffman cast risk taking as the male preserve, admired “the cult of masculinity” found in Latin culture, and rhapsodized the situations where men had “the opportunity to be measured by Hemingway’s measure of men.” “Character” and “manliness” for him are virtually synonymous (“manliness is a complex of qualities better called ‘character’”, WAI:209, 238, 214n). A decade later he would sound a different tune (Shalin 2014), but in the ‘60s he shared the prejudices of his age: “[T]he qualities of character traditionally associated with womanhood [compel] the female to withdraw from all frays in order to preserve her purity, ensuring that even her senses will be unsullied. Where action is required to ensure this virtue, presumably her male protector undertakes it” (WAI:234). The only area where women take up serious action, Goffman claimed in his earlier years, is sex play (WAI:209-210). The gender bias behind this outlook reminds us that social scientists belong to their time, that they survey society from the vantage point of the ongoing present and with the aid of their im/personal biases.

Goffman’s “ambivalence about safe and momentless living” and his reveling in the “primordial bases of fatefulness” (WAI:260, 164) owed much to the historical context, intellectual fads, and biographical circumstances in which he framed his theory. The methodology Goffman used in his gambling study also reflected the scholarly conventions of his time. In this era, sociologists freely embedded themselves in the field and conducted their observations with little outside scrutiny and scant attention to the ethical implications of their participatory research. Gambling establishments offered a welcome opportunity to disguise one’s research agenda while observing things *in vivo*, as Goffman did in the case of blackjack. David Hayano did something similar with respect to poker. Card playing and ethnography, he contended, share certain strategies and techniques – the two “required careful observation of misleading, disguised, and perplexing behaviors,” both “had to develop reasoned deductions, make decisions, and predict future behavior,” and each “called for enormous patience and self-control” (Hayano 1982:ix). Yet deep immersion studies entailed serious risks and morally freighted choices. As Hayano confesses, he “did not want to report illegal or unethical acts I witnessed or was drawn into” (bid. 157-58), while Goffman dabbled in card-counting and brought his family into the act in the course of his research. No Institutional Review Board would have approved such practices today. Goffman’s biases and gambling habits must have influenced his conclusions, in both positive and negative ways. The growing attention to field methods in gambling studies shows how important it is for a researcher to practice methodological reflexivity and interrogate oneself about the ethical issues in participant observation

(Hayano 1982; Holtgraves 1988; Li 2008; Parke and Griffiths 2008). Analyzing the methodological and ethical implications of Goffman's practices in light of the changing research conventions will help understand the pros and cons of participant observation as a method in gambling studies.

### **Conclusion**

On June 8, 2008, Tom Goffman wrote to me, "For about 8 years I've wanted to finish EG's vegas [sic] study, but his kind second wife, Gillian will not hand over his notes. Alice, my half-sister has gone into Sociology. Maybe someday the two of us can do it." Tom's intent, perhaps not altogether serious, will remain untested, as he died two years after this exchange. The present paper is an attempt to honor his father, one of the most important social scientists of the last century.

Throughout this study, I highlighted the historical, intellectual, and biographical sources of Goffman's imagination. His cultural roots, religious skepticism, family interests in gambling, personal fascination with card playing, and voracious appetite for intellectual inquiry led him to take up a job as casino dealer and explore the Las Vegas gambling scene. "Where the Action Is," Goffman's seminal paper, continues to inspire researchers striving to understand the role of risk and the commercialization of chance in society. Among his insights is the realization that fatefulness is endemic to human conditions and that our pathway in society depends in large measure on the opportunities we are handed over and make our own. How we manage these opportunities, the chances we take and forego, and the manner we account for ourselves in the process reveal to the world our character. There is a philosophical dimension to Goffman's musings on fatefulness that shines through in this vignette with which I close this essay:

[I]f the individual compares the very considerable time he is slated to spend dead with the relatively brief time allowed him to strut and fret in this world, he might well find reason for viewing all of his life as a very fateful play of very short span, every second of which should fill him with anxiety about what is being used up. And in truth, our rather brief time is ticking away, but we seem only to hold our breath for seconds and minutes of it (WAI:261).



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