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*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

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THE BOYS' CLUB: AN EXPLORATION INTO  
THE SOCIAL WORLD OF A LAS VEGAS  
CASINO SPORTS BOOK

By

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Bachelor of Arts  
Allegheny College  
2001

Master of Arts  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
2003

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology**  
**Department of Sociology**  
**College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College**  
**University of Nevada, Las Vegas**  
**May 2010**

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**THE GRADUATE COLLEGE**

We recommend the dissertation prepared under our supervision by

**Frederick William Krauss**

entitled

**The Boys' Club: An Exploration into the Social World of a Las Vegas  
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be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology**

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**May 2010**

ABSTRACT

**The Boys' Club: An Exploration into the Social World  
of a Las Vegas Casino Sports Book**

by

Frederick William Krauss

Dr. Robert Futrell, Examination Committee Chair  
Associate Professor of Sociology  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

This ethnography of the La Mesa Casino Sports Book explores the characteristics that frame the social world its regular patrons create. Specifically, I explain the characteristics of La Mesa's sports bettors, the types of people who bet on sports, the mechanisms used to sustain participation in the scene, and how the sports bettors view themselves, their social world, and those outside of it. I argue that regular sports book patrons do not use the environment simply for sports betting. Rather, their complex interactional dynamics create a robust social world they come back to again and again to create a meaningful social world or community. My observations reveal the existence of a hierarchal order among bettors; they abide by both formal rules of conduct regulated by the casino and informal rules of conduct that are governed by La Mesa regulars. Regulars participate in ritualistic behavior, develop social bonds with like patrons, and combine different styles of expression and interaction to create a male-dominated home away from home. More broadly, Las Mesa regulars create a sense of community in the sports book. One implication is that we may have to look in seemingly unusual places to understand how and where community is created. In Las Vegas, the sports book is one such unusual space for camaraderie, social cohesion, and community.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation is dedicated to memory of  
Dr. Fred Preston (1941-2009)

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Las Vegas is unique. The odds were always slim for a city of more than 2 million people to grow out of the Mojave Desert. With minimal water supply in a dry, infertile landscape it is a marvel that Las Vegas has flourished. Still, despite being one of the most famous and popular cities in the world, many view Las Vegas as a dystopia. It is called Sin City, a playground for adults to quench their hedonistic appetites. Gambling is its economic bread and butter. Popular perceptions focus on the famous four mile “Strip” of mega-casinos, the epicenter from where the city spreads. And many of those who live in the city are transient, moving to the Valley for work in the casino industry for a time and then away for other opportunities. A running joke among locals is if you have been here for a year, then you are a native. There are few multigenerational families from Las Vegas and few established traditions that signify what it means to “be a Las Vegan.”

But Las Vegas is not only the “Strip.” Beyond the casino corridor a vast expanse of neighborhoods spread throughout the Valley. This is where the 2 million people that make up the metro area live. Within this sea of suburbs, there appears to be a palpable lack of community fellow-feeling among residents. The 2003 Harwood Institute for Public Innovation study on human capital in Las Vegas found that residents feel remarkably isolated from one another (Harwood & Freeman, 2004). The more recent Las Vegas Metropolitan Area Social Survey (LVMASS) confirms that this pattern has not changed (Futrell et. al., 2010). Las Vegans evince a sense of societal fragmentation and a culture of individualism that leaves little room for communitarian bonds. Residents talk

of the difficulty meeting others, forming community, and connecting with neighbors, and identifying with something larger than themselves.

The Harwood and LVMASS studies also describe a populace that strives to be connected. They worry about life in a city of strangers. They look for and create vestiges of community in public and private spaces like churches, libraries, social clubs, bars, coffee houses and parks. A burgeoning grassroots Arts District has emerged in downtown Las Vegas, spurred on by local artists and patrons looking for a scene and aesthetic to call their own, outside of the corporate casino culture that caters mostly to tourists from around the globe.

Where else do Las Vegans connect with one another? Where else do they build community? Can the casinos that dominate the Las Vegas landscape be spaces where residents meet, socialize, and bond with one another? Can these gambling temples so fixated on finding ever more efficient means for drawing cash from players' wallets and purses, be places where people also find connections with others that go beyond the betting act?

These are some of types of questions that anchor this study. I am interested in how Las Vegans connect with one another and create social worlds in the most predominant part of the city—the casino. And to do this I look to the most social of spaces in the casino—the sports book.

## Broad Issues

Why is it important to examine gambling from a sociological perspective? Gambling is intertwined with the fabric of global society. According to Bernhard and

Frey (2006) “at no time in human history have more types of gambling been more widely available to more human beings than they are today” (p. 1). In the United States individuals “lose more gambling than they spend on movie tickets, theme parks, spectator sports and videogames combined” (Morais, 2002, p. 66). And, the emphasis on gambling is growing. According to the American Gaming Association (2009a), in 2007 almost 93 billion dollars were spent on gaming related activities, as compared to 58.2 billion dollars in 1999. Yet, sociologists have not placed nearly enough attention on gambling and its social implications. We have spent considerable amounts of time and effort studying the “socio-cultural tentacles of Hollywood” but, according to Bernhard and Frey (2006) we have failed to adequately study the gambling industry, a vastly more economically significant sector. The growth of the gaming industry can be considered a social phenomenon that is fast becoming a rather normal part of everyday society and that risk-taking behavior is part of human nature.

Clearly the spread of gambling in the United States is not linked only to the growth of Las Vegas. Casinos can be found across the U.S., from San Diego to Atlantic City. Moreover, a number of states have a state-supported lottery to generate extra revenues to fund education, building of roads, or to support public works projects. Gambling is and has always been an attractive pastime (Schwartz, 2006).

Another common pastime in the United States is the participation in and spectatorship of sport. Sport in America is arguably on par with religion in terms of participation, following, and commitment. Fans of a particular team or sport often state that they are “religiously devoted.” Eitzen and Sage (2009) explain that although sport may appear to be a trivial aspect in North American culture, it is deeply woven into the

cultural, political, and economic fabric of society. “Many millions of Americans...are vitally interested in sport. It constitutes much of their conversation, reading material, leisure activity and discretionary spending” (p. 2).

The pervasiveness and popularity of sport has been even more driven by a culture shift with sport moving past the simple purpose of competition and recreation to becoming “big business.” Giulianotti (2002) explains that many sports in contemporary late-capitalist societies have gone through a “hyper-commodification” process, which has resulted in the increased importance of commerce and consumerism tied to sport. Sport’s popularity is based on the fusion of participation, spectatorship, and commercialization.

Sports and gambling are two separate recreational activities that Americans love in themselves, but they also combine in the realm of sports gambling, a seemingly controversial and confusing issue for many Americans. On the one hand, the major sports governing bodies (e.g., NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, and NCAA) publicly bash and despise sports betting. Yet tens of millions of Americans partake in numerous forms of sports gambling from officially sanctioned and regulated Nevada gambling to office pools and friendly wagers. Even national newspapers and websites report point spread odds for games, yet, sports gambling is only legal within the State of Nevada? To put this in perspective, in 2009 more than \$2.57 billion was wagered legally in Nevada sports books. Conversely, the FBI estimates that more than \$2.5 billion is wagered illegally on the NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament (“March Madness”) each year *alone* (American Gaming Association, 2009b).

The Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act of 1992 (28 U.S.C. §§ 3701-3704) was enacted by Congress to prevent the spread of legalized gambling. This form

of protective legislation by the federal government left Nevada as the only state with fully legalized and regulated sports gambling. With the exception of a few states that had sports lotteries, all other states were shutout from considering the notion of legalizing sports betting in the future. Now Nevada is the only state that has legal sports books and is the only place where one can conduct a thorough and systematic study of what happens in sports books.

### Purpose of Study

This is an ethnographic study of the social world created by patrons of a Las Vegas casino sports book. After several years of patronizing sports books around the Las Vegas Valley, I have observed that people who congregate in these settings are engaged in much more than the instrumental task of sports betting. There are very complex interactional dynamics that develop over time among groups of patrons. For instance, regular patrons create formal and informal codes of conduct, hierarchical organization, ritualistic behavior, gender dynamics, and social bonds. This study focuses on understanding these dynamics to better explain what people are doing in casino sports books, why they do it, and how they do it.

This study is based on observations, records, descriptions, and understandings of the social organization built by patrons of the La Mesa Sports Book. Specifically, I focus on the culture of solidarity and the social relationships created over time among regular patrons as a way to understand a sense of community-building within a context not often thought of as facilitating or emphasizing communal social involvements. My ethnographic approach focuses on ground-level observations of the interactional patterns

and symbolic codes that constitute the sports book culture. My originating questions are general and start with Erving Goffman's initiating question: "What are people doing here?" I ask "Do people come to sports books solely for the instrumental purpose of betting on sports or is there more happening in this scene?"

Indeed, there is much more going on and much of it involves establishing reciprocal bonds of solidarity and collective identity among participants, along with creating hierarchy, setting-specific codes of conduct, unique language, and interaction orders. I suggest that, in Las Vegas, sports books are spaces where social worlds are built that transcend the instrumental purpose of sports betting and that part of what these social worlds provide to participants is meaningful, enduring social relationships and a sense of belongingness for some members.

At the broadest level, I discuss the elements that make up social worlds that I found in the social organization of sports book patrons. Some of these aspects include people with similar interests sharing a particular space; the development and implementation of social norms, values, and mutual understandings through social interaction leads to the establishment of a membership hierarchy, social bonding, and in general maintains an overall stability of the social world.

Also, all these elements lend to the idea that the sports book is a place that is something more than just a space for betting. It is a male-dominated social world that patrons use as a place to hangout, to escape from the daily stresses of life. In short, it is a type of place that Oldenburg (1997) refers to as a "third place." Moreover, it is these signs of "togetherness" through social bonding that exhibit traces of community.

Social bonding might seem like an unexpected aspect of casino culture. Casino gaming is particularly unsociable with the increased reliance on machine-based gaming options (e.g., slot machines, individual video poker, and now automated group poker, roulette, and other table games) that reduce rather than promote interaction. Gottdeiner, Collins, and Dickens (1999) argue that, “Community life requires social institutions and spatial arrangements that promote interaction, daily contact, and visible, accessible forums for discussing everyday concerns” (p.128). I suggest that, in Las Vegas where casinos dominate, sports books are a place where some residents build social worlds that support relationships that approximate “community.” Sports books are settings where regular interaction occurs among Las Vegas locals and I am interested in the content, quality, depth, and richness of that interaction. Thus, my focus is on the social world(s) constructed and sustained by sports book patrons at a local Las Vegas casino called the La Mesa Sports Book.<sup>1</sup>

### Conceptual Focus

This study is rooted in symbolic interaction (SI) perspectives on social life. SI emphasizes human capacities to form social groups, create meaning, and coordinate actions on the basis of those meanings (Blumer, 1969). Anywhere people congregate we can expect to find meaningful and complex interaction orders that form as people make sense of their situation and orient themselves to one another. Sports books are spaces where people congregate. My central question is: What is the character of the social world(s) they create?

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym



I draw from the social world concept, which is based on the idea that humans, through repeated social interaction, create order, norms, and values. Consequently, the social order, norms and values structure the ways in which members of that world interact with one another. At the most basic level, the research focuses on how patrons of the La Mesa Sports Book create meaning and mutual understanding through social interaction. The shared activities in the sports book create and sustain interaction order and ritual chains, and shared collective experiences that constitute a social world.

This study also deals with the more general themes of sport, gender, and gambling. Basically, the study is unique in that the research examines a specific point in which all three of these themes intersect. The research reveals that regular patrons of the sports book establish social order and out of this a hierarchy is created, different types of relationships are formed and evolve, and gender norms are reinforced—specifically male-dominance within a public setting.

The following chapters will discuss those elements of the social world found within the La Mesa sports book. In chapter 2, I review the core literature and concepts I draw from to analyze the La Mesa Sports Book. Next, in chapter 3, I discuss my methodological approach. Chapter 4 describes the elements of the social world of the La Mesa Casino Sports Book. Chapter 5 examines the social order that guides interaction between sports book patrons. Chapter 6 explores the social life of a regular at the La Mesa Sports Book. Chapter 7 discusses the La Mesa sports book as a third place. Chapter 8 concludes the research and suggests future directions for study.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation discusses the casino sports book as highly gendered space where men form social worlds anchored in masculinized activities ordered around sports gambling. In this chapter I review sociological standpoints on sport, gambling, and gender to situate this study in disciplinary context and then draw connections to disciplinary themes that the ethnography will inform.

Few studies have addressed the three-part thematic focus on sport, gambling and gender. Rather, sociologists have typically theorized each of these analytical elements singly or in relation to one of these other elements. Gender, along with race and class, occupies a position at the center of sociology's core focus on inequality. Sport and gambling have been curiously relegated to secondary status in the discipline's unofficial hierarchy of core issues. Sociologists see sport as one many social institutions where gender inequalities are played out from the boardroom to the playing field to media symbols. Historically, sociologists have given gambling even less emphasis than sport. As gambling participation and gambling sites grow, researchers are turning in larger numbers to study pathological gambling practices and the political-economy of gambling's growth.

This study offers a modest attempt to draw linkages across all three of these sociological concerns through an ethnographic analysis of a sports betting context. My interest revolves around what happens among patrons in a social space where men gather to participate in activities devoted to gambling and sport.

As sport and gambling grow, we need to better understanding the sociological dynamics of the settings where these spheres intersect and the social worlds that people create in these contexts. In the following sections, I review the sociological literature on sport, gambling, and gender that frames and informs my analysis. I begin, however, with a brief history in the legalization of sports gambling in Nevada as a way to mark the uniqueness of the casino sports book context that I analyze. Following this discussion, I describe the relationship between gender and sport—followed by reviews of relevant issues in the sociological literature on third places, social worlds, and social order. Finally, I describe some key conceptual tools from ethnographic studies of social worlds and the nature of interaction that I use to direct my analysis of the casino sports book.

### The Rise of Sports Gambling

“Americans have never quite agreed on what to do about gambling” (Schwartz 2005, p. 12). This statement captures the tumultuous history of gambling in the U.S. Lotteries were the first legal form of gambling used as an economic tool to finance colonies, universities, churches, and even the revolutionary armies (Thompson, 2001). Despite this start, gambling has been banned and reinstated at various times and in various cities and states ever since. The history suggests that Americans seem to move between tolerating gambling as a go-to source of funding for state and local governments and banning games of chance for moral ideals.

The federal government originally lumped sports betting in with all other forms of gambling and legislators gave states the responsibility to legalize games of chance within their borders. Nevada was the “rogue state” that first took the step. The infamous

mobster, Bugsy Siegel, created the first race and sports book in the late 1940's when he opened the Flamingo. He transformed the back floor of the Flamingo resort into a space that would take bets on sporting events. Siegel used the technological advances of television to create an atmosphere where people could place a bet on races and sporting events and then stay and enjoy the events. The Flamingo sports book closed by the early 1950's in response due to a federal tax hike on American sports betting.

In 1951, Congress responded to a college basketball points shaving scandal by imposing a 10 percent tax on all sports betting transactions (Rosen, 1978). The federal action forced sports betting to be relegated to seedy joints called "turf clubs." Places such as the "Vegas Race and Turf Club," "Hollywood Sports Service," and "Del Mar" in Las Vegas, and the "Reno Turf Club" in Reno opened and closed frequently due to poor management or failed attempts to evade the federal tax law. According to Davies and Abram (2001), the "turf" or "race and sports" clubs that survived the tax only did so by learning to circumvent the system. For example, in exchange for a \$500 bet regular customers received a ticket for \$5 with a designated mark on it that let the club know that the bet was for \$500. Thus, during audits, the clubs would only be required to pay 10 percent off of \$5, instead of \$500. Moreover, clubs also took bets "off book," meaning that there was no formal record of the bet so that tax auditors and state regulators were unable to track those bets. Unknown customers were given accurately written tickets for fear that they might be federal agents operating a sting (p. 123).

Congress passed legislation on October 15, 1974, which lowered the 10 percent tax to 2 percent. Nevada Senator Howard Cannon spearheaded the lobbying efforts and, as a result, the turf clubs were, for the first time, able to turn a profit on running a

legitimate sports book. During the first year alone, wagering on sporting events quadrupled after the lowering of the tax (Thompson, 2001). The casinos took notice of the success the turf clubs were having and quickly began developing plans to open up their own sports books.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the economic viability of sports betting in Nevada the rest of the country seemed to embrace a negative perception of sports gambling. This perception was solidified with a series of betting scandals during the 1980's. In response, the professional sports leagues and the National Collegiate Athletic Association adopted stringent rules against gambling and those who participated in sports gambling.

In the late 1980's a couple of states created state sponsored football lotteries to generate revenue, setting in motion a new round of controversy over sports betting. The lotteries became widely popular, but also attracted scrutiny from the federal government. In an effort to stop the spread of any and all forms of sports gambling, the government drafted legislation prohibiting the practice.

On February 22, 1991, United States Senator Dennis Deconcini (D-Arizona) introduced the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act (28 U.S.C. §§ 3701-3704) on February 22, 1991 (Cabot, et al., 1999). Deconcini said, his bill "serves an important public purpose, to stop the spread of state-sponsored sports gambling (1991)." Subsequently, the bill was passed, thus making any wagers on amateur or professional sporting illegal, except where already permitted. Thus, Nevada, along with Montana,

---

<sup>2</sup> Casino operators then targeted the remaining legal restrictions on the casinos ability to maximize their earning potential through sports betting. During the same year, Frank "Lefty" Rosenthal, a renowned sports gambler, appeared before the Nevada legislature on behalf of the Gaming Control Board and explained the viability sports books and how the casino could benefit from this new revenue source. As a result of Rosenthal's testimony, the state legislature approved changes to the laws, thus allowing casinos to fully capitalize on sports gambling. Not only did Rosenthal make it easier for casinos to successfully run sports books, but he was also instrumental in designing the sports book at the Stardust, which is considered the standard bearer for what is now the prototypical race and sports book.

Oregon, and Delaware retained the right to continue sports gambling and, New Jersey was given a one-year window to decide whether they wanted to also legalize the practice, which they allowed to pass without making a decision (Thompson, 2001).

As a result, Oregon and Montana were able to keep their sports lotteries, Delaware had previously voted to legalize sports gambling but decided never to act upon it, and Nevada was allowed to keep sports gambling legal. Outside of those states sports gambling remains illegal. However, at the present time, the state of New Jersey is attempting to have the federal ban overturned, because they have decided they would welcome legalized sports betting (Mueller, 2009). The sole purpose of their attempt is to generate a new revenue stream during these difficult economic times.

The presence of sports gambling on the internet has created some new challenges to the United State's enforcement in prohibiting the practice. Many of the websites that offer sports gambling usually reside in countries where sports betting is legal. Still, the United States has used its laws to indict the owners of those websites, despite appearing to lack jurisdictional authority.

Originally the government used the Wire Act of 1961 (18 U.S.C. § 1084) to prosecute those involved with offshore sports books. But, in 2006, the House of Representatives passed the Internet Gambling Prohibition and Enforcement Act (H.R. 4411), thus creating a more updated statute to go along with times. The act made it illegal for foreign companies to accept sports bets from United States citizens.

Although, the Tenth Amendment allows for matters involving gambling to be resolved by each state, one can see that the federal government has played an active role when it comes to sports gambling. Most federal laws deal with the prohibition of

gambling information (18 U.S.C. § 1304; 18 U.S.C. §1084), devices (15 U.S.C. §§1171-77), or paraphernalia (Act of 1890, Act of 1895; 18 U.S.C §1953), but the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act of 1992 (28 U.S.C. §§ 3701-3704) specifically prohibits the wagering on any sporting events and the Internet Gambling Prohibition and Enforcement Act (H.R. 4477), which specifically prohibits all forms of gambling on the internet.

Despite all the federal legislation against sports gambling, the one constant that has remained is that Nevada is the only place where sports gambling legal and out in the open. This fact alone is the main reason why this study is so unique. The social space of a legal sports book is overlooked as a context rich in social interactional dynamics. This dissertation provides insight into the social world of a legalized sports book and the elements that create and sustain that social world. I now turn to the sociology of sport and gender.

### Gender and Sport

In Western culture, men have always dominated the social realm of sport. According to Messner (1987), sport is an arena that enacts and perpetuates male bonding. Sport sociologists have found that sport is a hyper-masculinized culture used to legitimize men's domination of women and their control of public life (Bryson, 1987; Farr, 1988). Men learn this culture in early childhood socialization processes that emphasize traditions, rituals, and formal codes that define maleness. The ideas are handed down from generation to generation (Gilligan, 1982). I will explain in this dissertation that the social world of the sports book is a highly masculinized. Males

dominate this social realm. I draw upon prior research on sport as a masculine activity to illuminate the type of gendered dynamics I will discuss in later chapters.

While gender equity in sports has grown over the past couple of decades, a large gap between male and female representation still remains (Eitzen & Sage, 2009, p. 327). Eitzen and Sage (2009) point out that “laws [such as Title IX] may force compliance in equality of opportunity for females in the world of sport, but inequalities in sport continue, albeit in more subtle and insidious forms” (p. 318).

Many sport historians and sociologists define the rapid expansion of organized sport at the turn of the twentieth century as a moment of cultural change that solidified modern sport as a bastion of masculine pride and participation in the U.S. (Messner, 2007). Specifically, these scholars point to the expansion of industrial capitalism leading to a changing division of labor between men and women. Men left the privacy of their farms to work in the public sector, while women were left to stay at home and perform the domestic duties. A new basis of male privilege was created out of these disparate realms of labor (Hartmann, 1976; Zaretsky, 1973). But, industrial capitalism also created a crisis of masculinity due to the rapid ascension of social feminization as women became more involved in schools and work (Messner, 2007). As a result, men looked to other social realms to dominate and organized sport became a way for men to assert and validate their masculinity (Dubbart, 1979).

Eitzen and Sage (2009) argue that in North American society there is an “overemphasis on protecting women and girls from the experiences of achievement and success and the underemphasis on developing physical skills” (p. 316). These attitudes are apparent in the realm of sport. Sage (1970) provides three reasons for women’s



historical insignificance in sport: “(1) Women’s cultural ‘tasks’ have been child rearing and homemaking. This left very little time for sport participation; (2) The deep-seated suspicion that vigorous sports were a health hazard for women; and (3) Social mores of masculine-feminine sex roles have discouraged women from participating in sport” (p. 288). These cultural assumptions situate female characteristics as passive, docile, and nurturing, rather than aggressive, competitive, and athletic. These expectations are manifested through socialization processes at home, in school, and through mass media. In every society, children are taught about gender roles and expectations through the socialization process. Children are educated on what is meant to be masculine and what is meant to be feminine. The social actions that are considered “right” are reaffirmed, while “wrong” actions are met with disapproval. As such, children learn to act according to their sex, thus, intertwining sex and gender. These expectations are carried all the way through childhood and adolescents and into adulthood. Studies of sport and gender expectations in the U.S. find that parents, especially fathers, encourage their sons to participate in sports more than that of their daughters (Shakib & Dunbar, 2004; Witt, 1997).

Gender roles and stereo-typing are also reinforced outside of the home through school and mass media. School perpetuates gender roles indirectly as the majority of teachers are women and the majority of administrators are men (for statistics *see* Eitzen & Sage, 2009, p. 319). Thus, children learn that there is a difference in status between men and women. Within the media, there is a major difference between the coverage of men and women’s sports, despite the fact that women have made great strides in gaining exposure. Male athletes still dominate all forms of media—TV, newspapers, magazines,

movies, and internet—and, therefore, gender stereotyping persists (Eitzen & Sage, 2009, pp. 319-320).

Despite major changes toward gender inclusion over the last decade—such as the growth of women’s professional sports league, greater media attention to women’s athletics, and continual increase of participation—sport remains an activity or interest that is clearly demarcated as a “male” as domain. Sport as a masculine pursuit goes beyond participation on the field, court, or course, as it also carries into the stands as a fan.

Gosling (2007) argues that women not only face obstacles to participate in sports on the field but also as a fan. Her work on female spectatorship demonstrates that although many women attempt to participate in sport as a spectator, they are also “restricted from attending most mass spectator sports due to cultural expectations [regarding domesticity and care-giver responsibilities] and gender discrimination” (p. 252). Other research suggests that women are also limited in their leisure options compared to men (Deem, 1982, 1986; Shaw, 1994; Wearing, 1998).

Male locker rooms are distinct hypermasculine gathering places for male sports participants. Curry (1991) describes that male locker rooms as “bastion[s] of privilege and a center of fraternal bonding” (p. 119). According to Curry, talk among male athletes in locker rooms focused on women as objects, taking form of loud profane performances for other men. Similarly, Mariah Burton Nelson (1991) has said that the locker room is a place where men discuss women in great detail, boast about sexual prowess, and create a wholly male culture space. The locker room reflects sport’s dominant male cultural tendencies that combine competition and fraternal bonding. Curry explains that the

competition between the athletes revolves around both status and position on the team. “While sport provides an activity to bond around one’s position on the team is never totally secure” (Curry, p. 123). The bonds among athletes are characterized by low levels of intimate disclosures and an array of social rules about how interaction should occur. “If one follows the ‘rule,’ then he has the ‘right’ to participate in bonding. If one does not follow the rules (i.e., quits), he ceases to exist in a bonding capacity” (p. 127).

As I will explain, sports books are also bastions of male competition, bonding, and machismo. While, officially more public than male locker rooms, sports books reflect the male cultural emphasis on sport and act, informally, as spaces where men create a masculinized social world where women are relatively absent except as objects of thought, talk, and desire. Next, I discuss the relationship between gambling and gender activities which indicate that the male-centered patterns that dominate sport carry over into sport gambling as well.

### Gambling and Gender

Gender and gambling behavior has been widely studied. According to the National Research Council (NRC 1999, also see Shaffer, Hall & Vander Bilt, 1999) men are more likely to gamble. The NRC also suggests that men are more likely to develop into problem gamblers than women. However, other studies suggest that gender does not play a significant role in the development of problem gambling (La Plante et al., 2006; Volberg, 2003; Hraba & Lee, 1996).

Although men gamble more, the number of women gamblers is growing. Volberg (2003) calls this trend the “feminization” of gambling. According to Volberg, the

“feminization” of gambling means that more and more women are participating in gambling activities and, consequently, more and more women are developing gambling problems. Volberg suggests that the increase in female gamblers is linked to the increase availability of gaming machines.

Gambling activities are highly gendered, and a number of studies show that female gamblers have a preference for gaming machines (Hing & Breen, 2001a; Lesieur & Blume, 1991; Tavares, Zilberman, Beites & Gentil, 2001). Men, on the other hand, are much more likely than women to gamble on sports, horse races, the stock market and even cockfighting and dogfights (Evans, Guthier & Forsyth, 1998; Geertz, 1973). Welte et al. (2002) offer another way to distinguish gendered differences in gambling behavior: men bet more on games of skill than do women.

Researchers have also identified differences in betting patterns between men and women. Spunt, Lesieur, Liberty, and Hunt (1996) found significant differences in how much men gambled compared to women and the variability in the types of games each gender played. Also, the career trajectory of a problem gamblers differs for men and women; men start gambling at an earlier age, show a relatively slow emergence of problem gambling behaviors, and take a longer time to seek help for their problem gambling, whereas women tend to start gambling later on in life, rapidly develop behaviors attributed to problem gambling and, subsequently, seek help more quickly than men (Potenza et al., 2001; Shaffer, LaBrie, LaPlante & Kidman, 2002; Tavares, Zilberman, Beites & Gentil, 2001).

Nelson, LaPlante, LaBrie, and Shaffer (2006) studied gambling problem trajectories by examining the relationship of gender and other demographic factors

among 2,256 gamblers enrolled in the Iowa Gambling Treatment Program. The researchers discovered that gender made a statistically significant contribution to the prediction of gambling problem trajectories. However, the research revealed that gender's contribution to problem gambling was only related to the age of initiation, or the point at which a person begins to gamble. Specifically, as explained above, men tend to start gambling at an earlier age and therefore, those men who become problem gamblers do so at an earlier age than women, who tend to participate in gambling activities at a later age.

Other researchers suggest that gender differences in gaming behavior can best be attributed to the influence of culture. Specifically, Hing and Breen (2001a) argue that gambling preferences are culturally based and that social acceptance of the different types of gambling for both men and women are influenced by their availability within a given culture. Hing and Breen (2001b) examine the gender differences of socially accepted gambling activities between men and women in Western cultures. There is a wide acceptance of male participation in gambling activities, which show them as risk-takers, innovators and speculators. Conversely, since women are largely viewed as nurturers and caretakers there are fewer social norms that encourage their own risk-taking behavior, including gambling. Yet, this pattern may be shifting as women are increasingly participating in gambling activities, due in part to the widespread introduction of gaming machines which females tend to gravitate to for wagering (Volberg, 2003). Additionally, the spread of safe and clean gambling venues (Hing & Breen, 2001a; Trevorrow & Moore, 1999) is also spurring greater cultural acceptance of women gamblers in Western societies.

In this dissertation, I discuss how the sports book remains a highly-gendered space with males constituting the bulk of the participants. The sports book offers men opportunities to gather with one another and wager on games that draw upon both skill and chance. The sport focus also reinforces cultural norms held by many males to wager, compete, bond, and express their masculinity in socially acceptable ways. Next, I discuss Ray Oldenburg's ideas of the "third place" and suggest that this concept is useful for capturing many aspects of the social nature of the sports book scene.

### Third Places

Ray Oldenburg (1997) coined the term "the third place" to describe places that are outside of the home and work where people look to relax and enjoy themselves. The "third place" concept originates from Seamon's (1979) discussion of "at-homeness" or "homes away from home" in his book, *A Geography of the Lifeworld*. Third places are spaces of refuge where people can unwind and escape the grind of everyday life. It is an environment strictly made mainly for leisure. Third places are also normally homosocial environments, although they are not created strictly by men. For instance, Oldenburg notes that homosocial third places include beauty parlors for women and barbershops for men. Third places may also involve both men and women, such as coffeehouses, cafes, bars, and taverns (Oldenburg, 1997; Seamon 1979). The functional purpose of many third places is to offer a place for consumption in the context of leisure activity. But what people do in these spaces typically go beyond the instrumental act of purchasing and consuming goods or services. Instead, they create communities connected by habits of association that provides a social group to build cohesion, identity, and commonality

outside work and home. More specifically, Oldenburg and others note several other characteristics that define a third place.

A third place is a *haven of escape and relief*. The attraction of the third place is that the function of the place itself is not affected by the harried nature of life external to it, nor is it affected by the stresses found on a daily basis. Also, the place must be on *neutral ground*. Individuals must be able to come and go as they please and are not required to be the host. Oldenburg says that the neutral ground “makes possible far more informal, even intimate, relations among people than could be entertained in the home (p. 23).

The third place is a *leveler*—it rids the group of major differences in terms of rank and position so participants are on relatively equal social footing with one another. The inclusive and accessible character of third places means there are no formal criterion for membership. Oldenburg points out that, “Third places, however, serve to *expand* possibilities, whereas formal associations tend to narrow and restrict them” (p. 24).

*Interaction is the anchor of social cohesion in third places and conversation is the main form of interaction*. Oldenburg explains that “neutral ground provides the place, leveling sets the stage for the cardinal and sustaining activity of third places everywhere. That activity is conversation” (p. 26). Patrons may exchange smiles and handshakes and backslapping, but the enjoyment created in the third place is pleasurable and entertaining conversation. Moreover, a third place is *accessible and accommodating*. That is, third places provide people with service at many times of the day or evening which increases the odds that one’s acquaintances will be able to attend.

Third places must have *regulars*. Regulars are the members that lure others back to the space. Everything else about the third place is secondary. The attraction to the third place is not the management, but the fellow patrons, “It is the regulars who give the place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there” (pp. 33-34). The regulars set the mood of the space, they dictate the style of interaction and how new faces are accepted, which is important.

The physical structure of the third place is usually unassuming. Oldenburg says there are three factors that contribute to the unattractiveness of the third place. The first factor is that third places are establishments that are commandeered by people seeking a place to linger in good company and more often than not these takeovers happen in older places. Second, the homeliness of the third place is a form of protection from attracting high volumes of strangers and transient patrons. Oldenburg points out that the third places that are male-dominated and where women are not openly welcomed in the place usually has a distinct seediness in order to repel female customers. Third, the plainness of the space removes and discourages all signs of pretention. A nonpretentious décor encourages leveling and diminishes social pretense.

The mood of third places is *playful* and the camaraderie makes it a *home away from home*. Oldenburg draws from Seamon’s concept of “at-homeness”, which refers to the sense of possession or control over a setting that need not entail actual ownership. Member’s feelings of at-homeness include the sense of being able to freely express one’s personality, receive warmth from others in the form of companionship, friendliness, support, and mutual concern.



None of these characteristics are theorized to effect the level of enjoyment of it patrons as much as gender. Oldenburg emphasizes the fact that the best and most enjoyable third places are those that have same-sex associations. In fact, sexual segregation may be the reason why third places emerge in the first place and their members sustain them over time. In general, people seek out a third place to establish a sense of connectedness and community with others and gender sameness seems to be a core feature of this process.

Many third places are organized in privately-owned, consumer-oriented settings, not wholly public contexts. This is to be expected in capitalist society predicated on private property and colonization of our social space by business activities. Increasingly, we live our daily lives in a series of business-oriented contexts. It is in these contexts where we carve out social worlds that fulfill our desire for group membership, social support, and belonging.

In most cities and towns local bars are popular third places for men to meet others, have a few beers, relax, and talk about current events, local happenings, and sports. Local bar environments are highly masculinized, dingy and dirty, often sports themed, and feature alcohol and other advertisements that display scantily clad women to appeal to male desires.

In Nevada, and especially Las Vegas, I argue that the sports book offers similar third place experiences for many patrons. One of my main questions is how patrons create a third place in the casino sports book. To answer this question I draw upon additional sets of conceptual tools from social world theory and Erving Goffman's concept of the "interaction order." I review these below.

## Social Worlds

Local Las Vegas casino sports books offer space for locals to place sports bets. Bettors also meet and build connections with one another. Local casinos cater specifically to Las Vegas residents which increase the odds that some bettors will become regulars and create social worlds in the sports book anchored in repetitive social activities that extend beyond sports betting.

“Social world” is a key sociological concept that refers to a socially-constructed shared perspective of meaning and connectedness among a small social group. Tomatsu Shibutani (1955) says there are four factors that lead to the establishment of a social world. Social worlds are: (1) regularized by mutual responses; (2) demonstrate some organization; (3) not set by territory or formal membership, but by informal social connections that members sustain together; and (4) requires effective communication to define the parameters and rules of the group. Social constructionists Berger and Luckman (1967) characterize the relationship between individuals and their social worlds as one between producers and products; seeing humans as the producer and the social world its product, and that the relationship between the two as a dialectical one. Interaction between humans creates a social world that has its own order, norms, and values. In turn, the human-created social world reflexively influences the way members interact with each other.

Social worlds are created and sustained through habitualization and institutionalization. Habitualization is any action that is repeated frequently and, as a result, is cast in a pattern that can be reproduced with minimal effort. These repeated actions serve the dual purpose of creating meaning to the individual as well as becoming

an embedded routine to the individual for which the action becomes taken for granted. Embedded routines play an important psychological role in that it narrows choices for individuals. Moreover, the authors point out that the habitualization of activities frees energy for other decisions to be made. Institutionalization occurs when members share routinized activities and meanings understood by all or most members of a group. Institutionalized activities create rules and expectations for behavior. If an individual has a particular role within a group it is the expectation of all members that the individual will tend to act in particular manner. As a result, the people's habitualization of activities creates a social world as they establish fundamental actions that are meaningful to the members; institutionalization helps sustain the social world by reaffirming the significance of each action.

Finally, Strauss (1978) elaborates Berger and Luckman's discussion by outlining what he feels is the essential features of social worlds. First, within every social world there has to be at least one primary activity taking place and that activity has to be vividly apparent to everyone. Second, there has to be a space, or site, where the activities occur. Third, technology is always involved, whether it is inherited or innovative modes of carrying out the activity. Fourth, within social worlds, in the beginning, there are divisions of labor, which helps to organize the activity. The organization of social interaction found within the social world is guided by formal and informal norms.

The routinized and institutionalized rules, norms, and actions that anchor social worlds create what Goffman calls an interaction order. I end this conceptual discussion by explicating the concept of interaction order as a guiding lens for this dissertation to

assess the ground-level characteristics of the social world, created in the third space of the casino sports book.

### Interaction Order

As in all organized, recurring social situations, regular interactions among sports book patrons create and recreate order. Order is at the root of social interaction and we can see order on the basis of such formations. Much of my analysis of the sports book aims to answer, as Erving Goffman might have put it, “What is the interaction order produced by sports book participants and what meanings does it hold for them?”

*Social interaction* is “that which uniquely transpires in social situations, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another’s response presence” (Goffman, 1983, p.2). *Order* refers to a domain of activity, a particular kind of activity (p.2). Goffman suggests that all domains of face-to-face interaction will exhibit *interaction orders*. Anytime people come together in a given environment and take part in a shared activity, an interaction order is produced. Isolating and studying the interaction order is important because the majority of our daily lives are spent in the immediate presence of others; therefore, most all of our doings are *socially situated* (Goffman, 1983, p.2).

The interaction order can be viewed as the consequences of systems of enabling conventions, or “the ground rules for a game” (Goffman, 1983, p.5). The “rules” participants follow are akin to a social contract of sorts in that each person acts within a given set of conventions, paying the small price of giving up some of their freedom in order to obtain a larger convenience of smooth, cooperational relations (and, in Collin’s

(2004) terms, potential access to positive emotional energy). Of course, this-only happens if all participants uphold the rules which require some working consensus of what is and should be “going on.” Thus, any orderly interaction is a product of normative consensus which rests on “self-submission” of the participants to an agreed upon definition of the situation

The interaction order of a particular situation is inherently a *social order* with a set of socially-constructed norms that influence the behaviors of participants. Within this order, the participants will “fit” into a social group(s) and occasions will arise when an individual’s “fitness” will be tested and he or she must display their belonging to the group(s) in the scene. My analysis below will begin by observing how patrons navigate their way through a sports book, constructing and responding to normative rules in order to “fit in” with other patrons.

People construct social worlds in “settings” – the actual space and its accoutrements where people gather and interact (Goffman, 1959). In Goffman’s vernacular, sports books are quasi-public settings. For him public places refer to “any regions in a community freely accessible to members of that community,” whereas, private places refer to soundproof regions where only members or invitees gather” (p.9). Traditionally public order begins at the moment where a private gathering intrudes upon neighbors. In this sense, casino sports books are limited public places in that casinos are relatively open to entry by anyone over 21, although as private operations they can delimit who they serve. They are typically situated in the inner recesses of a casino and, at minimum, house a counter where bets are taken, chairs for patrons to sit, an area for bettors to stand, desks, televisions, and odds boards where the betting odds are displayed.

There is often a bar and restaurant of some kind nearby for patrons to obtain drinks and food. Sports books are almost always clearly marked off from other parts of the casino floor where table games and machine betting is offered. It is within these boundaries that the interaction order of the sports book is accomplished.

As I will describe, the social world of the sports book is complex. The “occasion” for sports betting provides “the structuring social context in which many situations and their gatherings are likely to form, dissolve, and reform” (Goffman, 1963a, p.18). People use the sports book to place bets on sporting events, but for many their involvement does not end there. Many of the sporting events bettors have placed their wagers on are televised and they often stay to watch them play out. Various gatherings form, dissolve, and reform as conversations are struck, bets compared, and experiences are related among participants. Some of these interactions are explicitly devoted to betting. For instance, individuals often gather together for cooperative knowledge sharing about proposed bets and their odds for winning. These “teams” (Goffman, 1959, p.79) exhibit their own distinctive performance and operate as “islands of interaction” (Brown & Goldin, 1973) that, in conjunction with others in the scene, create the involvement contours that makeup the interaction order of the sports book.

The interaction order contained within the sports book is replete with formal and informal rules and expectations and sanctions to support them. The significance of the norms and their sanctions is that in identifying them we can expose the shared beliefs underlying them which signals the character of the interaction order, ritualism, emotional energy, and sense of community they support. In examining the social world of a casino sports book, my observations focus on the interactions between participants and groups to

identify particular patterns and behaviors that repeat over time and are indicative of the social order participants accomplish in the setting.

### Sociological Significance of Research

This dissertation is a modest start to filling the dearth of ethnographic sociological work on the social organization of casinos, and sports books. The research that does exist includes a study on the gambling scene (Martinez, 1983), a postmodern exploration into the opening of the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino (Borchard, 1998), an interactionist ethnography of a casino (Dunkley, 2000), and a look into the day-to-day operations of the Las Vegas Hilton Superbook from the standpoint of its Director of Operations, Art Manteris (1991).

Two studies that offer an insider's account of a casino gambling scene. However, the authors of both studies "went native." They became completely immersed in the gambling activity they chose to study, which blurred the lines of subjectivity and objectivity. Moreover, both studies lacked much descriptive analysis of the sociological elements in their surroundings.<sup>3</sup>

*Double down: Reflections on Gambling and Loss* (1999), by Frederick and Steve Barthelme, is a personal account into the world of problem gambling. The authors discuss their immersion into the Mississippi riverboat casino gambling scene and the subsequent downward spiral into gambling addiction. The book provides insight into

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<sup>3</sup> Garry J. Smith and Robert Paley (2001) [International Gambling Studies, Volume 1, Issue 1 September 2001, pages 102 – 131] offer an excellent ethnographic analysis of golf course gambling that shows the social world constructed around the golf wagering scene has many similar characteristics as the social world I describe in the La Mesa sports book. In particular, there is a hierarchy of bettors arranged by expertise, a particular language, and a socialization process. What is different is that the golf bettors play against each other, whereas the sports bettors in a casino play against the house.

how a gambler becomes engulfed in the pursuit of winning, which goes far beyond an obsession. However, the book falls short in offering the reader a thorough discussion of the social elements involved in the social world of the riverboat casinos.

John D. Rosecrance's *The Degenerates of Lake Tahoe* (1985), provides an account of the author's integration into the social world of horse-race bettors in a Lake Tahoe, Nevada casino. Rosecrance briefly touches on some sociological themes found in his research, but it still falls short in giving a comprehensive sociological account of the scene. Through a careful examination of all available research, there appears to be an empirical and theoretical gap in literature that explores the social world of a legal sports book from an insider's perspective.<sup>4</sup>

This dissertation will address both empirical and theoretical gaps. Empirically, it will offer insight into a much under examined context where gender, sport, and gambling intersect. This gap needs to be filled, given the growth of gambling generally, and the growth of casino sports books specifically in Las Vegas over the last two decades. In Nevada, where sports gambling is legal, sports books constitute a significant site for social interaction among many of the state's residents. Theoretically, it will offer insights into the dynamics of male culture and the use of sports gambling to construct that culture. It will also offer ideas about how people accomplish community-building in privately-owned, consumer-oriented settings such as the casino. The focus will be on the possibilities and limitations to building social bonds in the space of the sports book.

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Lesieur's ethnography, *The Chase* (1984), famously chronicles compulsive gamblers in a casino setting. Lesieur is widely known for coining the term "chasing" to characterize a tactic of some gamblers to try to win back losses by betting more and more to break even. Lesieur's book does not focus on the social world of sports book betting specifically.



In the following chapter I describe my methodological approach for this study specifically focusing on my background as a researcher, how I chose the casino sports book, and my ethnographic process.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

*If the purpose of research is to know the reality work of a phenomenon, then the researcher must begin by first becoming the phenomenon. The researcher must become a full-time member of the reality to be studied . . . Membership cannot be simulated.*

David Hayano, *Poker Faces* (1982), p. 149.

This quote from David Hayano refers to the fact that there is no better way to study a scene or phenomena than to become a member. A researcher can enter a scene, observe and study what is transpiring and make conclusions; however, the depth and understanding of the environment can never be greater than someone who has prior knowledge, vast experience and unlimited access to members. There is no substitute for being a real member; experiencing the same emotions, striving for the same goals, and knowing the proper language, behavior, and rituals accepted among members. This is another reason that this study is unique. As a researcher I was able to observe and record unedited behavior in the sports book and, therefore, provide readers with a real account of the scene. This chapter will discuss my background as a researcher/sports bettor, the origins of study, how I arrived at deciding which casino sports book to study, and my research process.

#### Researcher's Background

This study uses participant observation and contextual analysis to conduct my research. For all participant observation studies the researcher must be accounted for in the setting. It is important for the audience not only to know where the researcher is

located within the social setting, but also how the researcher became interested and immersed in the scene. In the following section, I explain my background as a sports bettor and how my interest in this activity led me to this study.

Before I continue I must answer the question that readers might have of being able to separate the sports bettor from my role as a sociological researcher. The key mode for maintaining my objectivity was continuously recording my thoughts and feelings into my observations. I was able to gauge where I stood in my study on a daily basis. Moreover, I was able to recognize quickly when the line between bettor and researcher began to blur. I consciously worked against the tendency of “going native” that haunts many ethnographers. I retained my critical distance by constantly questioning my observations, how close I felt to the research subjects, and by writing my notes immediately after each phase of observation outside the research setting, which helped me to critically reflect on the experience.

I have been participating in sports betting for more than seven years and, therefore, have a preliminary working knowledge of the language, social norms, and written and unwritten rules of sports books. I have interacted with many sports bettors and am comfortable in this particular environment. The following is an explanation as to how I became socialized into the sports book culture, and how I was able to navigate through the social world.

I moved from the Midwest to Las Vegas in the fall 2001 in search of new opportunities and life experiences. Moving from a slow-paced, laid back city to the fast-paced, bright lights lifestyle of Las Vegas was a shock in both good and bad ways. It was exciting for the endless opportunities that the city had to offer, but it was difficult in

trying to make new friends and establish social connections. In the first month or so I searched around for places that might have people that I could connect with; however, most of my time was found either on the Strip with other tourists or in a dark, dingy, smoke-filled bars with people who were more interested in their drink than conversing.

I felt frustrated that I could not find a place that felt like a home away from home. I felt at the time when I moved to Las Vegas that I could not find a place to connect with people and I reflected on how easy I had it in college. A majority of the students went to just a few bars and everyone knew that everyone else would be there, so it was a friendly atmosphere that left people wanting to return. Looking high and low, I was constantly searching for an environment in which I could get to know a few people and possibly develop some friendships. My pursuit was a struggle until I came across the sports book at that the local casino down my street.

Coming from the Midwest, whenever I heard about sports books I always attributed it to being seedy. These assumptions derived from watching movies such as *Casino* and *Goodfellas* that involved characters that were bookies and more significantly growing up during the Pete Rose scandal, which was not about sports book gambling specifically but did make me much more aware of sports gambling more generally. My concept of the sports book was that it was located in some backroom of a casino and filled with the same stale smoke and lifeless bodies that appeared in the bars that I was frequenting. I naively assumed that many of the patrons of a sports book were either degenerate gamblers, or connected to shady people. I figured that even though I have deep passion and love for sports it was still no place for someone like me to visit.

I held this belief for my first few weeks as a resident in Las Vegas until one day a few guys I started to get to know told me to meet them at the sports book at our local casino for a few drinks. I felt that I would be comfortable enough to make my first visit to a sports book since there would be people there that I knew. When I arrived I quickly saw my assumptions were entirely wrong. The sports book was not in a backroom, but out in the open. It was not blanketed in a fog of cigar smoke, but was well lit and well ventilated. Moreover, the patrons there looked normal (at least the majority of them) and well-adjusted, and not the unfortunate stereotype of “degenerate” gamblers that I thought would be there.

Quickly the appeal of the sports book became apparent as all the sporting events that were taking place at that time were made available to the patrons through the magic of satellite television. Also, one did not need to get up out of their seats for beverages as the scantily-clad cocktail waitress came around every five minutes or so to take drink orders. I noticed too that the sports book had an energy to it that was not apparent in the local bar scene. Moreover, the people there were more similar to me than I ever imagined. The patrons were mostly men in their twenties and thirties. I began to think that maybe there was something more going on here than just sports betting.

Soon after my first visit I began to frequently visit the Blueshore Hotel and Casino Race and Sports Book<sup>5</sup> but I did not yet know how to properly place a bet. I tried picking up as much as I could without letting on that I had no clue how to place a bet. I found the task of learning the ins and outs of sports betting to be daunting. The different numbers on the betting board, arrayed in various forms and colors, the different types of bets, and the lingo of sports book culture very foreign and intimidating.

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonym

I began to see that there was a certain order and preparation to the entire process. Initially, I kept my distance from most bettors in order to observe more and to avoid any suspicion that I did not know what I was doing and, therefore, did not belong in that particular environment. Through close observations, analysis of multiple betting sheets, some eavesdropping, occasional conversations with bettors, and research on the internet, I eventually figured out the basic language of sports betting and the different types of bets. I soon felt the courage to place my first bet.

As I started to get the hang of the process, I became more comfortable hanging out and talking to fellow bettors. I began to understand the subtle nuances of bettors. Once I was fully immersed into the scene I saw that there were specific groups in which certain types of regular bettors hung out in. Those who wagered a significant amount of money stayed together, while those who wagered regularly, but with less money, stayed in their own separate groups. I also saw that the bigger bettors rarely interacted with individuals who did not bet the amounts they wagered.

When I first learned to bet I visited the sports book infrequently on a week- to- week basis. When I became more comfortable and felt confident enough to initiate conversations with other bettors I began to visit the sports book more regularly. I soon became a regular visitor and started to socialize with a group of regular bettors. I found that once I felt comfortable in the group I went to the sports book even more frequently. Instead of going out to bars or meeting up with other friends, I went to the sports book and hung out with the group. I knew that at least some of them would be at the sports book on a weekday night and, assuredly, all of them would be there on the weekends. It

was encouraging to know that whenever I showed up there would always be someone there I knew—or sort of knew.

From that point on the sports book became my place of refuge after long days of work, or to escape the stress of school. Soon, my presence in the sports book and interest in sports betting became matched by my curiosity and a desire to understand this environment as a research topic. Since then I have had a keen interest in answering the simple question that Erving Goffman always asked of social situations, “What is going on here?” Specifically, I wanted to know more about the social character of the sports book. In this dissertation, I ask: “Are there regular patterns of interaction and relationships among participants?” “Do sports book patrons come to the sports book only to bet, or is there much more to their involvement?” To ensure that what I began to discover at the Blueshore Casino was representative of all sports books, I decided to conduct my study at a different sports book.

### Choosing the Casino Sports Book

I accounted for several factors in selecting a sports book for study. First is the locale of the sports book. Within the Las Vegas valley there are three distinct types of casinos: strip casinos, downtown casinos, and local casinos. Strip casinos are casinos that are on or around Las Vegas Boulevard that caters specifically to tourists. The Strip is normally demarcated by the Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino at the south end of Las Vegas Boulevard and at the north end by the Sahara Hotel and Casino at Sahara Avenue. There are a few casinos near Las Vegas Boulevard that can also be placed in this group. The majority of these casinos also contain some of the largest hotels in the world. The

sports books within the casinos vary in size and capacity. For instance, the sports book inside New York, New York Hotel and Casino is extremely small, with only a few chairs to sit and only a couple of windows to place a wager. More entertainment-oriented superbooks, such as Mandalay Bay's sports book, offer lounge chairs, larger screens, many windows, and a bar nearby. One can see just by size alone the degree to which each casino values sports betting.

Downtown casinos are a second type. Downtown Las Vegas, a mile or so north of the Strip area along Las Vegas Boulevard at the intersection of Fremont Street, is where the city was originally founded. The downtown casinos are much smaller and older. The Plaza, Golden Nugget, Binion's Horseshoe and others cater to a mix of tourists and locals. Their sports books usually have limited seating and only a few televisions, and are old-fashioned in that instead of having an electronic odds board to automatically display spreads the employees write the numbers on a board with a marker. The lone exception to these types of sports books is the newly remodeled Golden Nugget. The new sports book there has state-of-the-art technology with electronic odds boards and multiple high-definition televisions. Still, the capacity is limited and, therefore, the ability to observe social interaction is also limited and I chose not to conduct my study in these sports books.

The third type—local's casino—caters specifically to local Las Vegas residents. Local casinos vary in their size, style, and the types of amenities they offer. Some are extremely small and have only slot machines, no table games, and a small bar (e.g., Eureka Casino, Dotty's Casino), while other local casinos come close to rivaling some of the smaller strip casinos. Places such as Green Valley Ranch, Red Rock Casino, and the



Orleans house clubs, movie theaters, bowling centers, bingo halls, large pools, different types of restaurants and food courts. To meet the gaming needs of its locals, these larger casinos offer a large number of table games, endless rows of slot machines, full poker rooms, bingo halls, and large race and sports books.

I chose to study a sports book at a larger local casino, because it has the highest volume of repeat patrons. Unlike strip casino sports books, which attracts a heavily transient clientele, local casino sports books attract people who are residents to Las Vegas and, therefore, have the ability to return to the same place. Consequently, the social elements that are essential in the establishment of social worlds and community, such as norms, values, and social order, are created out of the repetition of social interactions. Locals (as opposed to tourists) are able to construct social worlds and a consistent community by developing and strengthening social bonds with other patrons by returning to the environment and building upon those relationships that were started at a previous time. In environments populated by tourists social connections are fleeting; conversely, social connections between locals have the potential for something more.

As a result, I chose to conduct my research at the sports book inside the La Mesa Hotel and Casino in North Las Vegas. I chose the sports book in this casino for all the reasons above. The casino caters specifically to locals. Thus, there is a greater chance for bettors to return to the sports book on a regular basis and at the same time minimizes the appearance of first time, tourist bettors. The sports book at the La Mesa Casino is large enough to facilitate social organization and interaction. Additionally, the sports book also was remodeled so now it has a unique design and the latest technology, which

this study might be able to uncover whether the new design, organization and arrangement, helps or hinders social interaction.

## Research Process

### Observation

I began this study by conducting at least ten hours worth of participant observations a week, broken up into a few days during the week. For the first few months I designated specific times during one or two-week periods in order to see how many people were present, what types of people were there, and to identify regulars. The objective for this particular schedule is to observe and document the “peaks” and “valleys” and contours of the social world in the sports book, which will provide in-depth insights that capture as much of the sports book culture as I can through participant observation. After a few months of observations and through my past experience I identified the times in which the sports book had its highest volume of visitors and, thus, maximum social interaction between patrons.

My fieldwork began when I entered the physical environment of the sports book. A major concern for this research is concealing my new role as a social science researcher. Above all, my goal is to make sure that I was able to experience and record the true social world of a sports book. From my past experiences in sports books it seems highly probable that if patrons found out about my new role they would be more cautious with me and, therefore, not their true self. Also, I was concerned that if a casino manager found out that I was taking notes about gamblers in their casino for a social research study they would ask me to leave the premises.

To disguise my note taking, I used betting sheets and pencils that the sports book provides as my materials to write down my observations. This cover reduced suspicion, as the majority of bettors use these materials to keep track of their bets and scores of games. When in the field, I closely observed the interactions between people, and my own personal interactions, and wrote down descriptions of people, characteristics, thoughts, and occurrences as discreetly as possible. In order to delve deeper into the social world of the sports bettors I asked questions when I came into contact with people, such as: How long have you been betting on sports? How often do you come to the sports book? In my notes I also placed the setting in context by keeping an account of how many people are present, the day and time, and what sporting events are playing.

#### Transcription and Coding

Each day immediately following my fieldwork I took my field notes home and typed them out on my computer, detailing everything that I saw and experienced. I recorded the day, time, how many people were present, and what sporting events were available for betting at that time. Subsequently, I began to describe each of the social interactions I observed or was a part of, making the descriptions as vivid and detailed as possible. As I transcribed I looked for patterns and themes that became apparent.

My qualitative, inductive methodological approach is guided by the criteria set forth by Charmaz (2001): *Coding data*, *memo writing*, *theoretical sampling*, and *integrating the analysis*. However, due to my experience, my analysis of what transpires in the sports book setting began well before I began to code my data. Although I recorded everything I saw or heard when I was in the field, I also had a general idea of what to pay attention to and what themes were starting to surface. Hence, I was

continuously analyzing and reanalyzing what I was observing even before I started the coding process.

Once I finished transcribing my notes, I mined them for themes and generalizations. I took notes on what I found and compiled a list of those themes that were repeatedly showing up. I used coding strategies set forth by Lofland and Lofland (2006) and the evaluative criteria designed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). After coding the data, I wrote memos trying to link themes and concepts into categories that became apparent within the data. The memo writing helped the research by keeping me focused, generating ideas, discovering any gaps, and to create and clarify categories. After establishing specific themes and concepts, I returned to the field to reflect on my assumptions and theoretical concepts that began to emerge. The comparison of new observations with prior ones created a self-correcting process in which I was able to identify gaps or inaccuracies, thus sharpening the analytic process. Lastly, I ‘integrated the analysis’ (Lofland & Lofland, 2006) by deciding on which memos to use in my research paper, by selecting those memos that I feel will work for both the prospective audience and the analysis. Subsequently, I organized my findings and wrote my research.

### Validity

To ensure validity I followed the standards of ethnographic validity presented by Altheide and Johnson (1994). The standards are categorized into three parts: (1) *Validity-as-reflexive-accounting*; (2) *Reflexive accounting for substance*; and (3) *Accounting for ourselves*. Under *Validity-as-reflexive-accounting*, I, as the researcher, placed myself, the social world of the sports book, in the analytic and interpretive process in interaction. I focused on the process of my ethnographic work. I accounted for the relationships

between the people I observe and the larger cultural-historical and organization context. I included my sociological interpretation of the data in memos each time I copied my fieldnotes into organized computer files.

Under *Reflexive accounting for substance* I satisfied the basic elements of the ethnographic ethic that are outlined. The following generic topics include: (a) context, history, setting, environment; (b) number of participants, key individuals; (c) activities, routines, practices; (d) schedules, temporal order; (e) hierarchies; (f) significant events, origins, consequences; (g) members' perspective; (h) social rules and patterns of order. As for *Accounting for ourselves*, I accounted for my total representation as a researcher within the study. From my entry into the field, to my self-presentation, mistakes, misconceptions, and my narrative report. By providing insight into the entire process the reader will be allowed to engage the work from my perspective.

I use comparative analysis and theoretical sampling introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The constant comparative method of analysis involves the comparison of categories of data for similarities and differences. Also, since I have a working knowledge going into the field I use theoretical sampling to guide my data collection. I began sampling based on my knowledge of the field then continued to sample based on observations and social interactions, which allowed for theories to emerge from my notes.

In addition to the fieldwork, transcribing field notes and writing memos, I also kept a running account of my self-reflections, which were guided through Ellis and Berger's (2002) article that discusses how to include the researcher's experience in interview research. It is essential in qualitative data for the researcher to understand his or her place within the context of a study. Within the self reflexive account, I wrote

about my participation in the field concerning my sports betting, my interactions with fellow bettors, my thoughts and feelings regarding my time spent at the sports book at that particular day, and how I see myself within the social world of the sports book. I would compare my self-reflections with previous accounts to see if similar patterns were beginning to surface. The self-reflections were important in the analysis in that I was able to compare the characterizations of the social interaction with my feelings and how I perceived my place in the social world. Finally, before writing the final manuscript I gave pseudonyms to all persons and casinos discussed within this study in order to maintain anonymity. Also, the age descriptions applied to the bettors I describe are mostly approximations, unless I was in fact able to learn about a particular patrons real age.

#### Limitations

One methodological limitation of this study is my choice not to pursue one-on-one interviews with the La Mesa Sports Book patrons that I observed. This was a strategic decision forced by the UNLV Institutional Review Board on the Study of Human Subjects requirement that I secure a site authorization form from the La Mesa Casino management before approaching patrons/interview subjects to ask for their consent to do an interview. I was concerned that if I raised the point with the La Mesa management that I was surreptitiously studying La Mesa patrons, I could be barred from the La Mesa altogether. Instead, I chose to base this study on participant observation alone, with the potential to return for interviews once this study phase is complete.

Another methodological limitation of this participant-observation study is the inability to indisputably determine the social class of each regular patron. I am unable to

make such a determination based on appearance since the majority of people who hangout in the sports book tend to dress informally or “down” in common parlance. Most La Mesa patrons wear jeans, sweat pants, or shorts paired with a t-shirt, sweatshirt, or possibly a team jersey. The choice of clothing can reasonably be attributed to the idea that patrons use the sports book as a place to relax and, therefore, the style of clothing is based more on comfort than appearance. Some patrons do visit the sports book while wearing formal clothes, but these are usually men who just finished work. Even so, these patrons tend to make certain adjustments to dress down their attire, such as removing their tie and unbuttoning and rolling-up their sleeves.

There are some tell-tale signs that may suggest class-level; however, any such determination can only be based on speculation and assumption rather than fact. For instance, I might assume that a person who places a very large wager just ahead of me in line is wealthy and, thus, possibly upper-class. But, I am unable to firmly establish a direct correlation between the amount wagered and his socio-economic status through basic observations and casual conversations. For all I know the person could be wagering his whole savings account on a game and is actually relatively impoverished. Conversely, it is just as unreasonable for me to assume that a person who makes small wagers is impoverished. There are also other signs of affluence, such as nice watches and jewelry, or designer shoes or jeans, but again, any determination of class status would be based on assumption without any substantial proof. As a consequence, I do not discuss the class status of the patrons who visit the La Mesa Sports Book.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE SPORTS BOOK

The sports book is a social scene replete with all the elements that are essential to a social world. This chapter begins with a description of a typical day of participant observation during the atypical first day of the NFL season when the La Mesa Sports Book is filled with excited regulars and other bettors and fans. The description of this day introduces and begins to analyze elements of the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book. Specifically, I describe the primary activity of betting, the sports book as the site of the activity, the technology (i.e., tools) used to carry out the activity, the social organization of the sports book, and the social actors who participate.

#### Hanging Out in the Sports Book: NFL season, Day One

As I sat at the red light, fingers tapping anxiously on the steering wheel, I read the sign: “Race & Sports Book.” It was almost gametime and hoards of people streamed through the doors. Clearly, the betting lines would be long and I wondered if I had left myself enough time to wager. I went over my plan: “Check the line on the Cowboys game. If it goes down to minus six and a half, then take it. Avoid the Tennessee game no matter how good it looks. Definitely take the Eagles over the Packers unless the line changes. Don’t take the Lions, you’ll jinx them!”

The light turns green and I hit the accelerator angling my car straight for the parking lot and the first space I see. This might be my hardest task of the day, since the parking lot is packed. I weave through the cars toward a space at the far end of the lot. I grab my betting sheets and lucky pen from the passenger seat, check the time, and walk



quickly toward the sports book. Glancing at my cell phone I take notice that I have exactly 45 minutes before kickoff. As I reach the door, a burly guy in a Washington Redskins jersey opens it for me and asks rhetorically “Are you ready for some football! I think, “Yes indeed, the first NFL weekend is finally here!” The excitement is palpable.

Any person familiar with American sports knows that the National Football League (NFL) is king. It has surpassed baseball in television ratings and overall popularity. It attracts more spectators, audiences and overall fans than all other sports. The revenues that football generates shows its wide appeal as professional football is now well over a \$1 billion-a-year business (Gorman & Calhoun, 2004). Moreover, each NFL franchise is worth more than \$795 million (Forbes, 2009). NFL and its fall counterpart NCAA college football make football the most popular wagering sport (Sports Betting World, 2009).

The first week of NFL wagering means that that La Mesa Sports Book is packed. As I walk into the soundscape I hear the chatter of patrons, ding-dings of the slot machines, and the faint voice of a TV announcer calling the lineups for the day’s first game. As my eyes adjust from the bright sunshine outside the door, I can focus on the sea of people, many decked out in NFL jerseys and hats, most clutching betting sheets like me. Each betting window has a line of at least 20 people ready to test their luck, skill, or both at picking winners today. I begin to make my way through the lines toward the table with new betting sheets so I can check if there has been any movement in the betting lines.

I immediately see the familiar faces. Kenny and Bob look more excited than me. The NFL season is finally here after a long slow summer of baseball, which attracts little

excitement in the sports book. Most of the patrons seem filled with joy and energy.

Kenny and Bob, two Caucasian men in their late thirties, look at me as if to say, “We are finally here!” Football season signifies many weeks ahead that we will gather, bet, and carouse about sports, wagering, and life.

I finally get to the betting sheets; grab one along with a couple of parlay cards. I make my way to the back of the sports book to go over my bets. On my way to the back of the sports book I run into an acquaintance. I don’t recall his name, but we have often spoken. He is a tall Caucasian man with closely-cropped gray hair and wire-rimmed glasses. I don’t think he knows my name either, but clearly recognizes me. He says, “You lookin’ forward to today?” “For sure!” I reply. “The build-up from the draft to now is almost too much.” The guy responds, “Yeah, I know what you mean. I thought this day was never going to come. But, we’re here now! Let’s get it on!” and he squeezes toward the betting line. I smile and think, “That guy and I have a *strangership* – a relationship that Hiroshi Mizuta (1975) says is an amicable acquaintance that we expect no particular favors or sympathy from but hold some fondness for. People are not quite strangers, but also not quite friends. There are a lot of strangerships in the sports book. The sports book is a bit like, *Cheers*, the mythical television bar where, as the jingle, goes, everybody knows your name. The sports book is a hangout but, unlike *Cheers*, not everyone knows your name. And, they do not have to because the bets and the games are the common denominator that connects people here.

Socializing is really at the core of the sports book experience. Betting is the instrumental act that most sports book patrons participate in and is the core purpose of the sports book from the casino’s point of view. But, once bets are placed bettors stay and

watch with other patrons and root for their games to fall the right way. The main activity in the sports book is social conversation about sports, betting, and the opposite sex. The experience of sports book regulars is of camaraderie and escape from work and home, not just wagering.

Proficiency in the sports betting lingo is a key component in developing a bond with another bettor.<sup>6</sup> Using proper terms is essential. Not knowing betting terminology or incorrectly using it reveals inexperience and can create a stigma for the offender. Social groups and hierarchies are created as those who share common traits stay together and those who do not fit into a particular social group are kept at a distance. For instance, regular bettors tend to avoid new or green bettors.

I find a space to huddle over my betting sheets. I reexamine the notes I took at home from sports websites and the game day warm-up shows on ESPN. I then check to see if the betting lines (i.e., the point odds for each game) have changed. After careful consideration, I decide to take the over on the Vikings and Falcons game, take the Patriots at -7, the Steelers at -6 ½ and the Packers on the moneyline \$20 each on separate tickets. I decide just to do straight bets and no parlays (a bet that includes several different wagers on one ticket. Parlays are low odds, high return tickets, but if one bet does not win, the whole ticket is worthless). If I was confident and wanted to go for the big score I would put them all on one ticket, but I would rather concentrate on each game separately than worry about all the games all at once. I am here more for the thrill of the bet than the winnings at the end. I write down all the correct numbers on my betting sheet so I can state my bets quickly to the cashier, then I walk over to the shortest line

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss the specifics of sports book language in much more detail below.

possible and wait. Look at the clock—“Hmm, thirty minutes until kick-off. I should be okay.”

This internal debate about what to wager on happens every time I come here. The debate does not turn solely on the financial risk of the wager. I do not bet enough that it really matters, although I always hope to win. The social risks associated with the bet are what get to me. For any bet I also weigh its social acceptability to the group of friends and acquaintances I will talk to over the course of the game. For instance, placing sixty dollars on a straight bet might be socially acceptability and low risk, but placing that same sixty dollars on a six-team parlay on all underdogs would bring guffaws and derision from other bettors since the odds for such a ticket to hit (win) are enormous. Such a bet opens one up to ridicule and stigma from peers. Betting might be a rational cost-benefit calculation about odds and one’s financial stake, but it is also a calculation that accounts for the social standards of other bettors as well.

I stand patiently behind a couple that appears to be in their late thirties. The woman is draped on the man’s arm as he is carefully studying his betting sheet. The couple is unusual because most patrons are men. In fact, the sports book is a space that is dominated by males. Not long after beginning my field work in the sports book I started to call it a masculinized “third place,” which I found to reflect Oldenburg’s (1997) concept of places that people use to escape from the everyday struggles of home and work. The sports book is a place free of life’s mundane pressures. Personal life is not usually the topic of discussion with fellow bettors. Rather the fantasy world of sports, made a little more real by wagers, takes center stage. So, the sports book is a sanctuary for men.

Five minutes and I haven't moved up one spot in line. I check the time on my cell phone again anxiously then look around. Ahead of me at the front of the sports book are twelve windows open for bets. The people in line give a wide berth of space and privacy to bettors at the counter. There is little conversation in the line compared to others in the sports book. The majority of the people in the betting line keep to themselves, reviewing their betting sheets or watching the televisions that covered the odds board.

Directly behind me is the VIP section packed with big bettors. I wistfully think of how nice it would be to get a table there. The section has its own cocktail server, teller to place bets, and each table has a television. Just beyond the VIP section and three steps higher is the lounge. Although not quite VIP, the lounge has choice seats to view the games and a full service bar and waitresses. The lounge is jammed with people.

The line starts to move. The lines occupy what I call the front staging area between the seats and the counter where there are distinct expectations. No one in the know stands in the staging area in the hour or so leading up to the start of the NFL games unless they are planning to place a bet. This area is a temporary stop on the way to the counter. Even on slow days when there are no lines, the informal norms of the staging area remain—you can wait there as your last chance to review your bets, but if you seem settled to watch a game standing in this area, regulars will tell you to find a seat. All sections of the sports book operate under a code of informal norms, as well as some formal rules set by the casino.

Only two more bettors to go then I'm up. I start to get my money from my pocket, readying myself for a quick exchange with the cashier, well aware that the quicker I am the more chance the 20 people behind me will get their bet down before

kickoff. I have already heard several bettors behind me scrutinize the time that some of the people have taken at the window with exasperated exclamations like, “Damn, are they betting the whole season?” or “C’mon man, say it and pay it. Let’s get on with it!” I know the rule and I’m still extremely conscious about limiting my counter-time.

I glance up at the television showing the Pittsburgh Steelers warming up before their game. This sets off Steelers fans in the sports book to chant, “Let’s Go Steelers,” but it soon sputters out. A short, African American man in his mid-thirties, who is holding hands with a young, Hispanic woman in front of me looks over to where the noise is coming from and shakes his head as if to say he is not amused. He slightly turns back to me and says, “Man I hate the Steelers.” I nod in agreement, “Same here.” Had we not been in line, we might have talked more about our mutual enmity toward the team. Instead, I wondered if he was a fan of a rival team or if the Steelers had given him a bad beat (betting loss) in the past. Many bettors declare their allegiances based on their fortune betting a team, not because they are a true fan.

I am next in line to place my bet. As the guy in front of me approaches the counter the woman on his arm steps to the side as if to give him a little more privacy at the counter. I stand a good five feet behind the guy to make sure I give him enough room as well. I review my picks one more time. The guy at the counter is reading off numbers from his betting sheet to the teller. Soon he stops and waits for the teller to register the ticket. He gives him the money, gets his change and ticket. Before leaving the counter the man checks his ticket. He slowly steps away from the counter and without looking he extends his arm for his female companion to grab. I approach the counter.

This is the moment of truth. It is my turn to take a gamble. My betting decision will dictate the rest of my experience in the sports book today. If I am winning I'll be happier and more outgoing. If not, I may close in a bit and concentrate on the games as if my attention will sway the outcome. I'll also, be more open to talk about my bet with others. And, if I do win then I might be more willing to bet again. If I do not win, I might "chase" my money (Lesieur, 1984). That is, I might look to the next games to make a bigger bet to recoup my losses. In short, betting influences how I feel and how I relate to others in the sports book.

But, the money game is only part of what brings me and many others to the sports book as I always look forward to the camaraderie of the scene; sports bettors learn to bond through the betting act. Wagering is the shared activity that opens one to all sorts of interactional possibilities with other bettors such as queries, competition, and *esprit de corps*. On the basis of this interaction, sports bettors create a complex social world in the La Mesa Sports book.

I'm up to bet. I give the standard "what's up" and he does the same, hands are on the register ready to get this transaction going. I tell him all my bets are on separate ticket for \$20, then "113 Steelers, 117 Patriots, the over on 110, and the moneyline on 114." As I am rattling off the numbers that designate the teams I'm betting on the teller types them in just as quickly. As the tickets are printing he says, "That'll be \$80." I hand him four twenty dollar bills and he gives me my four tickets. I then quickly ask for some drink coupons. The teller leans to his side, grabs two yellow drink tickets, scribbles the date on the back and hands the over to me. I thank him and just like that, the transaction is done and I walk back into the fray of the floor.

Although the actual transaction is brief, the time until the wager's outcome is the longest in the casino. Unlike table games like blackjack or machine games like video poker and slots, where money is staked and the outcome is determined all within seconds after the cards are dealt, the gambling experience with sports betting has only just begun when a bet is placed. The process of waiting for the outcome is far more drawn out than any other form of gambling. The wait is often a gut-wrenching, exciting emotional rollercoaster, since so much action, lead changes, and flirtings with the betting line occurs during any single game. The dynamic of sports games that you've placed a wager on are analogous to the ball in the roulette wheel skipping around and around, bouncing from red to black and back to red again, only in this instance it goes on for two and a half hours. This dynamic and the time it takes to play out, creates a focus for interaction and a temporal space that sports book participants extend into relationships that establish a complex social world.

I make my way to the back of the sports book to find a spot where I can watch the games. All the fans and bettors make it a tight fit today. On regular days there is plenty of space among the lounge chairs up front, at the personal televisions in the middle, or in the lounge back near the bar. However, on Sundays during the NFL season seating is at a premium and by now it is standing room only. While searching for my spot I see Brandon, a La Mesa regular. Brandon is Caucasian, about 5'10" and 170 lbs, and looks to be in his late-twenties. He motions me over extends his hand for a shake, and makes room. He looks me in the eye and says, "Another season of football, baby. Life doesn't get any better, eh?" I smile and turn toward the front as the enormous large screen TV divides into six sections, each showing its own NFL game. Just as the teams begin to line



up for the kickoffs, patrons send the noise level up several decibels. Some start to clap as if they were in the stadiums themselves. This is the sound of happiness and anticipation. As I look around I see people in all different jerseys and team apparel slapping each other's hands or participating in friendly banter. I think to myself, the purpose of this sports book is betting, but there is so much more going on here; something more profound and significant than meets the eye. After a year as a participant observer studying this setting for my dissertation, I am anxious to write about the social world of the sports book.

### The Social World of the Sports Book

Sociologically speaking, a social world is a socially-constructed shared perspective of meaning and connectedness among small social groups. According to Strauss (1978) we can assess social worlds on four dimensions: the primary focus of activity, site of the activity, technology used to participate in the activity, and the social organization that advances the activity. I suggest that social actors be added as an analytic category because each of the four dimensions presumes actors involvement. Elements cannot be present without social actors, who in this case are made up of different types of gamblers and the sports book employees that are present in the sports book environment. I begin to conceptually describe the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book starting with the category social actors.

#### Social Actors

My analysis concentrates on regular bettors in the La Mesa Sports Book. Regulars share the same locality, or place of refuge, share similar common interests

create and follow particular norms and practices, have a built-in hierarchal system, and exude an “us” versus “them” mentality in terms of their in-group against non-regulars who they see as invaders of their space. The social world of the sports book emerges in a designated space for the betting act where patrons meet, interact, and establish a culture to which they adhere. Also, interaction in the sports book is grounded temporally. Patrons know that NFL games start at 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. on Sundays. They know also know that those with an affinity for baseball will be there in the sports book during the summer. Additionally, those who like college basketball will be there during the NCAA tournament. This predictability allows for regulars to meet others with the same interests again and again.

Regular bettors are the foundation for all gambling scenes. A gambling scene is “created whenever people get together to engage in a game of chance and stake something of value on an uncertain outcome (Martinez, 1983, p. 3). In the sports book the regular gamblers consist of professional, pathological, and recreational gamblers. For professional gamblers, gambling is their primary source of income. They usually have a specialized knowledge of the games they play, which gives them an edge against other players. For the pathological gambler he or she gambles to escape from the stresses of everyday life (Jacobs, 1988). Pathological gamblers typically chase their losses to recover their bad wagers. Almost inevitably, this behavior leads to myriad troubles. Recreational gamblers are those who use the gambling activity as a form of enjoyment. They neither stake large amounts of money, nor do they chase to recover past losses.

Forgotten among many gambling studies are the workers that are present who make the activity possible. Similar to the bartender in the bar scene, the dealer, cashier,

teller, floor boss, manager, cocktail waitress, and even custodial attendant are just as important in the gambling scene. These actors allow for the scene to happen at all. Moreover, players do not just socialize among themselves, but interact with employees too. It is in the casino's best interest for the patrons to become familiar with the workers, as it gives a more personal feel to the environment.

### Activity: Sports Gambling

Those who are not familiar with sports gambling might assume that it is a simple process that only involves picking a team, placing a bet, and waiting for the results. However, there is much more to the process and experience of sports betting. Sports gambling is full of ritualism, social control and social order, group norms, informal rules, and defined roles. These social factors occur across four components of the sports gambling activity: (1) the decision-making process, (2) the act of betting, (3) watching the event/waiting for the outcome, and (4) internal negotiation and rationalization of the results.

#### Decision-making Process

The decision making process for sports gamblers normally begins when one obtains the latest betting odds from the casino sports book odds boards above the betting counter which show the most up-to-date numbers or the betting sheets found around sports book. Savvy bettors, especially professionals, begin their planning far in advance of walking into the sports book.

There are several different types of bets in which one can make, these includes: straight bet, totals, parlay, teasers, and futures. The most basic is the straight bet. The straight bet (or called sides) refers to the type of bet in which one picks a team to cover

on the point spread, or to win outright with a money line bet. Totals (or over/under) is a bet in which an individual bets whether the totals points in the contest will be over or under the amount that the sports book assigns. Parlay bets are when an individual places one single bet on multiple contests. In order to win a parlay bet one must win each contest that is on the ticket.

Teasers are another popular type of bet. Teasers allow bettors to buy points to add or subtract to the point spread of two or more games. The more points one buys the lower the odds the bettor receives. The futures bet is a wager that is made on the future outcome of an event or player. Proposition bets are usually reserved for special sporting events like championship games or nationally televised events. Proposition bets, or “props” are unusual in that the wagers have nothing to do with the outcome of the game. They are generally specific to players or plays, like the first player to score a touchdown, or player “x” will score more points than player “y,” or the first score in a game will be “z.” A proposition bet can even be made on which team will win the coin toss.

Among these different bets, sports books typically offer two types of wagers—a straight bet (or money line bet), or a point spread wager. The difference between moneyline bets and point spread bets is that the former is fixed, while the latter is active. Moneyline bets are fixed odds where the outcome of the competition is important. Point spread wagers even out the competition by assigning a point difference between the teams, which creates an active market between the sides. The sports book acts as the counterparty between the sides, with its only goal to make sure that the spread is adjusted to keep the sides even. The sports book is not concerned with the outcome as they charge a commission on each bet, which is called vigorish, the vig, or the juice.

Clearly, sports bettors have many choices to make before they place a wager and their decision process is vital to the process. Information is a valuable currency to the sports bettor. Bettors who wager based on solid information about the teams are held in much higher stead than bettors who look to luck or fate to see them through. Bettors obtain information through sports television shows, websites, sports magazines and newspapers, and, of course, by talking to other bettors. The more information or knowledge a bettor has the more they may be able to make an educated guess about an otherwise unpredictable event.

Art Manteris—former director of race and sports book operations at the Las Vegas Hilton SuperBook—in his book *SuperBookie* (1991) contends that—other than the mathematical advantage—every advantage in sports wagering goes to the bettor. He cites several reasons for this claim. First, the bettor has the ultimate choice. The player can choose to bet, or not to bet; if he chooses to bet, he also gets to decide what team he wants to wager on. Sonny Reizner—veteran race and sports book manager says:

The player of today is far ahead of the fellows behind the counter because, although the house may have a lot of information, he doesn't always have all of it when that number goes onto the board. That's when he's at the mercy of the player.

Any sharp player can look into that number and has something else in favor. *He can pass. He doesn't have to bet. The house can't pass.* (p. 19)

Choice does give the bettor an advantage, but as Manteris points out, the second advantage, availability of information is even more important “[The player] can analyze

and compile statistical data relating to trends such as home or away games, day or night games, grass or artificial surfaces, right- or left-handed pitchers, and so on” (p. 18).

Although bookmakers use multiple information resources, once the lines are set they wait for the action to be heavy on one side before they move a line. Therefore, the bettors have the advantage of seeing where the line is set and then bet accordingly. Another advantage Manteris says is that some of the most sophisticated and sharpest sports handicappers reside in Las Vegas. Just being around the top professional gamblers gives other bettors an opportunity to gain knowledge and information that the sports books might not have.

#### The Betting Act

Placing the bet is a little less involved than deciding what to wager on in the first place. But, there are a host of formal and informal rules that regular bettors obey and the unfamiliar break. There are three distinct parts in the process of the betting act; waiting in line, betting, and leaving the counter. I have found that this process is best explained through Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis. As Goffman (1959) notes so well, different social spaces may require the outward expression or performance of different social norms (p. 27). For instance, in areas in the sports book where people congregate and socialize normative expectations for behavior are very different than the area near the front counters where bets are made. Although there are no physical boundaries between the two regions there is a noticeable difference in the body language and interactions from those bettors who are waiting in line to bet and those who are not.

In the La Mesa, like most sports books, there are open spaces between the seating area and the counter, which allows enough room for people to pass through and for lines

to form. Bettors of all stripes typically go from joking around and energetic to reserved and less animated once they step into this space line to bet. When bettors enter a line, they shift from whatever they were doing before to focusing on the specific betting task at hand. A lot can happen between entering a line of bettors and approaching the counter—spread lines can move, one may overhear others talking about their opinions of a particular game, or a bettor can question their resolve and change their mind about a bet they had planned to make. With all the elements that can come into play most bettors appear to go through various rituals and rehearsals in preparation for their bet. They deal with the weight of the upcoming bet by breaking off socializing in order to concentrate on their plans. Socializing can wait until they finish the bet.

Most bettors appear to have very little patience for waiting, especially waiting in line. An informal rule of the line is that each bettor in line has already decided the wagers they will place. Regulars call this “doing your homework.” Nothing infuriates regulars more than when a green (new) bettor goes up to the counter and then looks up at the odds board and begins to contemplate his bets.

The degree of stress seems directly related to the type of event that is going on in the sports book and how close it is before the event starts. If it is in the middle of the summer when only baseball games are on and a new bettor approaches the counter without knowing what he is betting on others in line might not give anything more than a headshake or the rolling of eyes. However, if it is a Sunday morning in the fall and NFL games are about to start a different scenario might play out. Bettors will likely express vocally their displeasure with the person, and sometimes even threaten them.

## Waiting for the Results

After a bet is made, the wait begins. Most forms of gambling, such as blackjack, slot machines, and poker, do not take long for the game to play out and for bets to be settled. However, with sports betting, time between the bet and the settling of the bet is much longer.

A lot happens during this waiting period. This is where most socializing occurs. Bettors hang out watching their games and waiting to find out if they have a winning ticket. With sports betting, these feelings are sustained for long periods of time. Moreover, emotions ebb and flow with the directions of the games. Due to their unpredictability, sporting events provide bettors with continuous drama. One team's early success can change at a moment's notice and result in a defeat. Because of this, sports bettors can experience a roller coaster of emotions through the duration of a three hour game.

The heightened interest and excitement in a game created by the gambling is felt individually. Yet, when there is a room full of bettors experiencing these feelings and emotions something new happens; a social event occurs out of the sharing of an emotional experience as a collective whole. The experience of sports betting is taken to a new level, or elevated, when bettors are together, sharing the highs and lows of a sporting event.

When bettors share in a certain level of excitement a collective effervescence or in Collins' (2004) words, "emotional energy" develops. This is a unique experience created by bettors that goes beyond the simple winning or losing of money. Collins points out that the creation of emotional energy is an extremely powerful motivating tool.



Once individuals experience emotional energy—the sharing of a collective experience—they will most likely strive to repeat these feelings again. NFL games on Sunday mornings are the perfect example of this where a sports book full of people are enraptured by the drama that unfolds. People yell and scream at the games and when something positive happens they share in the experience with others close by, even if they are complete strangers. These interactions also occur during negative times too, when a game is not going the right way a gambler might reach out to those nearby for reassurance or support.

This waiting period is what makes sports gambling so unique. It creates a social environment that no other gambling game can provide. With most games money can dry up quickly; maybe the best poker players can stay for hours and socialize with other poker players, but they have to either be excellent players or have a lot of money to keep putting into the game. But more significantly, poker players still have to concentrate on the game in order to not bust. Whereas, with sports betting, once the bet is placed all one can do is watch and hope.

During this period, bettors have various ways to cope with the amount of time on their hands and also for the highs and lows that their bet creates. There are ways in which bettors try to alleviate the stress of the risk they face with their bet. For most bettors the time is best spent interacting with other bettors, many of whom drink beers or other alcoholic drinks. This interaction is at the heart of social order of the sports book. Out of this interaction comes the creation of social networks, strengthening of social bond, establishment of status, earning of social capital, development of friendships, strangerships, peer groups, temporary intimate groups, unwritten rules, norms, values,

shared language, microwave relationships, and coping strategies. Not only are these social elements created through social interaction, but they are continuously reaffirmed through the ritualistic behavior of sports bettors.

#### Internal Negotiation/Rationalization

The final component of the sports betting act is the internal negotiation and rationalization of the results. By rationalizing the results, and in larger part the reason for participation, players are able to justify their continual participation of gambling activities. Scott (1968[2005]) coined the term *ratiocination* to describe this moment when gamblers had to “make sense” of the results and participation. Although he uses the term to explain the thought process of horse race gamblers, this can easily be applied to other gamblers, including sports bettors. Scott suggested that there were two stages in the moral career of horse race gamblers, who were mainly addicts. I have seen these qualities in most of the regular gamblers I have observed. In the first stage players learn the intricacies of handicapping and the mastery of information that is provided to them. Once they are confident in their approach towards picking horses they soon feel that they have obtained some degree of mastery. This can be said for sports bettors as well in that the more one bets and becomes familiar with the intricacies of sports betting procedures and trends the more confident they are in their choices.

Scott’s next stage is more complex. As a gambler increases their level of participation “the player sees himself as one who can rationally cope with the complexities of picking a winner” (p. 90). Scott explains that “rationally cope” refers to the player’s belief system that consists of two independent components. The first component relies on the player’s belief that the sporting event is natural and not fixed.

That is, because the event is ordered and the outcome is not predetermined, the odds of winners and losers can be assessed through a close analysis of the information at hand. To maintain this belief, the player only needs to give, what Scott calls a “reasonable account” of the events that transpired. That is, the player must rationalize why his choice did or did not win and how the winner beat his pick. There are numerous ways to give reasonable accounts, such as blaming the picks loss on the weather conditions, faulty equipment, poor management or decision-making, or cheating by an opponent. As a result, through this process of *ratiocination* the gambler always sees himself picking a winner and that the only reason his pick lost was an unfortunate incident that could not be foreseen since it was beyond his control. Sports gambling, like horse race betting, is a test of decision making that retains uncertainty and risk in the unknowns that bettors cannot ever fully predict. Regulars at the La Mesa seek the action that lies between the challenge of picking winners and the outcome’s ultimate unpredictability.

Wins appear to reinforce a player’s involvement not solely because it demonstrates confidence to himself, but also because it demonstrates it to others. Betting is an individual act that not only carries individual consequences, but also *social* consequences. Wins may lead to confidence in one’s choices and a sense of self efficacy that bettors like to reproduce in subsequent bets. But, displaying competence through wins is also a way of establishing status, respect, and deference from other regulars in the sports book. These social consequences are critical for understanding the relationship of the betting act to the social world bettors build in the La Mesa Sports Book.

### Site: The Sports Book

The La Mesa Hotel and Casino is located in Las Vegas Valley. It is primarily a local's casino, which means that it focuses promotions and amenities towards local Valley residents much more than tourists. The suburban area surrounding the casino is made up mostly of working-class, blue-collar residents. The casino itself has plenty of sources for entertainment and dining other than the sports book and its lounge. There are several restaurants, a food court, a movie theater, bowling alley, a night club, and a showroom.

The race and sports book is in the most northern part of the casino next to the parking garage. (The organization of the sports book can be seen in diagram 4.1). It has its own entrance from the outside with a sign that reads "Race & Sports Book." The entrance has two sets of ten doors to serve crowds on days like the NFL's season kickoff. Once inside there is a wide-open space for people to either head towards the casino or to go into the sports book. If one walks straight towards the sports book there are thirty-six light orange lounge chairs in rows of six facing the odds board and the array of televisions that play the games of the day.

Beyond the lounge chairs sit rows of long desks that contain personal televisions at each desk space. There is another section of personal television desks for the race bettors beyond the ones in the center of the sports book. The televisions get all the games that are available for the casino to show, even if the sports book does not have them on the big screen. Because the televisions can be controlled manually they are popular among the patrons.

All the chairs face towards the front of the race and sports book, marked by the betting counter and odds board. The betting counter stretches the width of the room and forms a slight arc. If the sports book was cut straight down the middle, the right side, facing the front, would be reserved for the sports book and the left side for the racebook. However, the middle is considered mixed use. During heavy sports days the middle is predominantly occupied by sports bettors. Directly over the right counter is a large computerized odds board, where all lines and potential bets for games, events, and contests are posted. Next, to the odds board are two enormous screens. Each screen can be sectioned into a number of smaller screens to show up to eight games simultaneously. Televisions are ever-present in the sports book. There are different sizes, with the larger ones high above the counters and smaller ones a little lower or hanging off to the side.

Betting sheets are stored in two places. For that day's events the betting sheets are located up in the front at the counter, while the future and prop betting sheets are located in a bureau behind the lounge chairs. Also, the results from the previous day's games are posted in a case on the other side of the wall near the right side of the sports book.

There are also two lounges in the back of the race and sports book. The VIP section is two steps up from the floor of the sports book. It is reserved for the high rollers and special club members of both, the sports book and racebook. It is a small and narrow space so only a limited number of bettors can be seated there. There is a desk at the entrance of the lounge that members have to check in at, which also serves the other purpose of keeping non-VIP members from entering. The lounge is one further step above the VIP section and three steps off of the main floor. The lounge is open to all

patrons and sits on one side of a large oval shaped bar that has seats on the other side of it. There are also several televisions around the bar and in the lounge facing the sports book, as well as video poker machines on the bar surface. There are waiting stations on both sides of the bar for the cocktail waitresses to get drinks for their customers. Beyond the sports book lounge are rows of slot machines and the poker room, which designates the beginning of the rest of the casino.

### Seasons

Time in the sports book is marked by the three distinct seasons of football, basketball, and baseball. Football season which consistently draws the largest crowds, begins in August, and culminates with the Super Bowl in February. The football crowds come for both college and NFL games. Basketball season begins in November; the basketball crowds only dominate after the Super Bowl. College basketball appears to be a bigger draw than NBA games. The biggest event during the basketball season is the NCAA March Madness tournament. The tournament's opening week rivals the first day of the NFL season. Baseball season begins in April and ends in October; however it is the period from April to late August that I use to characterize baseball season in the sports book, since baseball overlaps with the end of basketball season and the beginning of football season. I consider the end of the baseball season in the sports book in August because football rules the sports book and once it begins baseball bettors blend into the crowd, and many of them also turn their attention to football as well. The sports book is at its tamest during the baseball season.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>There are a few factors that explain why baseball is the tamest season in the sports book. First, the game of baseball itself is slower and has more down time than football and basketball, so it is hard for the audience to sustain a heightened state of excitement. Second, baseball is not as popular as football or basketball; therefore, there are less fringe gamblers. As a result, the majority of those who are in the sports

## Technology

Technology refers to the tools that are used to carry out the activity. The La Mesa Casino used to have a traditionally old sports book configuration. It was smaller, the seating was limited to uncomfortable chairs, there was very little space to congregate, and the technology in the sports book was not as current as other sports books. Within the past few years the casino decided to remodel the sports book, making it more friendly and comfortable to its patrons.

A major element of the remodeling was updating the technology. The centerpiece of this new technology is their large high-definition television screen that is right over the center counter. The screen can show one big game or can be manipulated to show a different number of games all at once. Also, underneath both the odds board and the large television screen are smaller high-definition televisions. There are also four large high-definition televisions that hang off to the side of the lounge chairs. The large television screens make watching games enjoyable as it is easy to see from a distance and the pictures are clear.

The electronic odds board is another piece of technology used in the sports book. Some of the older sports books around the state of Nevada still use dry erase boards to post the latest odds. It is a primitive process where the sports book manager has to handwrite every line and score on the board and each time the odds change he has to change them. The majority of sports books, though, have the electronic odds boards, so as soon as a line changes or a score is final the changes are made on the board

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book gambling on baseball are regular gamblers, which means they know how to control their emotions throughout a game. Third, on Saturdays during the day the sports book is only limited to showing the FOX game of the week, which prevents those who want to watch other games from coming to the sports book to watch.

immediately. Not only are the electronic boards more efficient, but they are more professional, aesthetically pleasing than the dry erase boards.

Other technologies used in the sports book are the ticket machines that the ticket writers use to print out betting tickets. The machines are fast so that as soon as an individual says what bet they want to make the ticket writer merely has to punch in the codes and has the voucher ready in seconds. The personal televisions are a form of technology that allows each person to control the game they want to watch. The sports ticker resides below the large screens up front and runs the length of the sports book. The ticker provides an important service as it gives up-to-the-minute injury and score updates.<sup>8</sup>

### Organization

The function of the sports book is to provide a place where people can bet on sporting events and then stay and watch them in a comfortable setting. These activities are carried out between the workers at the La Mesa Casino and the sports bettors. The casino and casino workers are guided by sections 463-466 under Title 41 of the Nevada Revised Statutes (2010).

The sports book managers oversee the operations of the casino and supervise the workers and resolve any disputes between the customers and the sports book. The ticket writers, or cashiers, or tellers, are there to take the customers bets and to settle any winning tickets. The security guards are present to enforce the rules of the state and

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<sup>8</sup> There is a new phase of “technologization” in some sports books that could change the social character of sports gambling in the casino. For instance, the Cantor Gaming devices make betting activities a handheld act. Literally, gamblers at some casinos can get a handheld device, move throughout the casino getting updates and placing various bets outside the sports book. While the La Mesa casino does not offer this service, I expect that it will sometime in the future. Additional research is needed to determine the effect of these sorts of devices on the interactional patterns among sports book patrons. I discuss this more in the concluding chapter as an opportunity for future research.



casino, to break up any arguments, and to remove any individuals who fail to act in a civilized manner, or who have committed an egregious offense. The custodians come by to make sure that the desks and the areas around the chairs are kept clean, which mostly consists of picking up the trash, betting sheets, pencils, and cleaning out ash trays. The cocktail waitresses take drink orders and pick up an empty bottles or glasses.

The bettors organize themselves into groups. The amount of money one bets and the level of expertise usually dictates the group of people he will hang out with. For instance, professional bettors who bet tens, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars, typically hang out with others who bet around that amount. Regular bettors who bet a few dollars here and there will hang out with others who risk less. Other elements also come into play, such as race and age. Within the groups, bettors exchange information, share stories, compete, encourage, and bond with one another. These interactions help to strengthen the social bonds among group members. I will discuss the character of interaction and social cohesion in the chapters that follow.

### Summary

This chapter explains several components of social worlds and their presence in the La Mesa Sports Book. The primary activity of sports betting, site of the activity, technology by which the activity is organized, and the organization of that activity shapes what social actors do to build a meaningful social world in the La Mesa Sports Book. In the following chapters, I delve more deeply into the social dynamics at play among patrons of the La Mesa. The next chapter focuses specifically on the types of bettors that visit the sports book and how they are socially organized.

## CHAPTER 5

### SOCIAL ORDER IN THE SPORTS BOOK

The social organization of the sports book is built around those patrons who hangout on a consistent basis. I call these patrons “regulars.” Past research has attempted to categorize the different types of individuals who are present in the gambling scene. The purpose of this chapter is to not only discuss the types of gamblers that are found among regulars, but to also to describe distinct stylistic behaviors among different sets of La Mesa regulars. I term the different approaches as “old school code” and “new school style.” I begin this chapter by inviting the reader into what turns out to be a typical scene among La Mesa regulars during the NFL and college football season.

#### My Fellow Patrons

“I don’t believe this shit! Do you fucking believe this? He is intentionally blowing the fucking game! I don’t believe this.” Frankly, I do not believe it. Dusty, a short, scrawny, middle-aged Caucasian man is screaming into my ear about Jack Del Rio, the coach of the National Football League’s Jacksonville Jaguars. Dusty thinks Del Rio is intentionally losing to the Tennessee Titans. It is at this exact moment I ask myself “How in the hell did I end up here with these people?”

As I stood among 60 or so men waiting for the year’s first round of NFL games to end—all of us hoping to cash a winning betting ticket—I wondered what makes me return to this place. Questions ran through my mind “Why do I come here every Sunday during the NFL season, and often 2 or 3 more times during the week? Am I drawn to the sports book for the sole purpose of betting? Is it because I can watch any sporting event I

like on the 30 television screens throughout the sports book? Do I come because I like hanging out with the other people who frequent the sports book.”

Sports book patrons share several commonalities. Some are immediately obvious, particularly that they are mostly men over the age of twenty-one who share interests in sports and betting. There are also less obvious points of connection among sports book patrons. Over time sports book bettors perpetuate a social world made up of individuals within networks and groups that evince different styles of interaction, dress, and attitudes toward the gambling scene. Patrons develop identities and earn reputations associated with their roles in the sports book. The question I address in this chapter is: Who are the people that makeup the different groups that congregate in the sports book and what are the styles, codes, and values they follow?

### Patron Categories in the Gambling Scene

Little research exists on the social organization of gambling scenes. The work that does exist tends to over-simplify the differences between groups of gamblers and their relationships. Tomás Martínez (1983) in his book *The Gambling Scene* provides the most detailed exploration of the social organization of gamblers. In his study of casino culture, Martínez describes gamblers as one of four distinct categories: Pros, compulsives, regulars, and occasionals. The pros and compulsive gamblers are most tightly connected to the gaming industry, which is the focal point around which all gamblers orbit (see diagram 5.1). According to Martínez, pros and compulsives are always present in the gambling scene. Both groups must consistently gamble. Professionals must gamble to make a living. Compulsives, which include problem and

pathological gamblers, suffer from a mental disorder that causes a “continuous or periodic loss of control over gambling” (Bellinger, 1999).

The group Martinez identifies as “regulars” bet for fun and do not frequent the gambling scene as much as the professionals and compulsive gamblers. Martinez relegates them to secondary status in his social hierarchy of the gambling scene. But the range of gamblers Martinez calls “regular” is much too inclusive. Martinez describes regulars as those gamblers who “visit a casino twice a year. Intuitively, there seems little that is regular about twice in a 365 day pattern. Below, I will offer a more precise distinction of sports book regulars. Lastly, Martinez identifies occasional gamblers as the most minor players in the social order of the gambling scene.

I want to refine Martinez’s depiction of the social composition of sports books. My case suggests that the social world of a sports book may be more complex than Martinez’s typology intimates. The social order of the La Mesa Sports Book is a multi-layered, hierarchy of individuals and groups, distinguished by their knowledge, expertise, and experience as gamblers and sports book participants. In this chapter, I map the different groups in the sports book, and detail the social hierarchy and the stylistic differences among them. I begin with the broadest distinctions among who is “in” the scene and who is “out.”

### Regulars, Occasionals, and Tourists

Groups in any social scene with regular patronage fall into one of two basic categories—those whose members consider “in” the group and those who are “out.” Those who are “in” feel a sense of commonality and solidarity toward one another and contrast themselves with others they consider outside their social world. Martinez (1983)

suggests that pros, compulsives, regulars, and occasionals all constitute the in-group of sports book patrons. In the Las Mesa, people who attend twice in a year (what Martinez refers to as regulars) would never be considered “in the scene,” but rather as outsiders who have little to do with reproducing the social world of the sports book.

In contrast to Martinez, I characterize “regulars” at the La Mesa Sports Book as any bettor who exhibits habitual attendance and participation in sports betting and in the social scene of the La Mesa Sports Book. In my view, regulars, include “pros,” “pathologicals,” and what I describe below as “recreational bettors.” By habitual attendance I mean, those individuals who appear at least once a week at the La Mesa Sports Book. By participation, I mean those bettors who socialize with other bettors, or simply “hang out” in the sports book for thirty minutes to an hour after making their bets. Through my 15 months of research at the La Mesa Sports Book, I found there to be approximately 50 regulars who came to the sports book and hangout. I estimate that about 35 of those regulars attended the sports book at least three times a week.

Regulars as I describe them are significant, because they give any social scene its identity. Regulars create and sustain the social expectations of a given scene. Regulars are continuously present and establish social norms and a shared language that are the basis for their social world. Regulars are also the patrons sports books rely on for business as their repeat customers.

I categorize occasional bettors as those individuals who visit the sports book so infrequently that they cannot become part of the sports book’s established social groups. Occasional bettors appear once in awhile to place a bet, but they do not make enduring social connections with the regulars and the regulars do not know them. Occasional

bettors usually keep to themselves and remain on the outside of the social world of gamblers in the La Mesa Sports Book.

The bettors I categorize as tourist bettors reflect Martinez's "occasional bettor" group who enter the scene only once or twice a year. The tourist bettor category reflects the perception of the La Mesa Sports Book regulars: the unrecognizable few in the sports book, gazing at the odds board and sometimes making a bet are outsiders at the regulars' local casino. Tourist bettors have little sense of the betting game and typically vanish from the scene as quickly as they appeared.

#### Organization among La Mesa Regulars

Group distinctions exist within the La Mesa Sports Book and these distinctions shape social interaction among sports book regulars (see diagram 5.2). In the La Mesa Sports Book, professional gamblers are the most respected bettors in the sports book and, therefore, reside at the top of the social hierarchy. Recreational bettors look up to them for the persistence, sports betting acumen, and fearlessness to lay the big wagers. Recreationals are slotted in the second rung on the sports book hierarchy. They do not bet big. Rather, recreational bettors wager small sums for the excitement of the action, then sit back to enjoy the games with other recreational regulars, as if the sports book were their personal living room, just much bigger with more video screens and 10 to 20 of their sports-minded friends around. Pathologicals are the black sheep in the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book. Regulars see perceived pathological gamblers as irresponsible in their betting habits. They bet too much and they do it too often for their

own good. Pros and recreational regulars try and keep their distance between themselves and any perceived pathological gamblers.

### Pros

There is an old adage in gambling circles that professional gamblers play to live and live to play. Gambling is their job and their passion. For pro sports gamblers, their lives revolve the teams, players, and games (or horses and racetracks if the pro “bets the ponies”) that determine their livelihood. Pros research their contests, using computer programs and other schemes to sift through massive amounts of information available for indicators that can influence the outcomes of games, such as player injuries, team records, player matchups, and tendencies related to the type of field or track on which the game is being contested. Information is the bettor’s critical resources for making educated bets rather than random guesses. That said, information and analysis does not guarantee positive results. For professional gamblers consistency in their wins is the highest mark of distinction. Winning consistency suggests that a gambler is rigorous and methodical in his approach to analyzing the data, and savvy in their interpretation and choice of bets to make. Pros also live in networks with other pros, who trade tips and strategies for successful gambling. Pros also spend the most physical time in the sports book, and, importantly, they also risk the most money on their wagers.

Pros are the most knowledgeable and respected bettors among sports book patrons. This respect flows from both the sports book staff and the other regulars in the scene. The high stakes they wager earn them preferential treatment from the sports book managers in the form of attentive service from the staff. The more comfortable and

revered professional gamblers feel in the sports book, the more likely they are to return and place more wagers.

The high position of La Mesa pros in the sports book hierarchy can be ascertained by their membership in the private VIP area reserved by sports book managers for the most valued sports books patrons. The VIP area offers comfort and convenience. It includes private booths, personal cocktail waitresses, and access to a VIP betting teller. The VIP area is sectioned off from the rest of the sports book, isolating members from the other bettors on the main floor. Not all Professional gamblers become VIP members. Professionals may prefer to stay on the main floor. But the majority of VIP members are professional gamblers. The majority of the professional gamblers are men 50 and older, although about 5 of La Mesa's 20 or so professionals are in their late-20s and early-30s.

#### Pathologicals

I replace Martinez's term "compulsives" with "pathological" since the term compulsive is longer used to describe problem gamblers. According to Bellinger (1999) this group of bettors is now called *pathological gamblers*. Bernhard (2007) explains that "pathological gamblers are informed through treatment and public education problems that what they have is a rigorously researched and widely accepted health disorder" (p. 9).

In its simplest explanation pathological gamblers play for the thrill of the chase and not necessarily for the money. As mentioned above, pathological gamblers suffer from a mental disorder that makes it difficult for them to control their gambling behaviors.<sup>9</sup> When losing, pathological gamblers tend to "chase" their losses. Lesieur

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<sup>9</sup> Problem gamblers and pathological gamblers are used interchangeably, but there are subtle, but significant distinctions between the two. Problem gambling is a clinical distinction that refers to gambling



(1984) introduced the term “chasing” to describe those individuals who “gamble and lose and yet continue to gamble some more in order to get even” (p. xvii). The attempt to recover past losses leads to a downward spiral in which financial resources become more and more limited. First, pathological gamblers will use up their own financial resources, and then they turn to external resources, such as friends and family to borrow money. Once those resources are no longer available, pathological gamblers may look to other avenues such as stealing to support their gambling habit.

Since it is difficult to accurately diagnose pathological gamblers simply through participant observations, I cannot fairly delve deeper into discussing the presence of pathological gamblers in the scene. I can only say that there most likely are pathological gamblers within any continuous gambling scene such as the sports book. At the La Mesa Sports Book, there were some individuals that were perceived as problem gamblers and, therefore, were stigmatized. A result, of this stigma was social isolation created by the other regulars as they kept them at a careful distance to avoid perceptions of association with a perceived problem gambler.

#### Recreational Bettors

The majority of regulars in the La Mesa Sports Book are recreational gamblers. Recreational wagers on sports for, well, recreation. Recreational bettors partake in the activity of sports betting for fun. Recreational bettors use sports gambling primarily as a way to pass the time in the company of others while watching sports and risking a few

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behavior that results in any harmful effects on the gambler, or to those who are associated with the gambler (i.e., family, significant others, friends, coworkers, etc.) (Bellinger, 1999; National Research Council, 1999). Even more serious is pathological gambling, which is medicalized under the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (DSM) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) as “a mental disorder characterized by a continuous or periodic loss of control over gambling” (Bellinger, 1999). See the DSM for the 10 criteria for compulsive gambling diagnosis.

dollars on the outcome. They view sports gambling as an amusement, a hobby, and a way to relax away from work and home. Recreational gamblers do not wager large sums of money. A \$100 bet is a big wager for the recreational bettors; for pros, \$100 usually isn't worth the time it takes to stand in line to make the bet. Recreational bettors also do not make a large number of wagers like compulsives. They bet for fun and games, not to live or to fulfill some pathological need for the "action."

Recreational gamblers seem to enjoy the thrill of the wager but they do not bet so much that they risk jeopardizing their well-being or enjoyment of the game. Of course, their goal of the bet is to win money. But losing is not devastating. Recreational bettors talk of their wagers as a way to satisfy their competitive juices and to make the games more interesting. As Lonny, a La Mesa regular who is a tall, stylishly-dressed, African American male in his mid-thirties, said to me, "I bet to give the games a little more spice."

Recreational bettors also bet because it is the norm in the sports book. La Mesa Sports Book's recreational bettors are integrated into a social world where gambling and sports watching is the common activity and sets the stage for social bonding. At root, recreational bettors wager as a way into a social world they find appealing. My observations suggest that betting is secondary to the enjoyment recreational bettors get from the social act of watching sports events with fellow regulars with whom they experience camaraderie and fellow-feeling they find in few other parts of their lives. A winning a bet is icing on the cake to them, not the reason they frequent the La Mesa Sports Book.

“Green” or new bettors are situated on the periphery of the La Mesa regulars. Green bettors defy easy social categorization, as they appear to come from all ages, races, and backgrounds. Green bettors seek to be a member of the sports book scene, but have not yet learned the social rules nor been accepted as a full participant inside the ranks of the regulars. Their initial entry into the sports book is arguably based on the idea of participating in sports betting out of curiosity and as a form of recreation.

The group categories I have described are arrayed in a hierarchy of sports book membership. I now turn to discuss this hierarchy and its social consequences.

#### Pros and the Other Regulars

There are barriers between the professional gamblers and other regulars (i.e., pathological and recreational bettors). Professionals physically isolate themselves in the La Mesa Sports Book’s VIP section. The VIP section is reserved for the big bettors. Not all bettors in the VIP section are professionals, but most professionals that frequent the La Mesa Sports Book are in the VIP section.

The VIP section creates a physical barrier to interaction. The area sits between the lounge and the main floor of the sports book, is marked off with a short wall that designates who is in and who is out. With its own bar, teller window, and plush leather chairs, the VIP section clearly symbolizes exclusivity and importance. Those without membership cannot enter unless invited and accompanied by a VIP bettor. The VIP section symbolizes the top of the hierarchy in the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book.

The La Mesa’s VIP section distinctly formalizes a hierarchical separation among professional bettors that I have seen before. Prior to studying the La Mesa Sports Book, I

spent many years as a casual participant observer at the Blueshore Casino Sports book. The Blueshore did not have a VIP section, but nevertheless, professional bettors and other regulars segregated themselves. In the words of Blueshore pro, professionals do not socialize with bettors they considered “beneath them.” And the Blueshore regulars knew this “rule of the room” at the Blueshore. Recreational regulars were not supposed to approach the big betting pros. The same rules apply at the La Mesa, although the La Mesa’s VIP section formally concretizes the separation between the big bettors and others.

The formal separation of the VIP section helps unseasoned bettors learn the implicit “rules of the room” with little trial and error. The formal separation designates what is only informally known among patrons at other sports books like the Blueshore. I found it difficult at the Blueshore to initially figure out who the Professionals were because there were only two designated areas for all bettors to share: the sports book and lounge. As a new patron, I was not aware of the informal expectation that bettors stick to their “own kind.” As I earned membership within a group of regular recreational bettors I was socialized to understand this and other “rules of the room.”

My group at the Blueshore consisted of about eight regulars. We all sat at a specific table in the sports book and felt a strong sense of familiarity and camaraderie toward one another. We were also open to other regulars to our table.

Yet, at the Blueshore, I never saw the big bettors interact much with regulars. I wondered why no one approached the big bettors, and tried it once while I waited for a game to end. I walked up to a professional I had seen there for more than a year and said, “What do you think about this game?” He looked bothered, mumbled, “Eagles will pull

it out,” then walked quickly over to a group of pros and sat down. I went back to my group and asked the guys about what just happened. Mike, an older member of our group said, “You don’t talk to them unless they approach you.” “Why?” I asked. “Because you are not wagering thousands of dollars on each game. They don’t see you as an equal. Until you stake the kind of money they do, then you don’t bother them,” he explained.

At that moment I began to see the hierarchy among bettors. Pros are the dominant group in sports book culture. Other regulars respect them for their expertise, the money they risk, and how calmly they carry themselves with so much at stake. The La Mesa hierarchy is the same, suggesting a pattern wider than just my case.

#### Recreational Bettors and New Bettors

Regular recreational bettors are positioned in the La Mesa hierarchy below pros and above new patrons, occasional, and tourists. Like the distinctions among pros and the rest of the recreation regulars, who are separated by differences in knowledge, skills, and status, so too are the recreational regulars distinguished in the sports book from green bettors.

Green bettors are just learning the ropes of sports betting culture. The learning process includes socialization into both the formal rules of the casino and the informal rules of the sports book’s social world. Thus new bettors must learn not only how to bet in the sports book, but the interactional norms of the scene.

Regulars also see themselves as more highly-valued patrons to the sports book than new bettors and attempt to maintain a clear separation between themselves and new bettors. Regular recreational bettors are open to socializing with other bettors; however, it is important for every regular bettor to be perceived as competent and knowledgeable

about betting processes and all things related to sports. As a result, regular recreational bettors take a cautious approach with unfamiliar bettors.

A regular recreational bettor will converse with an unfamiliar bettor, but will do so with caution. Usually, these conversations begin in generalities about a sport or a particular game and as the conversation progresses a feeling-out process begins in order to determine whether or not the unfamiliar individual is in fact a bettor on or above his level. During this time the regular recreational bettor will look for social and verbal cues to gauge other's proficiency. Now, if both bettors happen to be experienced sports bettors then this process moves fairly quickly and the bettors are able to discuss all aspects of betting and share personal insights.

Conversely, if the regular recreational bettor perceives that the stranger is a new bettor who lacks the same level of expertise the regular bettor will look to disengage from the person in order to avoid any perception of association with the green bettor. This disengagement may be immediate, such as the regular bettor cutting the conversation off and walking away, or it can be gradual, where the regular bettor remains friendly and allows the conversation to finish naturally before moving on so as not to offend the green bettor. Still, similar to how Professionals keep their distance between all other regular bettors (i.e., recreational and pathological), regular recreational bettors maintain a distance between themselves and green bettors in order to avoid any social stigma.

#### Tourist and Outsiders

Tourist bettors and outsiders occupy the bottom rung of the sports book hierarchy. Tourists visit the sports book only while vacationing in Las Vegas or at the biggest sporting events such as the Super Bowl or NCAA Men's Basketball Championship.

Tourists may not actually be out-of-towners, but they are certainly outsiders to the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book. They visit once or twice a year at most to place a small bet, watch a game, and participate minimally in the scene. Outsiders enter the sports book, but do not gamble.

Tourists and outsiders do not belong to the social world of the sports book. They have discrediting attributes that causes regular bettors to avoid them. Specifically, if one does not carry themselves in a manner that is expected among the regular gamblers, the person is discredited and marginalized. A discrediting attribute usually involves appearance, body language, an unusual action, improper verbal communication, or in this instance, possibly gender (Goffman, 1963b).

Examples of discrediting behavior can be seen in something as simple as improper use of the personal televisions. There are about 100 personal television stations in the La Mesa Sports Book, which televise every sporting event possible for that day, as well as some non-sporting programs. In the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book, televisions are strictly meant for watching sporting events. Outsiders may tune the televisions to non-sports programs. This practice is an obvious red flag to regulars who know the social strictures against the practice. Regulars seldom approach outsiders about their gaffe. Rather, they isolate them, and may scowl in contempt, hoping they leave the scene. Outsiders are often oblivious to these responses.

Women occupy part of the outsider category in the La Mesa Sports Book. In my six years of sports gambling, I have witnessed only two women who consistently hung out in any sports book that I frequented, gambled, and were accepted by others as regulars. This occurred at the Blueshore and not at the La Mesa. In general, and as we

would expect from the research literature on gender and gambling, most regulars are men, and women seldom visit the sports book and they are certainly not integrated into the La Mesa social scene.

### Stylistic Differences among La Mesa Regulars

Unwritten norms and rules regulate social interaction in the sports book. The regulars, who attend the La Mesa Sports Book for betting and socializing create and sustain these norms and rules. Many of these implicit expectations shape conduct in the sports book. Acceptance in the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book requires acquiescence to these codes of conduct.

Martinez (1983) established categorical depictions of different styles of betting conduct. Martinez identifies different types of winners and losers. There are good winners and bad winners; good losers and bad losers. A good winner is humble, attributing his winning as much to luck as to skill. Good winners do not talk very much about their wins, do not apologize for winning. They also do not discuss past losses while winning, nor do they needle those who lost. Bad winners attribute their winning primarily to skill, talk about their wins continuously before, during, and after games; apologize to losers for winning while simultaneously needling them about their losses.

The distinction between good and bad losers is similar. Good losers make light jokes about their losses to alleviate tension. Good losers do not express or demonstrate frustration when they are losing. Bad losers complain about their losses and insult winners. Bad losers disrupt the game when they are losing.



I find even more complexity to the betting styles among sports book regulars. Specifically, stylistic variation occurs among pros and recreationals along the line of what I call “old school” and “new school” codes of conduct. These differences reveal divergent codes of conduct that sometimes create tensions among regulars in the social world of the Las Mesa Sports Book.

### Old School Code

Charlie is the most well-known and respected professional gambler at the La Mesa Sports Book. Charlie looks and sounds like a stereo-typical “wise guy” gambler one would find in the movies. He is approximately in his late-sixties and comes from an extended Italian family in the Boston area. He is also what I would characterize as an old school professional. I began to understand the old school style during a conversation I had with Charlie about the evolution of sports books. As a person who had gambled in Las Vegas for more than 40 years, I asked him about the differences between today’s sports book and those of the past. Rather than comment on the large space or technological advancements in casino sports betting, Charlie immediately focused on stylistic differences: “Guys today are not sports bettors, they don’t know what they are doing; they don’t know how to act. It is too much me. Players from my time know how to act. No matter what the game is people should always act like they have been there before.” Charlie’s “us” versus “them” characterization exposed a distinction that all La Mesa regulars understand: that two codes of conduct exist in tension within the sports book.

“Old school” gamblers see the sports book strictly as a place of business, not entertainment, and their actions in the social scene reflect this attitude. Old school

bettors, both professionals and recreational bettors, keep their emotions under control when they are winning and losing. Their “poker face” hides their feelings about the game and their wagers. My observations suggest that they hide emotions so they do not cloud their betting decisions. There is also an outward impression management aspect to suppressing their emotions. Hiding emotions conveys a sense of calmness under pressure. Old school bettors revere this attitude.

Indeed, “never bet with your heart” is a common expression heard throughout the sports book. The expression refers to the idea that a bettor should never include emotions in their decision-making process. The smart old school bettor is objective about their wagers. They bet to win and see the serious bettor as an objective decision-maker who relies on numbers, patterns, and match-up data to increase their odds and minimize risk. Subjective factors such as betting on a team because you are a fan, or you have a “hunch” is a sign a weakness and anathema to the old school code.

Old school bettors suppress their emotions to demonstrate to others that they take all situations, no matter how exciting or disappointing, with an even keel disposition. Old school bettors give off an air of accepting all consequences with the same cool demeanor. Old school style is about showing you’ve been here before, nothing surprises, and all outcomes are just part of the business.

Old school bettors value calm and controlled demeanors and appear to expect other bettors to act similarly. Old school bettors look down upon bettors that bring undue attention to themselves and that interferes with, disrupts, or hinders the betting experience of other gamblers. I repeatedly listened as old school bettors complained about

individuals using the sports book as their own “personal playground” for drinking, carousing, and entertainment.

The old school code embraces a specific idea of sportsmanship in the sports book. Old school bettors do not boast about their wins nor put others down for their losses. Old school bettors do tell stories about their wins and losses, but never to project superiority or to elicit sympathy from others. Instead, old school stories usually highlight the inherent unpredictability of sports betting. Their stories focus on the late hit and error in the bottom of the ninth inning that scored three unlikely runs to win the bet, or the buzzer beating basket that lost the bet. Modesty is the rule, even when winning big. Old school bettors do not want to listen to a losing bettor rant about the outcome, nor a winning bettor brag about his sports betting proficiency.

George, a recreational bettor reflects the old school code of conduct. George is short, Caucasian, with a slender build, and, while he is unassuming and quietly social, he also does not shy away from conversations with other patrons when they initiate it. He is also very modest about this sports betting experience, especially his successes, although other regulars knew he is a very proficient winner. As I got to know George over several months, he became more open about his prowess. As we talked about some of our exciting wins, George enthralled me with a story about placing \$20 on an 8-team parlay, which eventually paid out \$2,000. George talked in great detail about how the last game involved Curt Schilling pitching for the Red Sox and how the game kept him nervous and excited at the same time. At no point during our conversation did I sense him trying to use the story as a way to showcase his sports betting acumen. Rather, he conveyed a

story of success with humility and humor, sharing something personal about his sports betting experience.

Old school bettors are unassuming and inconspicuous within the scene, tending to blend into the setting rather than stand out. They accomplish this in a variety of ways. First, old school bettors often go unnoticed because they purposely avoid attention from others. I met several old school bettors who were loud and boisterous outside the sports book, but inside they were calm and reserved. After a big win, old school bettors do nothing more than pump a fist and yell out “Yes!”, then collect themselves, collect their money, and move on.

Old school bettors limit their social interaction with other bettors to just a few people at a time. I rarely saw a group of six or more old school bettors hanging out together at one time. Also, the socializing is usually kept to a casual conversation. Seldom did old school bettors raise their voice to get someone’s attention, yell at the screen as a game was played, or argue loudly about betting strategy.

Old school bettors also maintain a low-profile by the way they dress. Old school clothing style is plain for a sports setting. They tend to refrain from wearing jerseys of their favorite teams, or flashy clothes that would bring them extra notoriety.

If the foundation of the old school code is based on a business-like approach then the glue that maintains and reaffirms these tenets is mutual respect. The major frustration of old school bettors is that they believe today’s bettors are disrespectful to other bettors, to sports book staff, and to the code of the sports book itself. Next, I describe the new school style.

## New School Style

Like it or not, old school bettors appear to be a vanishing breed in the La Mesa Sports Book. They are literally aging and their style sits in sharp contrast to many younger regulars who populate the sports book. Young, 20 and 30-something new school bettors see the purpose of the sports book experience differently than old school patrons. New school bettors see the sports book as a place for more than just the business of sports betting. It is also a place for fun and entertainment.

In many ways, new school bettors mirror fans at a sporting event. For one thing, they are highly visible. New school bettors are vocal; they wear jerseys, hats, and shirts of their favorite teams, and hang out in large groups of 8 or 10 in the sports book. New school bettors also have few inhibitions about expressing their emotions. Similar to sports fans (and because they are sports fans), new school bettors express themselves during the ebbs and flows of a game and openly share their excitement with others. They shout for joy when something good happens to their teams and vocalize their frustrations when something bad happens.

In contrast to old school bettors, new school bettors see the sports book as a place for fun and excitement and express this sentiment in their actions. They choose to release the energy that the risk and rewards of sports gambling creates, rather than keeping it bottled up. New school bettors understand that as long as they do not directly interfere with the experience of other gamblers then they are within their right to have a little fun. Thus, new school bettors turn their time at the sports book into a social event. For instance, at the La Mesa Sports Book, every Sunday during the NFL season, a group of approximately ten new schoolers, mainly African American and Hispanic men in their

mid-twenties, always occupied the first two rows of the personal televisions. Each of them wore different NFL jerseys and during the games the guys would needle one another as the games played out.

Old school bettors viewed the group's behavior as offensive, because the new schoolers violated almost every old school code. These new schoolers were boisterous and visible, not business-like in the old school sense. The new school group had their fun, but also maintained respect for the privacy of other patrons. Every member of the group was friendly to other bettors and was also conscious of not directly affecting others experience in the sports book. For old schoolers, however, the mere presence of new schoolers was a distraction. Thus, while the new school code stands in sharp contrast to the old school style, new schoolers do not intend these differences to express defiance or disrespect to old schoolers.

New school style is, in part, a product of the new sports book. Before casinos reframed sports book as entertainment spaces, they were isolated in the corners of casinos as afterthoughts with few comforts and conveniences. This changed in the late 1970's, beginning with the race and sports book at the Stardust Hotel and Casino on the strip. With the help of Lefty Rosenthal, the Stardust designed a sports book that was larger and more accessible to bettors. The Stardust, in essence, turned their sports book into an attraction, which soon influenced other major casinos, such as Caesar's Palace, the Mirage, and the Las Vegas Hilton to rethink how they viewed their sports books. Instead of tucking them away, each casino brought their sports book out in the open to attract patrons.

All of these major casino sports books were built for the purpose of offering far more than just sports betting. The sports book was reconceived as an entertainment space for drinking, carousing, eating, and other pursuits in addition to sports betting. Art Manteris (1991), the visionary behind the Las Vegas Hilton Superbook explained the attraction of his design. “I have called it the ultimate sports bar, but perhaps that’s an understatement. One doesn’t need Stolichnaya or an exchange of astrological signs to find stimulation at the SuperBook” (p. 1). In the opening of his book, *SuperBookie: Inside Las Vegas Sports book Gambling*, Manteris requests the reader to take a stroll with him as he points out the finer details of what makes the Hilton Race and Sports Book a Superbook, instead of the typical run-of-the-mill sports book.

The La Mesa Sports Book has a grill so bettors do not have to leave for food. Patrons can easily access drinks at either the bar attached to the lounge in the back of the sports book or by ordering from the several cocktail waitresses assigned to the sports book. Moreover, there is usually plenty of comfortable seating for friends to hangout. Personal televisions dot the space, allowing bettors to stay and watch their own games by themselves or with a few friends. The La Mesa Sports Book encourages bettors to make it their sportswatching space with all the vociferous rooting and carousing that comes along with it. New school bettors reflect this change.

Like old school pros and recreational bettors like Charlie and George, new school bettors also include pros and recreationals. I use Drew, a new schooler professional, and David, a new school recreational bettor, to develop my description of the new school code of conduct.

Drew is a 32-year-old Caucasian of about six-foot with a thick build. He came to Las Vegas in 2005 to develop his chosen career as a professional poker player. Drew began playing online poker in Utah and soon became so adept at the game that he quickly earned more money than at his bartending job. He soon quit bartending to focus on poker and moved to Las Vegas to be closer to the action.

Drew's move was financially successful, but poker, like any job, soon became a grind. Drew said the pressure of needing to play poker as much as possible in order to pay the bills became tiresome. As a result, he eventually lost the joy he had when he first started playing. Drew gravitated to sports book as a fun escape from poker. Sports betting also appeals to him because once he makes the bets, he then sits back and watches the games among his sports book friends. He does not miss the constant concentration for hours that professional poker requires.

Like all professionals Drew bets thousands of dollars. As the saying goes, you have to bet big to win big, and professionals need big wins for betting to work as their sole source of income. Also like all professionals, Drew spends a lot of time analyzing betting lines, team lineups, statistics, and other information. But, this is where the similarities end between new school professionals like Drew and old school professionals like Charlie.

In contrast to old school pros who keep a low-profile in the sports book by staying in the VIP section and keeping to themselves, Drew prefers to hangout on the main floor of the sports book with other regulars, even though he is a member of the VIP section. Old school regulars are the sports book loners. Drew, like other new school pros, has a tight-knit group of friends that he hangs with in the sports book. Not all of Drew's sports



book friends wager as much money as he does, but sports betting is their main source of income and they are clearly outside the group of La Mesa recreational bettors.

New school pros are distinguishable by more than the amount of their wagers. At age 32, Drew is one of the older new school professionals. Most new school pros are between 21 and 35 years of age and few are married. Their minimal family commitments mean that new school pros have a lot of free time to hang out in the sports book and more disposable income for bets and beers. New school pros see sports betting as more than a job, it is also a social event where they relax, connect with friends, and establish new connections. New school pros not only come to the sports book as professional bettors but also as fans. On game days, new school pros wear jerseys of their favorite teams. Such garb is blasphemous to old schoolers who shun all appearance of an emotional rooting connection for any team or player. Sports betting is a dispassionate pursuit for the old school pro, and they avoid all allusions to fun and games.

New school bettors are also boisterous. They talk loudly as they banter about games and taunt each other about their betting wins and losses. New school pros do not hold back their emotions. Drew has no problem in expressing frustration when he loses or cheering loudly when he wins. This is not to say that Drew and other new school pros see gambling as all fun and games. To be sure, sports gambling is their business. But, they also see it as entertainment and clearly they make it a point to have fun while they are doing it.

The camaraderie among the new school pros also lends to the instrumental goal of winning wagers. I spoke frequently with Drew and his friend Mike, a small, African American man who although is in his mid-thirties has a boyish-look to him that would

allow him to pass as someone in his early-twenties. These conversations revealed how new school pros at the La Mesa Sports Book work together to improve their chances of placing winning bets. The La Mesa new schoolers that Drew hangs with each have betting specialties where they concentrate much of their research. For instance, Mike combines professional sports betting with a side job for an online sports betting company to whom he provides statistical analyses of specific games. Mike's specialty is small conference college football and basketball. He analyzes matchups in conferences such as the Ivy League or Northeast Conference. His analyses help him place high odds of return bets on games that get little action among sports book patrons compared to games by popular teams from the biggest conferences. Because these games draw so little action, sports book odds-makers spend less time on their own analyses and often set betting lines that, for Mike and other sharp pros, allow them to make high-odds wagers. As Mike said "as long as a guy does more homework than the book, a bettor can make what he calls easy money, all day long."

Mike and Drew work as a team with three other La Mesa new school pros to research these high odds games, share the information to improve their winning wagers. They see this teamwork as a crucial part of their betting business, but once the bets are made they enjoy the games as sports fans and see the La Mesa as their space for fun.

David is a new school recreational bettor who visits the sports book to hang with friends; drink beer, watch sports, and lay a little bit of money on the line. David—who is tall, Caucasian with light-red hair and in his mid-twenties—and his friends bet modestly, seldom wager more than \$20 per game, although I have watched some put \$200 on a big game they felt strongly about. Like old school recreational bettors, the new schoolers do

not make large wagers because betting is not their main purpose for coming to the sports book. They do not need the money as income; a bet is a way to add a thrill to an already enjoyable time to watch sports with friends. A big bet and a bad loss (meaning losing the big money bet) are too stressful and would take the fun out of the experience.

David and his group of friends are all young professionals, in their mid-to-late-twenties, who share a passion for sports. Their primary purpose for coming to the sports book is to socialize with friends. They use the sports book as a place to hangout and use sports betting as a way to heighten their interest in games. The mutual betting experience also forms a basis for camaraderie and fellow-feeling among the group as their (small) fortunes rise and fall with the ebb and flow of the games. Everyone wants to win their bets, but it is not the driving force behind the wagers. A winning bet in this group is the “icing on the cake”, so to speak, of an already enjoyable social gathering.

Like Drew and the new school professionals, David and his friends also display the allegiances to their favorite teams by wearing hats, jerseys, and other team apparel. Displaying team allegiances also helps to lubricate introductions and conversations with others in the sports book as patrons comment on their team’s prospects or rivals send good faith barbs each other’s way.

New school recreational bettors have no reservations about expressing their emotions. They whoop and dance in victory and yell out in the agony of defeat. They cheer when their teams are winning and jeer when they are losing. They needle one another for either winning or losing a bet.

The attitudes and actions of new school recreational and professional bettors reflect broader cultural shifts in the sports book toward creating an entertainment zone in

the casino that revolves around sports, fandom, and, of course, betting. The new schooler's extroverted attitudes contrast sharply with old school bettors who either do not see or fail to accept the shifts in sports book culture. Old schoolers see new schoolers as disrespectful to their traditional notions about betting conduct.

For now, old school and new school bettors co-exist in an uneasy tension regarding the norms and etiquette of the La Mesa Sports Book culture. It seems that only the old school bettors are aware of this tension, however. They bet and watch the games while seething about the conduct of new schoolers, while the new schoolers bet and have their fun too.

### Summary

In this chapter, I have extended Martinez's categorization of sports book patrons based on observations of the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book. The social world of the La Mesa Sports Book is composed of three categories of regulars: professional, pathological, and recreational bettors. A distinct hierarchy exists among all visitors to the sports book with regulars holding high status and new bettors and outsiders holding little among the patrons. I also describe a divergence in styles among subgroups of regulars. Old school regulars long for the early days of the sports book when bettors demonstrated a rugged individualism and business-like manner as they played the games. New school bettors shun the introverted ways of the old school cadre, and seek more than betting for business in their sports book experience (see diagram 5.3). These stylistic differences reflect some changes in the purpose of the sports book. As the sports book becomes

more central to the casino entertainment experiences, younger patrons use the space for extroverted fun and socializing.

In the next chapter I will discuss the three levels of relationships found in the social world of the sports book: microwave relationships, strangerships, and friendships. Specifically, I first discuss the importance in establishing a positive social identity. I explain how regulars create social order through the establishment of social norms, written and unwritten rules, exclusive language, and ritualistic behavior. This social order indoctrinates new bettors into learning how to look, sound, and act like a regular bettor, or at least be a perceived regular bettor, in order to become socially accepted by the established patrons of the environment. Next, I describe the characteristics of each relationship, the spaces in the sports book where these relationships are likely to be found, and how the relationships between bettors advance from one stage to the next.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE REGULAR

The social world of the sports book allows for social mobility and the development of social bonds across social strata created in the scene. However, for one to become a regular and form social connections with like bettors, a patron must learn not only the written rules of the scene, but the unwritten rules as well. This chapter introduces the different levels of relationships that bettors can potentially share with others. Moreover, this chapter explains that in order to navigate through these relationships one must learn the accepted language, social expectations, and even certain tricks to invite conversation.

#### The Evolution of a Sport Book Relationship

I sat in the La Mesa Sports Book and thought, “Wow! \$120, down the drain just like that; I am not even through the morning round games. This could be a long day.” It was 10 a.m. on the first Thursday of the NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament. The La Mesa Sports Book was packed and frenzied. To a sports book outsider, gambling at 10 a.m. on a weekday could seem odd. But in the social world of the sports book, this was one of the biggest days of the year and it would be odd not to be here. Groups of regulars, including my own, have begun their annual ritual—taking off from work on this Thursday and Friday to spend the days in the sports book betting and carousing as the games commence. The regulars look forward to it all year.

I look up at one of the eight screens directly in front of me, searching for a game on which I had wagered. I think, “Why in God’s name is Xavier [University] getting whipped by [the University of] Georgia?”

A few feet away, a man watches the same game and mutters aloud to no one in particular, “I don’t believe this shit, how can they let him score like that!?” Since I share in his pain, I take the bait and chime in, “I can’t believe this either, they’re nine point favorites, but playing like 9 point dogs.” As the game progresses we share in each other’s dismay and try to point out positive signs of a Xavier come back that could help us win our bet. Brian, is short, Caucasian and in his mid-to-late twenties, is part of a group of regulars, and he and I go back and forth from talking to the people at our separate tables to talking with each other about our mutual interest.

Suddenly, Xavier starts to make an unbelievable scoring run. We and the rest of the lounge respond with excitement. It’s clear that a lot of people have bet the game and are pulling for Xavier. The crowd grows louder and louder with each Xavier basket and Georgia turnover. Xavier ties the game. In most environments this would be the peak of excitement as who will win the game hangs in the balance. But sports book regulars see it differently. The spread on the game is minus nine for Xavier, which means that in wagering terms the teams are not tied until Xavier is ahead by nine points. So there is still a ways to go, and people are excited about Xavier’s momentum. Xavier scores again and Brian and I exchange high-fives. Both of our tables of regulars are shouting and cheering the team on. Three minutes remain in the game, but Xavier is only winning by five points. The energy in the sports book is equal parts excitement, tension, nervousness, and anxiety.

Then, suddenly with a minute left Xavier finally gets over the hump and moves ahead by 11 points. The go-ahead basket is greeted with a thunderous cheer from the sports book patrons. Those of us sitting in the lounge are now all on our feet. Xavier still needs to stop Georgia from getting the lead back under nine. Brian and I talk fervently about the different scenarios that will clinch the win for us. Finally, with just a few seconds left, a Xavier player is fouled while they are still up by eleven. We can now rest easy knowing that Xavier will win by more than nine points, cover the spread, and we will win our bets. The entire sports book seems to let out a collective sigh of relief. Brian turns to me and says, “That was frickin’ crazy, I thought for sure they were done.” I nod in agreement and reply, “Yeah, that game was about to ruin my morning parlay [betting ticket].” We both sit back down and I survey what just happened: we went on an intense emotional ride, filled with potential financial disappointment, to the height of excitement with the win and the chance to make some money. I feel as though I am coming down from some drug high as my heart is no longer beating out of my chest, but slowly returning to its normal pace.

Throughout the rest of the day, both mine and Brian’s group of regulars hang out together, bet more games, drink beer, and regale each other with our sports betting “war” stories. We ride similar emotional highs and lows with each game we bet during the weekend.

This scene is very familiar for sports book regulars and it raises many sociological questions, such as: How do bettors seem to connect so easily with other bettors? What are the elements of this scene that allows for social interaction between strangers to flow so easily? Why do some of these relationships begin and end quickly, while others



evolve into a more lasting bond? What is it about the excitement of games that brings bettors together? This chapter will answer these questions by examining the socialization process through which bettors go through and the three types of relationships that are found in the social scene of the sports book.

In Chapter 5, I explained that the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book is composed of regulars: professional, pathological, and recreational bettors. There are also stylistic differences among regulars, which I divide into two categories: new school and old school bettors. In this chapter, I describe the phased process of becoming a La Mesa regular. Specifically, I explain how sportsbook participants build short-term and long term relationships. I characterize the phases by types of relationships that move from short-term intense connections over a point of mutual interest, such as the outcome of a game and wager, to more sustained forms of social connection that draw regulars together in more meaningful ways. I characterize three types of relationships that vary in their qualities of emotional and social connectedness: *microwave relationships*, *strangerships*, and *friendships*.<sup>10</sup>

### Becoming a Regular

My interpretation of the sports book environment is rooted in the symbolic interaction (SI) perspective on social life. The SI perspective examines the human capacity to form social groups, create meaning, and coordinate actions on the basis of

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<sup>10</sup> Since the VIP section is unavailable to other bettors, this chapter focuses on the social interaction of those regulars on the main floor of the sports book, which consists of mostly recreational bettors. However, I did have a limited experience in the VIP section, which allows me to provide some insight into the social interaction and the types of relationships that are established within the confines of the sectioned-off area.

those meanings (Blumer, 1969). Coordinated activity constitutes an interaction order comprised of formal and informal norms, boundaries, and roles.

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

Creating a positive social identity relies on impression management. Managing the impression one gives off requires attention to cues about the type of person, attitudes, and actions valued in a group. The group judges strangers by inferring from their actions how well (or not) they “fit” within the norms of the group. As Goffman (1963a; also 1963b) explains,

The routines of social intercourse in established settings allow us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought. When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his ‘social identity.’ (p. 2)

The sports book is a space where the development of a positive social identity is essential to becoming a fully accepted participant in the scene. Exhibiting qualities that convey a negative social identity dissuades regulars from engaging in social interaction, and walls off the person from entry into the group. To gain acceptance from regulars, an outsider must pay close attention to the behavioral cues of others and mimic those qualities they estimate regulars will interpret positively and avoid those that draw negative attention. And, if one is unaware of the existence of social expectations within a group or scene then they are susceptible to violating a norm and creating a negative social identity.

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

Becoming a La Mesa regular first requires learning the positive and negative qualities of the regular. The bettor attempts to display the positive qualities while masking the negative ones. The process is not always smooth and interactants make ongoing adjustments to manage impressions in ways that bring acceptance by regulars. And, once membership as a regular is confirmed by other members, the regular must sustain and affirm that membership each time they participate in the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book.

Becoming a regular is fraught with pitfalls. Green bettors learning the “rules of the social world” are constantly at risk of making the kinds of gaffes that create negative

impressions on regulars who may cut off all routes into the group. These gaffes include clear displays that show their lack of betting knowledge or attitudes that contrast with the regular's "style." A few gaffes of this type may or may not render the green bettor as a "non-person" in the eyes of regulars, but they always put the green bettor at risk of social disgrace and ostracism from which they can never recover.

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

#### Microwave Relationships

According to Gergen (1991), *microwave relationship* describes interactions that "command tense heat and immediate provision of nourishment" (pp. 65-66).

Microwave relations capture well the initial instances of interaction between strangers in the sports book; their exchanges usually involve intense, fast-paced transfers

of knowledge about sport, betting, and personal experiences. It is during these initial interactions that often make or break a green bettor's chances to become a regular. Regulars observe their social cues and make decisions on their sports knowledge, betting savvy and social style about whether or not they will proceed further with the interaction. Often, regulars quickly disengage because the strangers do not meet their standards.

Microwave interactions happen often in the La Mesa Sports Book because the spatial arrangements and common activities facilitate frequent interactions among those present. Specifically, the La Mesa Sports Book offers a number of different spaces that promote social interaction. The different areas of the sports book have their own unique way of encouraging social interaction. For instance, the open area between the counter and seating areas bring people together in close proximity to obtaining betting sheets, place wagers, collect winnings, look at the odds board, or watch a game closely on the monitors. This is the busiest space in the sports book and there are many opportunities for brief encounters with other bettors.

The common interests and activities among sports book patrons also creates a built-in "ice-breaker" that allows even the most green sports bettor a chance to initiate conversations with regular bettors. Sports, whether as a topic of fan or betting interest, are a common denominator that is the common catalyst of conversation. Anyone can raise a point about a game on the screen or the odds board that others will have opinions on. It's what happens after the initial spark of conversation that determines the length and depth of the interaction, and thus the odds of two patrons connecting in ways that lead them into a strangership.

## Fishing

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

Responses to fishing vary from quick knee-jerk reactions with no intent to sustain the interaction to thoughtful responses that lays the ground for further conversation. I am interested in the latter instance. For example, in one of many instances I had, a middle-aged man I had never seen before approached while I milled in the “upfront area” between the betting counter and the seats. As we watched the end of a close baseball game between the Mets and Phillies, the man, with his eyes fixed on the game, says to no one in particular, “How in the hell did the Phillies come back?” I respond, without hesitation and with my eyes fixed on the game, as well, “The Mets bullpen totally caved. The Phillies kept getting big hits and the Mets bullpen could not get an out.” The guy replies, “That is hardly a surprise. If they make the playoffs they are not getting out of the first round.” As a result of this initial exchange, we talked baseball and betting for the remainder of the game.

Our interaction was relatively brief, but we both gleaned important information about the other. It was apparent that we both shared a similar level of knowledge about sports and sports betting. We began finishing each other's statements, agreed with each other's theories, and had similar betting stories, because we were able to add to each other's assertions, theories, and stories. We both easily inserted anecdotes into the conversation that displayed our level of expertise. Had either one of us found difficulty in the conversation topics, the interaction would have lost its momentum. Given that we impressed one another with an adequate level of sports knowledge and betting lingo, we began to seek out each other with in the sports book together and this initial microwave relationship eventually transformed into a strangership, of which I will talk about more below.

#### Emotional Energy

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

Durkheim first noted the sociological significance of emotionally-charged experiences that connect people with one another in a group setting. Writing about religious rituals, Durkheim (1965 [1912]) identified a "sort of electricity" found amongst

groups during a heightened state of excitement. This “*esprit de corps*” generates a sense of camaraderie, solidarity, and fellow-feeling among participants.

Randall Collins (2004) recently elaborated Durkheim’s point, arguing that entire social worlds may be held together through the emotional energy that is generated through participation in social rituals. Emotional energy creates feelings of confidence, courage, and boldness to take initiative among its members. Emotional energy also “has a powerful motivating effect upon the individual; whoever has experienced this kind of moment wants to repeat it” (p. 39). For Collins, emotional energy is the underlying mechanism that sustains our webs of affiliation. We seek to create and recreate those experiences that provide us with positive emotional energy. We organize our lives into chains of interaction rituals that offer the sort of emotional energy that appeal to our social needs.

The sports book environment offers a social space with emotionally-charged informal rituals and identity markers that are repeated over and over. Each game and each wager has the potential for an exciting finish and the ritualistic activities that accompany the event. Fans and bettors rooting for the same outcome are easily identified and will often create a temporary community of affinity during the event. They bond as they whoop and holler, high-five, and back slap while rooting on the team or outcome they desire. They cheer together when they are on top and groan in agony when a play or finish goes against them.<sup>11</sup> Most of the members in this temporary collective do not

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<sup>11</sup> Live sporting events are able to cultivate emotional energy, because each game has an ability to generate its own drama. Generally speaking, absent of a tie (in those sports that have ties), every game ends with there being a winner and a loser. As a result, according to Ferguson (1981) sporting events give spectators and fans an opportunity to experience a range of euphoric and dysphoric emotions. It is those euphoric emotions (e.g., celebrating, cheering, joking, and laughter) that Marcotte (1989) argues are essential for a society to survive. Emotional involvement in sporting events establishes communal relationships by giving fans a sense that they have an active role in game (Lancaster, 1997). The sports



know one another and most will never talk directly, but some will. These moments of interaction, lubricated by the emotional energy of their common ritualistic acts, create microwave interactions among strangers.

Moments that elicit emotional energy are catalysts for microwave relationships as those moments of excitement that are often found in the sports book give bettors opportunities to survey which other bettors are on their betting side. During these moments of excitement, bettors gravitate to those who they recognize as being emotionally attached to the same game, regardless if they know them or not. The emotional energy gives everyone a shot of confidence to talk to a stranger who appears to be on their side. This allows the bettor to share in the ecstasy of victory or cope together in the face of defeat.

#### From Microwave Interactions to Strangerships

To move from a microwave interaction to a strangership with a La Mesa regular requires that the green bettor or non-regular displays attributes that the regular perceives in positive ways. There is not much time to do this as microwave interactions are short and intense. Each participant in the interaction usually only has a few minutes (or even seconds) to display their level of expertise.

The move from a microwave interaction to a strangership often rests on the interactional agility of the interactants. By interactional agility I mean the ability of the

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book offers additional opportunities to be a winner and loser beyond interest as a team fan. The wager itself creates temporary fans interested in one or the other team's victory, albeit usually by a specific number of points.

For instance, recall the opening story of this chapter which described my interaction with another regular during a college basketball game. Noteworthy in this about experience—and innumerable other experiences like it that I observed and participated in—is that without placing a wager on the game, I would have had little interest in the outcome could care less about the two team. However, placing a wager on the game made me a Xavier fan, for a time, and as long as they won by 9 points or more.

actor to assess and respond to the other's perceived expectations; the continuation of interaction rest primarily on the interactional agility of the least knowledgeable bettor in the interaction. The more green the bettor, the more complex their work is to give off an impression sufficiently positive to sustain the interaction. Most seasoned regulars do not put up with green bettors for very long.

Specifically, each bettor must pay attention to each other's language (or vocabulary), mannerisms, behavior, and even storytelling. If one feels the other is not receiving him in a positive manner, he must recover quickly by making adjustments to any attributes that he may believe convey a negative quality. A regular will usually have little difficulty in making adjustments "on the fly," but a green bettor must rapidly glean some features regulars expect in order to hide some of his inexperience or naïveté.

Before discussing strangerships, I must also note that managing impressions and adhering to social norms extends beyond microwave interactions. Regular bettors take notice of people who violate social norms well before interaction occurs. Thus, a green bettor must also be self aware of his behavior in order to avoid stigma and social isolation. For instance, regulars despise green bettors who do not "do their homework" before stepping up to the betting window. All regulars expect each bettor already know how they are going to bet before they step into the betting line—on who or what will the wager be? What number has the sports book assigned to a particular team? How much will the bet be? And, finally, bettors must have their money counted and out to hand the teller. Regulars follow this code to ensure that the lines move quickly so that everyone has a chance to get their bets in before the games begin. A green bettor who waits to choose his bets at the counter will make the ultimate mistake, because not only will the

bettors in line become angry, but they will avoid any association with that person in the future.

The fallout for this violation is related to the conditions at the time the bet is being made. If bettors behind them are in no rush then they will keep quiet, but take notice. However, if a green bettor approaches the counter without doing his homework on an NFL Sunday morning when betting activity is generally the heaviest, then the bettors will not suppress their displeasure. On one particular NFL Sunday morning, with only a few minutes left to bet, a green bettor made this mistake and was shouted at with insults and threats from those behind him in line. Tyrone, a regular at the La Mesa told me that he even saw a fight start over the same scenario at another casino.

Another primary violation is asking a stranger how much they wagered. Social norms dictate that you can ask a bettor who they bet on and how many points they got or gave up, but never how much they wagered. The only ways this information is obtained is either by the bettor offering the amount wagered without solicitation or by simply showing the other person his ticket.

Also, regulars tend to keep to themselves while they are waiting in line to place a bet. There is usually little talking as the bettors prepare to risk their money (and ultimately their pride) on their games of choice. This betting ritual compares to the social rituals that a player might have before he prepares for a game, and any disruption to their concentration can lead to hostility.

If both bettors make it through microwave interactions relatively unscathed (i.e., they have pulled off positive impressions of self with a regular) they may be invited into

a strangership, which is the most common relationship among La Mesa regulars. Below, I discuss this next stage in becoming a La Mesa Sports Book regular.

### Strangerships

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

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

Strangerships reflect Simmel’s (1949) relational category of *sociability*, which refers to associations based purely on feelings of “togetherness” in the company of

others. Sociability centers around a particular recreational activity, such as card-playing, music, or sports (p. 255). The interaction between the participants is playful, leaving out any serious talk. Thus, little more than the basic desire to socialize establishes sociability among individuals. The strangership concept captures the type of relationship that arises out of sociability.

La Mesa strangerships tend to be found in spaces that I call destination places. Destination places are areas where bettors look to settle in after wagering to watch their games and plan their next bets. Destination spaces in the La Mesa include the upstairs lounge, the VIP area, the personal television area, and the lounge chairs on the main floor of the sports book. Bettors use these spaces to sit down next to each other and carouse. These spaces are where regulars turn microwave relationships into strangerships.

Regulars learn about one another by hanging out together in the sports book, but their knowledge of the other remains rather thin in strangerships. Regulars might mention in passing their relationship status (i.e., married, divorced, has a girlfriend, dating, or single) and possibly their employment status, but even these personal tidbits are rare in their discussions. That the regulars share few personal facts should not be surprising, given that men do little of this generally (Eshel, Sharabany, & Friedman, 1998; Miller, 1983; Rubin, 1986).

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

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

#### Humor and Insults in Strangerships

Regulars use humor and insults to create an in-group whose members know that putdowns or insults mean something other than its literal interpretation. As Kaplan explains, “Male friends may develop a communication system that they can employ in public, in the context of their daily life, while still maintaining a sense of exclusivity. It entails the juxtaposition of semipublic performance and private meaning” (p. 577). The friendly banter with other regulars is a way to keep the mood light while solidifying connections among group members. For instance, a young, Caucasian regular in his mid-twenties approached a group of older regulars in the lounge who were looking over their wagers for the morning’s college football games. The young regular said loudly:

**Young Regular (YR):** What’s up ladies?

**Old Regular 1 (OR 1):** Well, well, well, look at this loser.

**Old Regular 2 (OR 2):** Where the heck have you been?

**YR:** They stuck me on swing shift, so how’s it looking today?

**OR 1:** Bob took the Dolphins/Patriots on the over; I think he is full of it. I took the Jets to cover; they have been a good surprise this year. So what are you looking at?

**YR:** I am thinking the Lions to cover, I got a feeling that the Bucs and Garcia are going to choke, that west coast offense is not doing them any good, I am going to put 2 bills down.

**OR 2:** (*sarcastically*) Boy, you’ve got a set on you.

The dialogue of put downs might seem harsh in a more open and public forum, yet among the regulars the insults are meant to be light and welcoming, a warm greeting of sorts. It is an expression of camaraderie because the regulars are comfortable enough to put each other down, or to attack the way they wager without seriousness or worry of retribution. It becomes almost a badge of honor to be put down by a group of regular bettors, because that means the individual is in good with them.

The use of put downs or negative jargon among regulars tightens the social bonds between them, because the jabs create and sustain a set of shared meaning that endear them to one another. However, it all depends on how familiar the bettors are with each other. For example, if a few bettors are standing around and are unfamiliar with each other and one bettor calls the other a “cooler” or a “small hitter” it is likely that the receiving party will be offended. Yet, on the other hand, if a few regulars who hang together are standing around and one is called a “cooler” or a “small hitter” the men can laugh it off, because it is meant as a friendly jab not to be taken seriously.

#### Physical Affection in Strangerships

Another way that regulars tighten social bonds with each other is through physical affection. Bettors in strangerships use physical contact to publicly express their affection for one another. The sports book environment is a highly homosocial environment—men dominant the scene. And men are often reluctant to express affection to one another in a direct way. Hugging, for instance, is not a normative act of affection among La Mesa regulars. As a result, regulars are limited in the ways in which they express themselves physically with one another. As Kaplan (2006) discusses:

The general frame for expressing such contact is in the context of instrumental action, for instance during work or sports, when the men's involvement with each other has an outward focus apparently extending beyond their relationship in itself. Such circumstances, especially at distinct times of stress or victory, offer a legitimate context for physical contact and one that may explicitly communicate a message of support, intimacy, and pleasure. (pp. 582-583)

The "distinct time of stress or victory" that Kaplan refers to occurs in the sports book when emotional energy is at its peak. The environment helps to facilitate expressions of affection between bettors by creating legitimate excuses to make physical contact. However, since the sports book is a highly masculinized environment, physical affection is limited to handshakes, backslapping, or pounding fists. It is common that during these heightened moments of energy that complete strangers would be watching a game together and when a big play happens they will high-five each other without hesitation. This is common for me as it is for any other bettor. For instance, during the brief period that my Detroit Lions were winning, I was hanging out with a bettor that I hung out a number of times before, Tom. Tom is Caucasian, around six-feet tall and appears to be in his early thirties. Tom and I both had money riding on the Lions who were six-point favorites over the Denver Broncos. The Lions were winning, but in terms of the spread the Broncos were within reach of covering. Then, midway through the fourth quarter, all of sudden the Lions returned a fumble for a touchdown and everyone in the sports book who had money on the Lions went crazy and started clapping and yelling.



Tom and I shared in this enjoyment and high-fived. He then slapped me on the back and over the din of the sports book said loudly, “Man, I love this.”

The physical contact of the handshakes, back slapping, or fist pounding may appear to be dispassionate and inconsequential expressions of affection, but it is in fact much more sentimental than one would assume. These contacts between men create a sense of affiliation and connectedness among participants. Slapping hands or grabbing shoulders may not seem intimate, but since men are restricted in the ways in which they can express themselves physically in public these minor gestures can be seen as a form of public intimacy. They express their emotions through touch within the limits that are socially accepted in the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book. It is not so much the style of touching that bonds bettors but it is the simple act of touching and its acceptance that solidifies the connections.

#### Buying Drinks as a Sign of Affection

Another way that bettors strengthen social bonds is by buying drinks for one another. Enjoying a drink while watching an event is part of the sports book experience and to help encourage the purchasing of beverages the La Mesa Sports Book offers drink vouchers for every twenty dollars that are spent on a wager. The drink vouchers are not necessarily a major gift, but it provides an incentive to stick around and have at least one drink; thus keeping bettors and their money in the casino for a while longer. However, for most bettors drinking and sports gambling go hand-in-hand, and just like social norms guide the interaction between bettors while they bet, social norms also guide bettors when hanging out and drinking in the sports book.

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

Strangerships are the most common relationships among regulars. By reaching this relational level with others, regulars acknowledge acceptance of one another into the group; their personality, style, knowledge, and betting prowess has passed the unwritten competency test. A latent function of strangerships is that while hanging out bettors can discuss betting strategies and pool their knowledge together to determine if a potential bet is wise, or not. The more bettors spend time hanging out with one another the more they are able to establish deeper social bonds and create a sense of camaraderie and empathy. And, often, the better they become at laying successful wagers on the games.

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

### Friendships

If strangerships are free from serious talk and shared personal information, then friendships are those relationships between bettors that entail those qualities. To clearly

identify what the term “friendship” exactly means is a daunting task, as sociological research, over time, has provided both narrow and broad definitions of friendship.

Rawlins (1992) best explains the intricacies of such research,

Actual discourse within and about friendships appears to blend moral and tactical meanings in constituting a range of relationships that runs the gamut from private to public scope and responsibility, and from idealistic to realistic impulse. Thus the word friend itself has multiple meanings, including moral ones, and can be employed tactically to reflect changing social circumstances and various definitions of self and others. (p. 13)

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

minimizes the risk of exploitation in the relationship (Fiebert & Fiebert, 1969; Kurth, 1970).

Mutual involvement is a key element, because it pertains to the strengthening of social bonds between individuals and what Rawlins refers to as a construction of a shared social reality. Rawlins further explains that the shared social reality evolves out of and matures through “mutual acceptance and support, trust and confidence, dependability and assistance, and discussion of thoughts and feelings” (p. 12). Lastly, friendship involves the expression of positive feelings, caring, and mutual concern for one another, which are the foundation of companionship. However, as Rawlins clarifies, these affective feelings are distinguished from sexual or romantic feelings. Sexual and romantic feelings include implications of possessiveness and exclusivity that friendships do not.

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

I observed friendships in a variety of ways. Conversations revealed regulars who met outside of the sports book. For example, Frank and Donnie often spoke of activities

they participated in together with their wives. Drew and Mike often talked about their nights out on the town and upcoming plans for future vacations. Even Charlie talked about going out to dinners with fellow VIP members and their wives. Personally, I hung out with a number of members who would invite those they felt close with over to their homes to watch the Super Bowl or major boxing or Ultimate Fighting Championship fights.

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

Some of the tightest friendships appear to be found not only on the main floor of the sports book, but also in the VIP area. In my visit to the VIP lounge as Charlie's guest, I repeatedly listened as VIP regulars recounted personal information about the other. As Charlie introduced me to a few of the VIPs and always added extra information when talking about him, such as where they are from, where they work, or something about their wives. When I talked to some of these VIPs they also did the same. Among other things, the very nature of the VIP space where regulars are confined to close

proximity appears to increase interaction and, thus, the odds for friendship formation go up, in contrast to the wide open space of the sports book's main floor. Also, the mutual status of VIPs at the top of the hierarchy among sports book regulars contributes a sense of commonality and camaraderie that sets the stage for fast friendships among them.

### Summary

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

The next chapter will discuss how the sports book is an ideal example of what is called a "third place." The sports book is a homosocial environment that is male-

dominated and highly masculine. It is an environment that not only exudes male culture, but the social interactions found within the social world are used to reinforce male dominance. Although, perhaps, it is unintentional that the environment is controlled by men, it is an obvious characteristic of the social world of the sports book environment that has yet to be explored. The following chapter will delve into the essential components that create this third place for men.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE SPORTS BOOK AS A THIRD PLACE

*The sports book is like a boy's tree house. Girls have the ability to climb up there, but they shouldn't. Men act differently amongst men. When a woman is present, we can't be ourselves because we have to watch what we say and do, which is no fun.*

Derrick, La Mesa Regular

The La Mesa Sport Book hosts a complex social world of regulars who create a community of affinity in a space typically understood to be devoted solely to the instrumental act of individual wagering. This chapter deepens this understanding by explaining how the La Mesa mirrors what Ray Oldenburg has conceptualized as a “third place.”

The La Mesa regulars use the sports book as not only a place to make bets, but as a sanctuary to escape the daily stresses of home and work. Drawing from Oldenburg's explication of the social dimensions of third places, I explain that the sports book is a *neutral setting* where none of the visitors have to play host and bettors can come and go as they please. The sports book is also a *leveler* where a person's status outside of the sports book does not translate into his status inside the sports book environment.<sup>12</sup> Light, playful, and friendly *conversation* is the main activity among regulars in the La Mesa Sports Book. The sports book is also *accommodating* to all schedules and provides food and drink services to its patrons. The La Mesa Sports Book is a *low profile* part of the casino, nestled into a corner with no real prominence. The combination of these characteristics encourages the establishment of regulars

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, a high-profile attorney may have status in the greater community, but if he is an uninformed bettor then within the environment his status is low as regulars would consider him “green.”



There is even more to this picture, however. The La Mesa is not a third place for everyone. It is distinctly a male hang out. With the exception of the cocktail waitresses and a few employees, men are main inhabitants of this social world. I was drawn to understand the gendered nature of this environment. This chapter focuses on the subject of male dominance in the La Mesa Sports Book. Specifically, I explain how men create and sustain a defacto males-only space, the character of their gendered experiences, and what they value in this homosocial environment.

I became interested in gender differences after observing male dominance in the sports book. The dearth of women in the La Mesa Sports Book raises a number of questions about gender in this social world. Women wager on sports in the La Mesa, but they never stay. Why? After all, the sports book is formally open to *all* genders. And, why are males so attracted to the sports book? Is it *because* it's a male only third place?

### Conceptualizing "Third Place"

The idea of a third place originates from David Seamon's *A Geography of the Lifeworld* (1979), where he discusses places that create a sense of "at-homeness" or "homes away from home." According to Seamon, homes away from home are places where there are regular patrons who have a sense of ownership and control over the setting, they express themselves freely, and there is a feeling of warmth arising out of the friendliness, support, and mutual concern among the regulars. According to Oldenburg, in *The Great Good Place* (1997) the concept of a "third place" describes public spaces that are used for informal gatherings where participants regularly meet, bond, and create community. Oldenburg's interest in third places arose out of his

findings that the advancement of technology has created fewer and fewer forms of informal, face-to-face public social connections, limiting bonds that are essential to the community life. As a result, Oldenburg argues that society must cultivate third places to fulfill our human needs and desires for community.

A third place derives its name from being a place of refuge that is outside of both the home—the first place—and the workplace—the second place. It is the third place that one would visit on a regular basis to escape the everyday stresses created by the other two places (i.e., home and work) by sharing in the company of others with like interests and whom you enjoy.

Third places do not have to be homosocial environments where one gender dominates the space. For instance, coffee shops, country clubs, or recreation centers can be third places that may have comparable numbers of male and female regulars. However, Oldenburg emphasizes that some of the most enjoyable third places for regulars tend to be those with same-gender associations. In fact, he argues that gender segregation is a main reason why third places are created and persist. An example he cites is the beauty parlor for women and the barber shop for men. Each setting is a place where women can socialize with other women and men can socialize with other men.

#### Third Place Research

The majority of recent studies on third places examine their function and role in community building in the wake of research that suggests a decline in community in modern society. The most notable recent study on the decline of community is Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000). Putnam found that the decline in opportunities and available space for civic engagement has led to the erosion of American communitarian

spirit that peaked in the 1950's. In fact, Putnam talks extensively about how casino slot spaces create individualized gambling opportunities which isolate gamblers from one another (pp. 104-105). Putnam argues that social bonds created in collective activities are essential to not only the health of the individual, but to the health of communities at large. As a result, current research suggests that third places are not only important to society in terms of how they facilitate social interaction and create social bonds, which are necessary for community building, but are also restorative spaces in that members look towards to escape and cope with everyday stressors.

The research on the types of third places is wide-ranging and disparate. Cheang (2002) conducted an ethnographic study of a naturally occurring group of older adults who frequented a fast-food restaurant. Cheang, mainly through participant observations, discovered several emerging themes in this third place. The research suggests that: (1) the older adults used the restaurant to congregate with their buddies in order "to play"; (2) the group continually creates shared moments of joy and laughter; (3) group membership within the third place provides the older adults with the structure, meaning, and opportunities to engage in forms of personal expression; and (4) the group members are sociable, but members choose not to exchange personal or confidential information in order to keep the mood light, which in turn, limits quality of social support participants can offer to one another. One group member explains, "I think it's good we all mind our own business . . . if they tell me too much, then it becomes awkward because it's like we now become their shrink" (p. 316). Cheang concludes by highlighting the fact that these older adults created their own third place, which gave them all opportunities to play, laugh, and receive positive appraisals on a regular basis.

Gulwadi (2006) examined the places in which teachers go to in order to cope with the everyday stresses created by the job. The study surveyed seventy-one elementary school teachers in Chicago to explore the everyday places in their milieu that they use for restorative coping strategies. The research found a wide-range of places that teachers used to cope with stress such as home, nature, city places, church, and third places.

Teachers with high-frequency interpersonal stress sought social contact the most; however, those teachers that had pleasant, supportive families used the home environment as a place to satisfy their need for social connections, instead of third places. On the other hand, those teachers that experience home-related stress, on top of occupational-related stress, sought out third places to fulfill their desire for social contact. Third places like cafés were found to attract those types of teachers, because they were “lightly social” environments that have little demands and allows for teachers to choose whether or not to initiate social contact. Gulwadi calls for a need to explore possible spaces on school property that can facilitate restorative experiences.

Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell (2007) studied the virtual world of Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOGs) to examine whether or not the social spaces of the virtual world fit the existing definitions and characteristics of sociable environments found in the physical world. Specifically, the research applies Simmel’s notion of sociability and Oldenburg’s “third place” concept to explore the sociable nature of these online spaces. The authors make an important distinction between MMOGs and traditional videogames. MMOGs require players to exchange information and collaborate with one another in real-time to discuss game strategy. The research focuses

on player-to-player interactions based on several months of ethnographic observations and computerized data collection. The researchers found, based on their results, that the virtual world of MMOGs provides “promising environments that could be designed to replace or, at the very least, supplement the places of the physical world.”

Glover and Parry (2009) examined the therapeutic functions of a place called *Gilda's Club of Greater Toronto*, a non-institutional setting where people living with cancer join together to build physical, social, and emotional support as a supplement to medical care. Specifically, the research examined how the third place of *Gilda's Club* benefited the everyday lives of individuals living with cancer. The research revealed that the members viewed the club as a place to escape the everyday stresses found in the home and hospital. Moreover, the club provided a place where cancer patients can meet others living with cancer, and facilitated and promoted a social environment in which they could confront or distance themselves from their health problems. The authors concluded that “third places” like *Gilda's Club* provide a significant contribution to the promotion of health and call for greater attention in research towards the therapeutic function of third places.

Mair (2009) conducted an ethnographic study of 18 curling clubs across rural Canada. The study examined the curling clubs' construction, dynamism, and fluidity through the sharing of the leisure activity. Mair reports through her ethnographic narrative that the curling clubs possess the essential characteristics of a third place. She mentions that each of these clubs have what members describe as “family rec rooms.” These rooms convey a “homey atmosphere,” which promote sociability, laughter, conversation and storytelling. Mair also discusses the fact that the regulars have a sense

of ownership over the club. Mair focuses a portion of her research toward examining the shrinking of the population in local, rural communities and how the club attempts to make adjustments in order to attract new members for the sake of the survival of the clubs. Mair concludes that the clubs are both the reflections and agents of the environmental, social, political and economic concerns that are changing the place of rural communities.

Even Peter Steinke (2008), a church consultant from Austin, Texas, recognizes the importance of third places and their ability to foster social bonds, bringing people together. In his article, *From Non-Place to Third Place*, Steinke raises the concern that the future of churches looks bleak due to the fact that the younger generations are less concerned with coming together through structured, hierarchal organization. Steinke fears that churches may eventually turn into non-places unless they are able to create new spaces for connecting, recognizing, and conversing. In response to his own questions, Steinke suggests a few ways in which congregations can possibly attract younger and lasting members. These suggestions mirror the characteristics of the third place set forth by Oldenburg (1997), but with a religious focus. Steinke concludes with one final question, “Could the church become a third place?” I have asked, “Could the La Mesa Sports Book be a third place? My answer is yes.

### La Mesa Sports Book as a Third Place

La Mesa regulars use the sports book as their own personal sanctuary that provides an escape from the pressure and stress created by both work and home life. According to La Mesa regulars I spoke to, a major part of this escape for men is to get

away from the watchful eye of women. As Pete, a fifty-something Caucasian regular once pointed out, “It is just sometimes healthy to get out of the house and away from the wife once in awhile.” The sports book is a place of refuge for men where they can socialize with very few constraints they may otherwise feel in the presence of women. For these reasons alone the sports book sets up to be an ideal setting where “men can be men,” as the old saying goes. In short, the La Mesa Sports Book is a “third place.”

Oldenburg calls a third place a *haven of escape and relief*. Oldenburg agrees with Seamon that the attraction of the third place is as a place of escape from the daily stresses of home and work. However, Oldenburg also argues that third places are more than just refuges from home and work (p. 21). Third places are *neutral grounds* where individuals can come and go as they please and are not required to host others.

Oldenburg says that the neutral ground “makes possible far more informal, even intimate, relations among people than could be entertained in the home (p. 23). The La Mesa Sports Book is a public place that is owned by a private company; therefore, no one patron is required to play host, so every patron is relieved of any type of pressure to make sure that others are enjoying themselves.

A third place is also a *leveler* among otherwise stratified members of society.<sup>13</sup> Third places level differences in power, prestige, and wealth as defined by social factors external to the space. This leveling effect makes the third place more inclusive than many common spaces, such as work or school, characterized by no formal criterion for membership. Oldenburg says, “Third places...serve to *expand* possibilities, whereas formal associations tend to narrow and restrict them” (p. 24). The La Mesa Sports Book

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<sup>13</sup> Oldenburg references the term leveler to that of the extreme left-wing party that emerged during the reign of Charles I. The goal of the party was to rid society of differences in terms of rank and position so that all men were considered equal.

differs slightly from Oldenburg's criteria as regulars create informal distinctions among pros and the recreational and pathological bettors, but all regulars perceive themselves as common parts of the social world in the La Mesa Sports Book. La Mesa regulars also create informal boundaries that demarcate who is in and who is out, although there are no formal rules for entry, except for an age limit to wager in the casino.

Specifically, every person who enters the sports book is first leveled as a new or green bettor, regardless of his standing or notoriety in the community. Each person has to establish themselves within the sports book environment. For example, a doctor is on equal footing with a janitor when they begin their initial entry into the sports book; neither one of their backgrounds play a significant role in how others perceive them. What is important is the social identity they develop within the environment. If the janitor learns the written and unwritten rules of the sports book quickly and carries himself as a knowledgeable bettor and the doctor violates rules and norms and brings undue attention to himself, then the janitor will be accepted by regulars and the doctor will be isolated, regardless of his education, income, or importance to the outside world. Thus, the sports book levels everyone at first and it is up to each bettor to learn all the intricacies that will allow him to navigate his way through the social order and gain acceptance among regulars.

*Conversation is the main activity in a third place.* Oldenburg says, "neutral ground provides the place, leveling sets the stage for the cardinal and sustaining activity of third places everywhere. That activity is conversation" (p. 26). Patrons may exchange smiles and handshakes and backslapping, but the enjoyment created in the third place is pleasurable, low-stress, and entertaining conversation.



The sports book is a place where men can relax and freely talk to each other about subject matters that interest them. Realistically, patrons do not need to be in groups to be in the sports book or even to place a wager. Gamblers could easily come to the sports book, see the latest odds, go to the nearest counter, place a bet, and then leave. However, this is not the case. Many individuals come to the sports book before games, talk to other patrons, place a bet or two, and stay and watch a game and maybe place some additional bets.

The subject matter that men usually discuss with each other involves one or more of the following five topics: sports, gambling, sports gambling, women and alcohol. The more a man knows about each of these areas the better chance he has of being accepted by other men. These topics serve as a common ground for men to develop a rapport with each other. However, not only does one's knowledge of these subjects function as a way to create relationships, but it also serves as a way for others to gauge whether an individual should be welcomed into a group, or be shunned through social isolation.

Those who "belong" know the meanings of certain words and phrases. I have noted in previous chapters that there is a large amount of vocabulary in the sports betting culture that individuals must know in order to prove that they belong in the environment. For instance, unfamiliarity with terms such as "spread", "the moneyline", or "the hook" shows that a person has not been exposed to the sports gambling culture and, in turn, is not likely to be welcomed by a group of regulars. If acceptance from others is what men seek then not only do men need to present themselves to the others accordingly, but they must be able to understand and speak their language.

A third place has *accessibility and accommodations*. People in third places seek services, be it food and drinks in a coffee shop or wagering in a sports book, when they are with other patrons. The third place is a cure for boredom, loneliness, and the frustrations and pressures of everyday life. People come to third places not to serve others, but to be served with others.

The La Mesa Sports Book opens early and closes late, so a bettor has the ability to place a bet pretty much anytime he would like. During signature events like the NFL playoffs or the NCAA tournament, the sports book usually provides extra seats so less people do not have to stand. Also, the sports book has cocktail waitresses to serve bettors drinks, the tellers give bettors drink coupons for every \$20 spent, there is a bar in the back and a grill directly next to the sports book. Moreover, nearby there are ATM machines for easy access to money and cigarette machines for easy access to nicotine. The La Mesa Sports Book is accessible and accommodating to bettors as best as possible.

A third place has *regulars*. “It is the regulars who give the place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there” (pp. 33-34). The attraction to the third place is regulars lure individuals back, while everything else, such as seating capacity, refreshments, parking, or prices are secondary. The regulars set the mood of the space, they dictate the style of interaction and how new faces are accepted, which is important.

The existence of regulars in the sports book environment has been widely discussed in the previous chapters. Regular bettors create and enforce unwritten norms that all bettors must abide by. They are the foundation of the sports book, as their

continual patronage, especially Professionals, is essential to the financial well-being of the sports book. If a sports book cannot attract a steady flow of customers then they will not be economic feasible to the casino. Moreover, the regular sports bettors attract other bettors in returning because they can be counted on to be present on a consistent basis, which creates the opportunity to build upon relationships that are initially established at the early stage of microwave relationships.

The physical structure of the third place is usually unassuming. According to Oldenburg, third places are establishments that are commandeered by people seeking a place to linger in good company and more often than not these takeovers happen in older places. The homeliness of the third place is a form of protection from attracting high volumes of strangers and transient patrons. Oldenburg points out that the third places that are male-dominated and where women are not openly welcomed usually have a distinct seediness in order to repel female customers. The plainness of the space removes and discourages all signs of pretention. A nonpretentious décor encourages leveling and diminishes social pretense. More to the point, a plain environment ensures that the topic of conversation between patrons will not consist of superficial discussions of the décor, but of more substantive subject matters.

Here, the characteristic of plainness differs for the sports book as the setting is one that is dynamic. The La Mesa contains multiple televisions with the latest technological advances in various sizes, transmitting numerous sporting events, while people are coming and going at the same time. The sports book maintains a low-profile within the realm of the casino, but once in sight, one would be hard-pressed not to take notice of all the action that emanates from the sports book.

Finally, the *mood* in the sports book is playful in third places and participants feel it is *a home away from home*. Oldenburg says, in third places, “Those who would keep conversation serious for more than a minute are almost certainly doomed to failure” (p. 37). Oldenburg leans on Seamon’s concept of “at-homeness” to explain that patrons have a sense of possession or control over a setting even though there is no actual ownership. This feeling of at-homeness includes the feeling of being able to be free to express one’s personality. Warmth is another characteristic of at-homeness, which is created through companionship, friendliness, support, and mutual concern. Again, even though a third place might contain all of these characteristics, according to Oldenburg, none of these characteristics have a greater influence on the enjoyment shared within a third place than gender.

In the La Mesa Sports Book, men create camaraderie and closeness with one another by sharing stories and laughter. Social bonds are reinforced between male bettors through the use of humor. Men in the sports book regularly joke around with one another. Often within the groups when not discussing sports or gambling the men are able to use humor to prevent awkward silence. The closer the men are with each other in the group the more they are able to freely to use colorful language to tell a story or joke.

The use of humor is in essence a shared activity in which there are multiple participants sharing a mutual understanding. Humor is a mechanism used by men to negotiate the tension created between their need for intimacy with other men and their need to maintain self-control (Lyman, 1987).

Humor is not only used to bring men together, but it is also used as a tool to avoid awkward silence and as a diversion from expressing potentially dangerous sentiments (Brandes, 1980; Sion & Ben-Ari, 2005). For men, humor is the perfect antidote, or filler, to avoid any serious conversations of personal feelings or thoughts. Kaplan (2006) believes that humor is not used to avoid intimacy, but is in fact a form of an intimacy between men. At the heart of his reasoning is that the common bond through humor that is shared between men in fact has private meaning. As a result, humor is the sharing of private meanings and, therefore, humor is the sharing of a private moment.

#### Gender, Third Places, and the La Mesa Regulars

Women regularly come to wager at the sports book, but in all my observations I never saw a group of women meet in the La Mesa Sports Book to watch a game. Among the myriad reasons why women do not hang out in the sports book, one is that the informal male culture that La Mesa regulars create works against the creation of female regulars. Although the sports book is a public space it also falls under the umbrella of sport and as Messner (1987) points out the arena of sport is well suited for the enactment and perpetuation of the male bond.

According to Curry (1991), fraternal or male bonding is “usually considered to be a force, link, or affectionate tie that unites men” and sports participation and viewing provides many opportunities of male bonding rituals and low levels of disclosure and intimacy. (p. 119). Spaces where fraternal bonding is prevalent often push women away. In the sports book, male regulars develop and strengthen social bonds by creating

shared meanings through both physical and verbal customs. Part of this bonding occurs as men establish boundaries between themselves and women through language, behavior, and humor.

### Sports Book as a Locker Room

The male regulars at the La Mesa create a culture akin to a “locker room” atmosphere that informally restricts women’s participation. The athletic locker room is closed off from the rest of society and even though the sports book is ostensibly open to the public, men either consciously or sub-consciously turn the public sports book into a private club. And, like the locker room, the La Mesa Sports Book is a center for masculine expression and fraternal bonding, has a built-in hierarchy, and is a central meeting place for those with privileged access.

Fine (1987) and Curry (1991) characterizes types of language men use within an all-male setting such as the sports locker room. Highly-sexualized, obscene language is one type. A common practice amongst men is to trade obscene stories (Fine, 1976). The use of obscene stories is not only used to build rapport amongst men, but to prove their masculinity (Fine, 1981). Another is sexual talk directed at women. Among groups of men, women are seen as sexual objects, and are targeted as such. When a woman enters a room it is almost inevitable that men within the group setting comment on the appearance of the women.

Obscene, sexual talk occurs among regulars in the sports book, although it is usually tame and low-key compared especially to Curry’s locker room tales. Curry finds that the peer group dynamics and locker room conversations reaffirm traditional norms of masculinity through the participation or acceptance of “talk about women as objects,

homophobic talk, and talk that is very aggressive and hostile toward women—essentially talk that promotes rape culture” (p. 128). Moreover, Curry also discusses that traditional forms of masculinity includes reaffirming one’s heterosexuality, avoiding any talk that may show caring or concern of another, and participating in forms of competition in order to establish status and position.

Masculine expression is prevalent in the La Mesa Sports Book, but it typically does not take on some of the more extreme qualities found in the locker room. Still, there are plenty exhibitions of maleness in the sports book to make women uncomfortable in the setting. For example, men will not make a sexist joke in front of a woman in the sports book, but they will approach a woman who is alone, make a suggestive comment out loud to other bettors about her appearance, or simply just stare. For instance, while sitting in the front row of the lounge chairs, a young blonde woman in jeans and a tight shirt enters the sports book and goes directly to the front desk. Another bettor sitting next to me leans over and says, “Man, I love living in this town. I never saw that kind of trim back home.” His companion nodded in agreement, and replied, “Amen to that.”

Invariably male bettors will acknowledge a woman’s presence in the sports book and make a comment on her appearance. Curry found that males within the locker room environment talked about specific women in one of two ways, either a woman as a real person, or a woman as an object. Those women who were talked about as real people were usually reserved for girlfriends and talk about sexual conquest of the woman was considered off-limits. Conversely, all other women were talked about in terms of being an object and, therefore, talk of sexual conquest was open for all to discuss.

Curry found that the locker room environment made it essential for a male to engage in talk about women in order to assert one's masculinity. According to the author "the striving to do gender appropriately within the constraints of the fraternal bond involves talk that manages to put down women while also including or teasing each other" (p. 130). It is no surprise that, although not as intense, these same performances of masculinity are found in the sports book. La Mesa regulars discuss women as objects as a bonding mechanism.

This overt objectification and the talk that accompanies it, serves as a barrier to female participation in the sports book. When entering the sports book, women appear to be conscious of the male regulars who almost invariably stare, evaluate, and comment on their appearance as if they were models on a runway. As they take notice of this semi-overt leering and evaluative talk, they fidget anxiously while they are in the sports book, do not make eye contact with regulars, and usually leave the area as quickly as they came. Male's objectification rituals strengthen bonds among them, while help keep the sports book relatively free of the female presence.

But, why would men seek to keep their space free of females, who they are apparently interested in, at least in a sexualized way? It is axiomatic to say that gender plays an important role in social interaction. Research suggests that the presence of women significantly influences how males interact in public (Kaplan, 2006; Aries, 1976; Eshel, Sharabany, & Friedman, 1998; Miller, 1983; Rubin, 1986). According to Fine (1987), "women have the potential to disrupt patterns of male interaction, possibly without realizing they are doing so" (p. 144). Aries (1976) found that men express themselves and act differently in an all-male group setting than in a mixed-gender



setting. In a mixed-gender setting, Fine observed that men acted more subdued and patient, allowing women to talk and express themselves. Men may also not feel comfortable expressing affection for one another in the presence of women.

I suggest that part of the reason that women are shunned by men in the sports book is that men see the sports book as their man-space (a homosocial third space, in more formal language). By minimizing the female's presence male regulars are afforded opportunities to interact without facing perceived limits on expression and relationships. Men express themselves freely and show their affection for one another in ways that they may not when women are around. The forms of expression that is prevalent among La Mesa regulars have been described above in terms of the use of obscene language and stories, and the sexual objectification of women.

Females as "Green"

Women may also be shunned by regulars in the sports book because they are "green" and do not know the normative expectations of this social world. Regulars tend to ignore or outright denigrate all greens and other non-regulars, regardless of gender. Regulars attract their own members as they repel non-members through a combination of their presence and some active deterrence. For example, the majority of the regulars are creatures of habit, some like to stand and pace back and forth during games, while others insist on sitting in the same seats. Other regulars tend to take notice of each other's tendencies and avoid disrupting such rituals, for green bettors they are unaware that they may be intruding on a regular's territory or ritual practices.

For instance, it is an unwritten rule in the sports book that if a bettor wants to save his seat he writes on the back of a betting sheet something to the effect of

“reserved” or “taken.” On one particular Sunday morning during the NFL season, the sports book was standing room only. Steve, a regular bettor, had a seat in one of the lounge chairs, which is an area that fills quickly on big game days. Steve is Caucasian, early-thirties, and is average build. He has tattoos on his arms and tends to wear clothing that is more suited for skate and snow boarders, rather than football fans. Specifically, he wears shirts and hats of sponsors of extreme sports, rather than sports apparel of his favorite team. During the middle of the first quarter Steve got up from his seat to go to the restroom, but he left a betting sheet with a sign.

Moments later a Caucasian male approximately thirty, and his blonde girlfriend came into the sports book, saw two empty seats together, but one was Steve’s with his sign laying out it. The man sat down in the empty seat and the woman removed the betting sheet and sat down. A few of the regulars mentioned to the guy that the seat his girlfriend was sitting was reserved; however, not understanding or not caring about the mostly unwritten rules of the sports book, the man shrugged off the warnings.

Steve returned, told the woman to get out of his seat, and she refused. Steve then turned to the boyfriend and told him to get his girl out of his seat. Although slightly intimidated, the man quietly contested that he left so she should get the seat. Steve became angry and threatened him if he “did not take care of his woman.” At this point a crowd of people were watching this unfold to see what the man and woman were going to do. Steve told the man that he was going to go off to the side and smoke a cigarette and by the time he returns his woman will be out of his seat one way or another.

Steve walked about twenty feet off to the side, near the doors and watched from a distance as the man talked to his girlfriend. A couple of the other regulars watching

this spoke up again and told the both of them for her to move. The man finally talked his girlfriend into letting Steve have his seat back in order to avoid any further conflict. Once Steve saw the woman get up he quickly put out his cigarette and returned to his seat. However, since all the seats were taken the man had his girlfriend sit on the floor in front of him. Throughout the rest morning every regular sitting near the couple avoided any conversation with them, as if they were making an effort to let them know that neither one of them belonged.

The scene was an example of how regulars show solidarity against those individuals who are unaware of the social norms that govern the sports book. Moreover, the regulars made an attempt to resolve the situation by directing the majority of their comments towards the man and not his girlfriend. It was if the man had direct ownership over the woman and therefore he was to blame for any of the social norms that his girlfriend had violated. This perception was reinforced by Steve's actions of directing his frustration towards the man and leaving it up to him to fix the problem before he returned.

The presence of male regulars is intimidating because their style and language marks the space as one where specific qualities are required to fully participate. The sports book-specific language marks greens and outsiders against those who are in the know. If these passive, subtle intimidating aspects of the scene are not enough to ward off outsiders, the active weeding-out process that occurs in microwave relationships among sports book patrons may do the trick. However, most women never even make it into these relationships. Their gender wards off male regulars.

## Crossing the Informal Line

While some women enter the sports book and wager, most women never enter at all. Most females I observed in the La Mesa Casino are hesitant to walk into the sports book area. They tend to stay on the periphery as curious observers. They pace or stare, as if waiting for someone from the inside to escort them in. I watched several women even stand in the “safe zone”—the area on the edge of the sports book where curious non members often watch the sports bettors or glance at the games on the screens—and use their cell phone to call a male friend inside the sports book area to escort them in. Once inside the sports book boundaries—in other words, across the informal line on the carpet pattern that designates the sports book from the rest of the casino—women with male companions typically direct their attention to their male companion, while the male divides his attention between her and the games on the video screens.

Periodically, these moments of male-female togetherness erupt with tension as the couple struggles over whether to stay or go. Invariably the woman appears to become bored, suggests another activity and the male protests to stay. These moments are hardly ever resolved amicably. I watched intense debates as each person laid out their reasons to stay or go. At times, resolution came as the male gave cash to his female companion who left for a period to play games in the casino. The man literally bought more time in the sports book. At other times the male begrudgingly left with the woman, longingly looking back over his shoulder to catch a last glimpse of the game as they left. Sometimes a compromise is struck, and the couple moves to the lounge for a drink, however these moments never last for long. In short, tensions between men and

women seem almost inevitable in the male-dominated social world of the La Mesa Sports Book

The stay-or-go conflict happens consistently, but it does not mean that all women despise the environment. On big game days, such as the Super Bowl or NCAA basketball tournament, groups of men and women will gather in the sports book to make a day of it. However, these moments are rare. The everyday reality of the La Mesa Sports Book is that it serves as a male preserve where men escape to a homosocial environment to enjoy the camaraderie of their friends.

#### The Casino Sports Book as a Third Place

Men seek a third place, or a place of refuge, to escape the stresses of work and the demands of home life. In most cities and towns, bars are generally the popular third place for men. In Nevada, sports books give men another option for a third place destination. The sports book offers all the important qualities of a third place to men, and then some. Not only is it a place of escape into a social world that levels many normal distinctions among the participants, regulars create experiences that provide relief from the stressors of everyday life, there is a hominess to the space, and regulars create bonds with others that satisfy their need for connection and community.

Although women may enter into this third place, the male dominated character of this social world, makes it unlikely for many to enter and uncomfortable for those who do. Men create the sports book as a third place where they feel unconstrained by women and bond with other males. It is the shared meanings of these elements that tighten the social bonds between men and create barriers that keep women out.

For those comfortable in the sports book surroundings, the space is a “home away from home” and the regulars have a sense of ownership and control over the sports book. Also, individuals can express themselves freely, and there is a feeling of warmth arising out of friendliness, support, and mutual concern. The one very prominent fact that stands out is the gendered nature of the sports book. Oldenburg emphasizes the fact that the best and most enjoyable third places are those that have same-sex associations and mentions that sexual segregation is the reason why third places were created and the reason why they continue to exist. In the sports book, men are able to let loose by watching sports, betting on sports, drinking, smoking, and to talk freely. The sports book is a place where men can be men.

## CHAPTER 8

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

#### Summary

This ethnography of a local Las Vegas casino sports book explored the characteristics that frame the social world its regulars create. Specifically, I explained the characteristics of La Mesa's sports bettors, the types of people who bet on sports, the mechanisms used to sustain participation, and how the sports bettors view themselves, their social world, and those outside of it.

After fifteen months observing the La Mesa Hotel and Casino Sports Book, it is clear that its patrons do not use the environment simply for sports betting. Rather, their complex interactional dynamics create a robust social world they come back to again and again to create a meaningful social world or community. My observations reveal the existence of a hierarchal order among bettors; they abide by both formal rules of conduct regulated by the casino and informal rules of conduct that are governed by La Mesa regulars. Regulars participate in ritualistic behavior, develop social bonds with like patrons, and combine different styles of expression and interaction to create a male-dominated home away from home.

Contrary to some stereotypes about gamblers that cast them as degenerates who simply spend their time on games of chance, my study shows that the regulars at the La Mesa are sports fans looking for a place to connect with other fans. Wagering on sports is as much an organizing activity that draws regulars together through the betting act.

Their interaction extends from there into a social order characterized by specialized language, interactional styles, camaraderie, hierarchy, and social control.

The hierarchal order among La Mesa regulars places professionals at the top of the status orders, followed by regular recreational and regular pathologicals. New or “green” bettors occupy the bottom rung on the status ladder and all other patrons are considered outsiders (see diagram 5.2). Distinct styles are apparent among older and younger bettors. I label these styles as old school and new school (see diagram 5.3). These interactional styles can be a point of tension among regulars, but that tension does not usually morph into open conflict. Regulars do however segregate themselves on the basis of style.

Interaction among regulars is marked by a three types of relationships microwave relationships, strangerships, and friendships. Each type of relationship contains its own set of characteristics and behavioral expectations related to the depth of knowledge and emotional connection among those involved. Relationships among regulars are also gender specific. Without exception, regulars are male and the La Mesa Sports Book is a male-dominated environment. This should not be surprising given that previous research shows that males dominate activities sports-related activities in public spaces (Arendt, 1958; Rosaldo, 1958, Messner, 1987; Bryson, 1987; Farr, 1988).

The regulars at the La Mesa use the shared activity of sports betting to seek out companionship, but few develop intimate friendships. Regulars tend to form connections without disclosing too many personal details of their lives. Conversations revolve around such subjects as sports, sports betting, other forms of gambling, women, and alcohol. How the conversations occur is as important as the topics for creating and sustaining



cohesion. Regulars use a shared language, social rituals, humor, needling or ragging on each other, sharing stories, assigning nicknames, and meaningful, albeit limited, forms of physical contact to convey fellow-feeling in the group.

The spatial arrangements in the La Mesa Sports Book give regulars physical means to segregate on the basis of the hierarchy among professionals and other regulars, and among groups of regulars. The VIP area, lounge, and seating area are distinctive spaces where status and behavioral expectations affects who interacts there and how they interact. Moreover, fringe area around the sports book, marked by subtle changes in carpet pattern stands as an almost invisible barrier that keeps many women and non-regulars on the outskirts, further solidifying the insider character of sports book culture.

The popularity of sports betting among the La Mesa regulars can be attributed, in part, to the shared experience of emotional moments with one another. While the act of wagering is an individual one, waiting for the outcome is a group experience for regulars. Wagering on a sporting event elevates the emotional energy in the sports book as bettors become financially vested and emotionally invested in the outcome of an event. And since most of those in the sports book have this emotional investment, there is a high frequency of emotional moments as the sporting events take place. These emotional moments help to create and sustain bonds among regulars

These emotional moments can be compelling enough to drive one to bet despite plans not to wager on a game. I watched others become influenced in moments where regulars had no intention to bet, but were drawn to wager on a game in order to participate in the collective emotional moments with other regulars that bet on the same game.

Could social influences that encourage wagering on more games than intended be a source of problem gambling? That question cannot be answered in this study. But, what can be said is that sports books' bottom line may benefit from encouraging social communities to be built and sustained within their walls.

All of the major findings in this study suggest that the La Mesa Sports Book is what I consider a gendered third place. The sports book is an environment that males use to escape the daily stresses of work and home. It is a neutral setting where they can relax and interact as a sports book regular rather than on the basis of their social status outside of the La Mesa. That is, each individual earns their reputation by starting at the bottom of the hierarchal order as greens or newbies and works their way into another status in the hierarchy of regulars. Men use the sports book to bet, but conversation is the main activity since there is plenty of down time between the placing of the bet and waiting for the outcome. The sports book is also accessible and accommodating to its patrons, as it is open at almost all of hours of the day and provides various services and amenities. One never has to go far for food or drinks. Lastly, and most importantly, the sports book has regulars which gives the place its character and assures others that the same people will be there the next time they visit. In short, regulars create a social world in the sports book where they feel a sense of community that drives them back again and again.

### Finding Community in Las Vegas

Las Vegas is a desert city that survives on the gaming and tourism industry. Social life is indelibly shaped by a casino industry that is oriented to the outsider tourist experience at the expense of local culture. The city's transient and transitioning

population makes it difficult to establish strong social bonds among residents. As a consequence, we are low on many indicators of social capital suggestive of reciprocal social bonds on which feelings of solidarity and support are built (Putnam, 2000; Walton, 2006). The 2003 Harwood report demonstrates that Las Vegans feel unattached to their neighbors and identify few social bonds that anchor a sense of community. Likewise, the 2010 Las Vegas Metropolitan Area Social Survey indicates that six years after the Harwood report little has changed (Futrell et. al., 2010). Valley residents do not find community in their neighborhoods. They remain isolated from their neighbors and in search of community in other spaces where they live their lives.

Las Vegans must construct meaningful social experiences in this context of a city where social capital is extremely low (Walton, 2006). And in this unique urban landscape, the places where they carve out community are also likely to be unique. At the broadest level, this study is a search for dimensions of community in the unlikely space of a casino sports book.

Casinos are not known as spaces particularly favorable for extended social interaction that produces stable, cohesive social networks. In fact, they are said to promote the opposite—individual gambling experiences, increasingly dominated by interactions with machines rather than people, isolating people from one another. Despite this, my ethnography suggests that sports book patrons can and do develop social worlds within them that express community bonds rich in meaning, ritual connections, and social cohesion. This happens, in part, because sports books are parts of a social gathering place in Las Vegas—casinos.

Third places are places of community-making. According to Oldenburg (1997), third places anchor communities in spaces that facilitate interaction. Oldenburg suggests that a main characteristic of contemporary society is that members intentionally seek out informal meeting places as a space where they can connect with others. It may be that for many urban dwellers neighborhoods are no longer the prime anchor points for community.

In contemporary mass society, people congregate where they find affinity groups to connect with. Increasingly, these informal meeting places may be outside the place where they live or work. We are more and more mobile and thus able to connect in dispersed spaces and into dispersed social networks. The bars, pubs, and coffee shops (classic third places for Oldenburg) that we frequent need not be truly local ones near our places of residence. We can now commute to them as we do for work and home. Cyberspace takes web surfers on a virtual commute from anywhere with an internet connection into affinity networks that can draw in members from around the globe.

Las Vegas is a relatively young city, auto-reliant city whose residents are highly mobile. It is far from a walkable city and few neighborhoods are organized around the types of third places that researchers have identified in older cities in the Northeast and Midwest. It is likely that Las Vegans expect to travel to many places over the course of their daily activities. Among these would be the places where they congregate and socialize.

While my close ethnographic study of the La Mesa Sports Book does not provide the sort of broad systematic evidence needed to fully determine the character of Las Vegas community, I suggest that future research would do well to look for the basis of

community-building outside of the classic neighborhood-based locations where social scientists have often assumed it is found. If available research is any indication, one pocket of social interaction where virtually no one expects to find social cohesion that reflects “community” is in a Las Vegas casino. Yet, at least in the La Mesa, the informal bonds built in the sports book turn it into a non-traditional third place.

This finding puts an alternate face on casino gambling. Rather than sports gambling being simply another facet of the dystopian Sin City image of societal dregs and deviants in smoke-filled rooms wasting their time and money on games of chance, La Mesa Sports Book patrons use the sports book as a place of social bonding. Of course, that bonding occurs over sports and wagers, but that doesn’t change the fact that the social world of La Mesa regulars reflects a fundamental reality of the human condition. We seek community and are creative in the ways and places where we build it, even inside a public space that houses regulated sports gambling in the United States.

### Las Vegas, Sports Gambling, and Popular Culture

This study is the first detailed exploration into the social world of legalized sports gambling patrons. For all of the perceptions and misconceptions that are thrown around about sports betting and its participants, no researcher has ever conducted systematic qualitative research to see what, besides wagering, goes on in a legal and highly-regulated sports book.

Revealing the social world of the La Mesa Sports Book raises a question about why there seems to be a sort of collective self-loathing in this country about sports gambling. This flows from a lack of certainty about how regulated sports gambling

affects both the institution of sports and the communities where legal sports betting is located. Additionally, many may be wary and unsure about the type of people legal sports gambling attracts. This study sheds some light on these questions as well

In January 2003—about the time in which I started to become a sports book regular—the National Football League rejected commercials developed by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, that were aimed at promoting the city of Las Vegas. The commercials in question were nothing more than montages of the city, inviting tourists to come and enjoy all that Las Vegas has to offer. The ads did not directly reference gambling, although admittedly Las Vegas is virtually synonymous with gambling. They were simply commercials created to show the glamour of Las Vegas as a whole. Yet, the commercials were rejected on the basis that the NFL associates Las Vegas with sports gambling and, any ties to sports gambling are seen by NFL administrators as anathema to the league’s clean-cut all American image. The NFL rejected the airing of the commercial. At the time, NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said, “The league office decided that the commercial was not in our best interest... The NFL has a long standing policy that prohibits acceptance of any message that makes reference to or mention of sports betting” (McKay, 2003).

Fast forward to Spring 2010—the time in which I am concluding this dissertation—and the NFL recently released a statement saying that they will no longer block advertisements that promote Las Vegas. Although they are prohibiting any ads that highlight specific hotels, casinos, and other institutions that offer gambling, the league is willing to allow Las Vegas to promote itself as a tourist destination. Coincidentally, the same NFL spokesman, Brian McCarthy, stated that the NFL considers it “a reasonable

modification of our policy that still protects our interests” (Associated Press, 2009). This was a small win for Las Vegas, but one can hardly deny an underlying message that the NFL conveys by its stance toward Las Vegas—that sports gambling is a deviant activity and any connection with it undermines the NFL’s integrity.

The NFL’s relationship with Las Vegas encapsulates the overall hypocrisy toward legalized sports gambling. On a macro-level, if sports gambling is such a deviant activity then why do the majority of national newspapers, magazines, and sports shows list the betting lines when one can only legally bet on sports within the boundaries of the State of Nevada and nowhere else? Moreover, why is it that the amount of money spent on illegal sports betting is far greater than the amount of money spent on legal sports betting in Nevada? On a micro-level, how does one explain the popularity of NCAA tournament pools or the presence of betting squares at neighborhood Super Bowl parties? After all, aren’t these activities a form of illegal sports betting? For instance, UCLA head football coach Rick Neuheisel was fired from the University of Washington over his participation in a simple neighborhood betting pool for the 2003 NCAA Basketball Tournament and his attempt to cover-up his involvement. Moreover, it seems that most all major professional and collegiate sports leagues have little reservation in publicly expressing their distaste for Las Vegas because Nevada has legal sports betting, despite the fact that it is highly-regulated and any possible anomalies in wagering trends are reported to state control boards and law enforcement agencies. And, still, though sports leagues are vocal against sports gambling, all of them support and even promote fantasy leagues, which are commonly known for charging entrance fees that in turn are placed in a pot for the

winner to receive. Last time I checked that is a form of gambling—staking something of value on an uncertain outcome.

Above all, the research shows that the majority of individuals who participate in sports gambling are demographically diverse “regular people.” Sports gamblers range from doctors and lawyers to janitors and cooks; the common characteristics that are shared by such a diverse group are an interest in sports, a penchant for staking money on games, and the use of the sports book environment as their own third place to escape for a bit from work and home. The sports book is the regulars’ own boys clubhouse where they relax and enjoy themselves. Sure, I have found that there is much more to just hanging out, but once one discovers how to navigate the scene by learning the written and unwritten rules of the sports book, proper language, behavioral expectations, and social rituals—then he can let loose and be at ease in the environment. I would argue that sport viewing and wagering then is an escape from the everyday routines of work and home, similar to any other innocuous third place.

### Future Research

I see several future research projects arising from this study. One project would further explore the idea of community building within the sports book scene. Community is a term that gets thrown around a lot in the field of sociology. There is vast research on the subject matter, but very little focus on the ever growing gambling culture, and until now no research on community building within a sports book. I feel that this study can be extended from an ethnography to also interviewing regular sports bettors to



determine exactly why they return to the same sports book and hang out with the same people.

Another project would survey a wide number of sports gamblers to explore their motives and influences for gambling. This study could extend Smith and Preston's (1984) study entitled, *Vocabularies of Motives for Gambling Behavior*. The authors created an eleven-fold typology that consisted of arguably all the possible motives for gambling. The eleven categories are: (1) masochism and self guilt; (2) monetary profit; (3) play, leisure, and recreation; (4) learned role; (5) sociability and gregariousness; (6) prestige; (7) escape and frustration; (8) decision-making; (9) belief in personal luck; (10) boredom and excitement; and (11) new experience and curiosity. Based on this typology the researchers developed questions that involved each category in order to gauge what a person's reasons are for participating in gambling activities.

More recent research has studied the gambling motives of problem gamblers versus non-problem gamblers (Clarke, 2004), college students (Neighbors et al. 2002), and Korean gamblers (Lee et al., 2006). To analyze differences among gamblers and non-problem gamblers, Clarke (2004) surveyed a sample of 147 New Zealand university students who gambled for money. The survey included questions from the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS), a depression inventory, the Eysenck Impulsiveness Scale, Levenson's Internality, Powerful Others and Chance Scales of locus of control, and the Gambling Motivation Scale. The research revealed that gambling motivation is a strong predictor and a more useful tool to explain problem gambling than determining the locus of control. In summary, the study suggests that researchers should focus on a problem

gambler's motivation for gambling and not the reason why he or she is unable to control their gambling behavior.

Neighbors et al. (2002) combined qualitative and quantitative approaches in examining gambling motives among college student gamblers. Surveying 184 college student gamblers, they identified sixteen gambling motives through the categorization of 762 open-ended reasons for gambling. The study revealed that the majority of college students gamble to win money, for fun, for social reasons, for excitement, or just to have something to do.

Lastly, Lee et al. (2006) examined casino gambling motivations of Korean gamblers. They conclude that a substantial portion of their sample visited a casino for "socialization/learning purposes;" the dimensions of socialization/learning included kinship, being with friends, learning and practicing games, and doing something fun. However, they found that the main motivation for casino gambling was winning (p. 864). As a result, gamblers are likely to visit a casino for socializing purposes, but when it comes to actual participation in gambling activities they are likely to be motivated mainly by the attraction of winning money.

My subsequent research would explore the motivations of sports book patrons through additional in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation to further develop understandings of why patrons repeatedly come back to the sports book to gamble. I hypothesize that such research may support the conclusions of the present ethnography; although people gamble for many reasons, those who come and hangout in the social world of the sports book have specific *social* reasons for maintaining their regular

participation altogether—to connect with other individuals and form a community of regulars that fulfill some of the human need for connectedness with others.

To extend the vocabularies of motive perspective, I would suggest a social bonds approach that explores the effect that the social bonding in the social world of sports book regulars has on their betting patterns. Questions here include: Do social influences among regulars increase or decrease the number of wagers placed and the amount of money wagered? Do social influences affect the amount of time regulars spend in the sports book? Also, do these influences create allegiance to a particular casino sports book? How do social interactions among regulars affect the likelihood of a regular becoming a problem gambler?

A third research angle draws from the perspective of architectural sociology. I am interested in the architectural and spatial influences of the casino sports book, specifically the relationship of interactional dynamics among sports book patrons and the spatial arrangements of sports books. Comparing different sports books would be important here to understand the spatial qualities that promote more or less social interaction, I believe that the higher level of social interaction a sports book can generate would correlate to a higher establishment of regulars. It follows that those sports books with spatial arrangements that promote interaction would generate more repeat regular customers.

A final angle of study I suggest would examine the technological advances found in the sports book and how they may affect the social world of sports book patrons. The majority of studies on technological change in gaming settings have examined the potential effects of technology on gambling behavior, not actual effects. Griffiths et al.,

(2006) argue that although advancements in technology has always played a role in shaping gambling behavior, early studies have indicated that Internet gambling in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States has had little impact on the frequency in which gamblers bet and the amount they wager. However, they contend that this trend is likely to change as the use of the Internet for leisure activities rise.

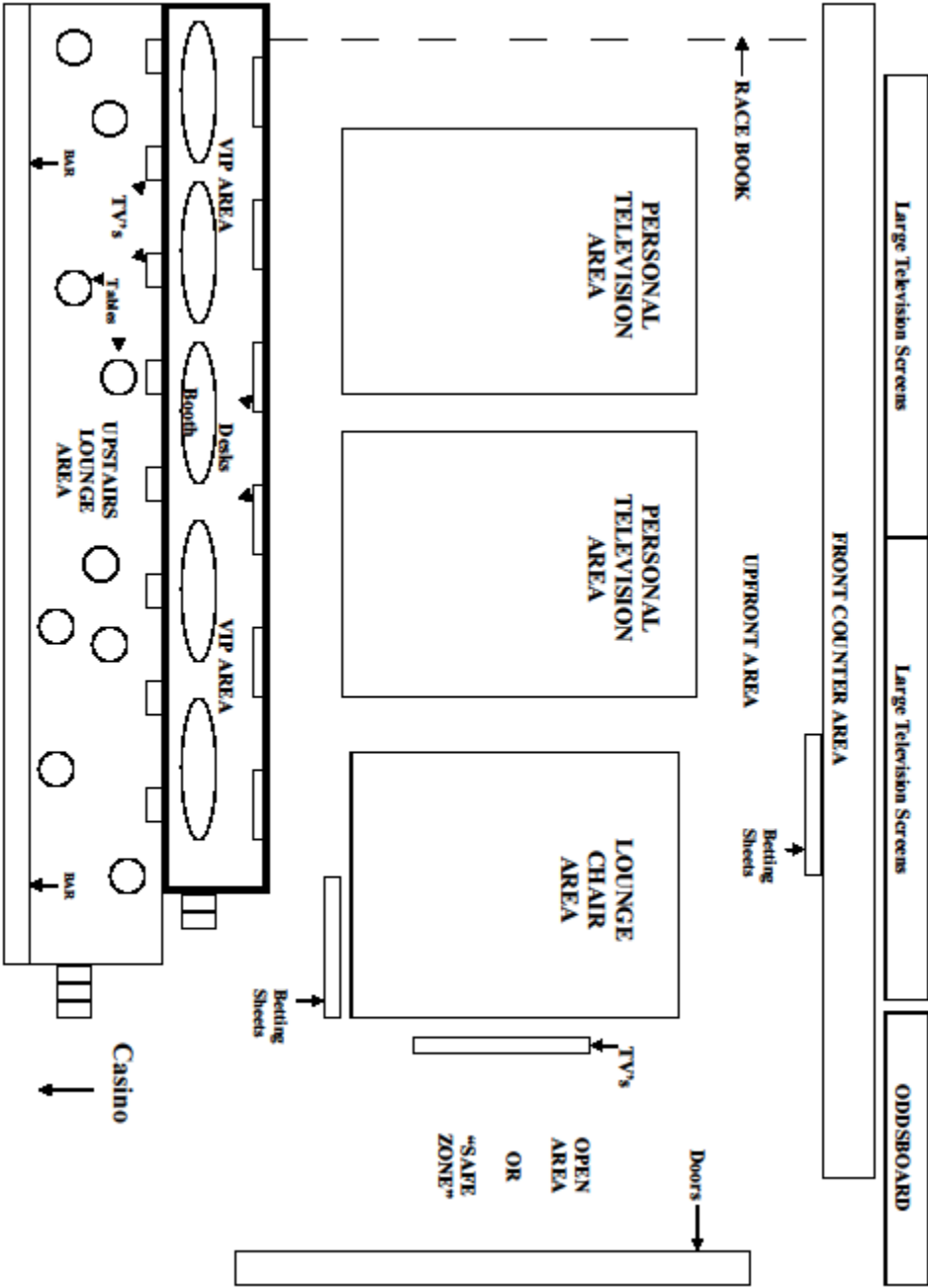
Griffiths (2004) also provides a brief overview of gambling technologies and deregulation issues as a response to the rapid growth of technology in the field of gambling innovation. He specifically examines the impact of technology by focusing on the rise of Internet gambling and even more so, the relationship between Internet addiction and Internet gambling. Griffith argues that the two most important factors in problem gambling is easy accessibility of the activity and event frequency, which the Internet provides. Griffith explains that the characteristics that the Internet offers is similar to slot machines— “games that offer a fast, arousing span of play, frequent wins, and the opportunity for rapid replay are associated with problem gambling” (p. 565). Research throughout the world (e.g., Australia, United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Spain, Holland, Germany) has tied these characteristics to problem gambling trends.

Cabot and Faiss (2002) in their article *Sports Gambling in the Cyberspace Era* explore the governmental problems and options in the era of Internet sports wagering. They argue that laws aimed to regulate sports gambling have presented unique challenges to the law enforcement community. However, the advent of the Internet has brought even more unique and difficult legal challenges. They recommend that “in light of the evolving technologies and the expanding global marketplace, federal and state governments may be forced to reconsider their approach to sports gaming” (p. 45).

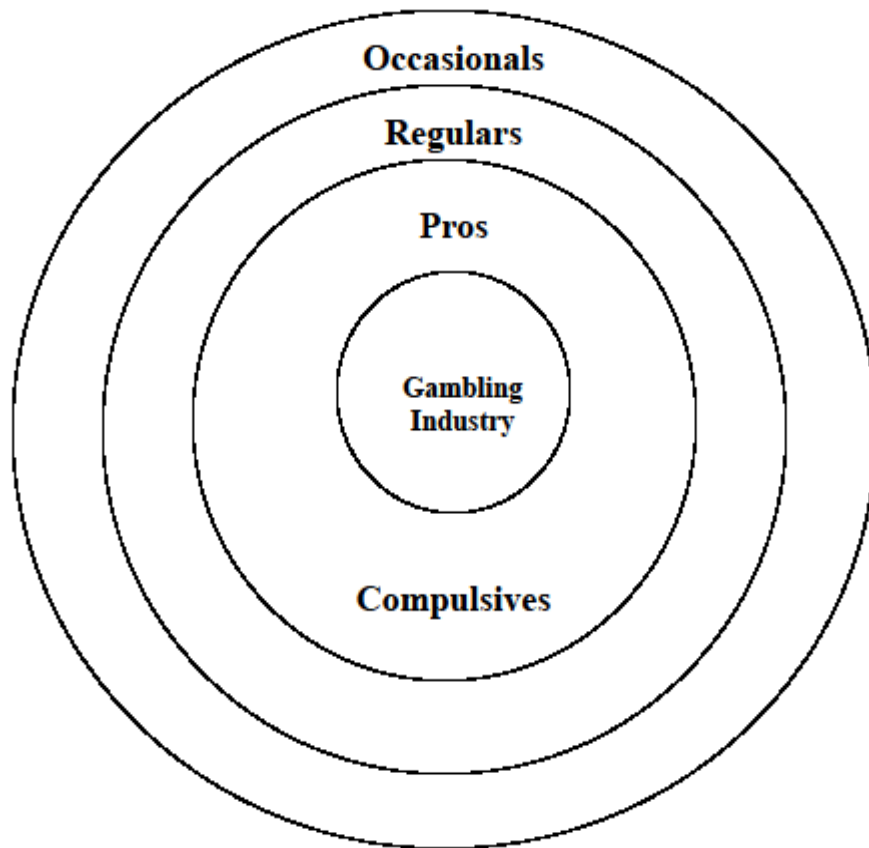
Presently, a few sports books in Las Vegas have begun experimenting with Cantor Gaming devices, which allows bettors to carry around a handheld device that lets them place a sports bet from any location found on a casino's property. My interest in the effects of this technology is twofold. First, I would like to examine how this new technology affects social interaction in the sports book. I expect that these devices may affect the number of regulars found within the sports book, as individuals will be able to place bets while watching games or doing other activities in areas of the casino that are outside of the sports book. Second, I would like to examine if these new devices may influence or change gambling behavior. I hypothesize that if these handheld devices decrease the amount of social interaction between sports bettors then they will by default create an individual and isolating gambling activity, like slot machines. This could lead to a rise of problem gambling among legal sports bettors.

Finally, I advocate more research on gambling generally. As an enormously impactful economic dimension of the modern economy we can never have too much of a systematic understanding of why people gamble and what the implications are for economy and society. My hope is that this study adds a modest but important facet to this knowledge.

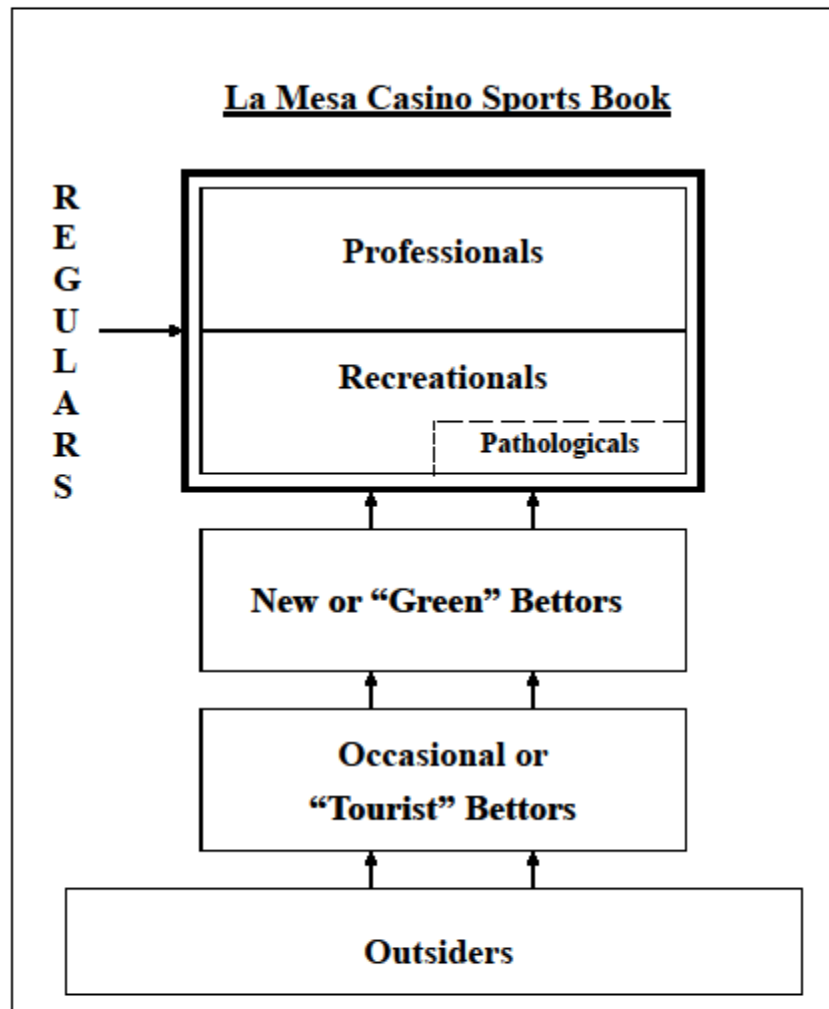
**Diagram 4.1: Floor Plan of the La Mesa Casino Sports Book**



**Diagram 5.1: Martinez (1983): *The Gambling Scene***

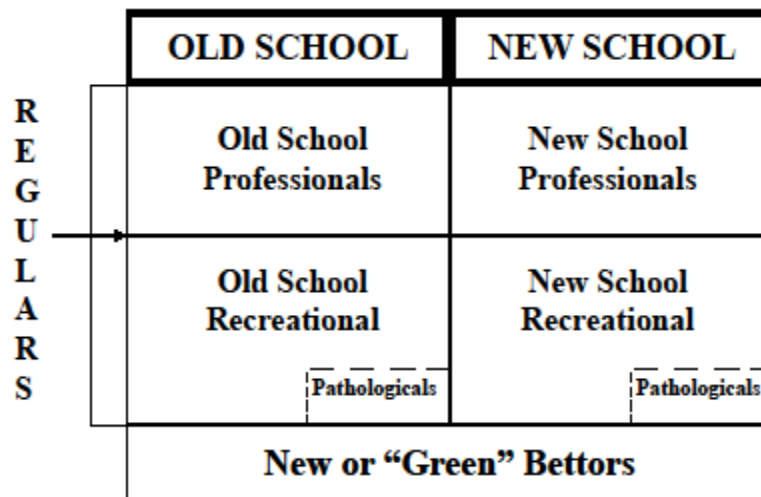


**Diagram 5.2: Krauss (2010):  
*Hierarchy of La Mesa Sports Book Bettors***





**Diagram 5.3: Krauss (2010):  
Stylistic Differences of Sports Book Bettors**



## APPENDIX 1: IRB APPROVAL



### Social/Behavioral IRB – Expedited Review Approval Notice

#### NOTICE TO ALL RESEARCHERS:

Please be aware that a protocol violation (e.g., failure to submit a modification for any change) of an IRB approved protocol may result in mandatory remedial education, additional audits, re-consenting subjects, researcher probation, suspension of any research protocol or issue, suspension of additional existing research protocols, invalidation of all research conducted under the research protocol, issue, and further appropriate consequences as determined by the IRB and the Institutional Office for the Protection of Research Subjects.

**DATE:** June 5, 2008  
**TO:** Dr. Robert Futrell, Sociology  
**FROM:** Office for the Protection of Research Subjects  
**RE:** Notification of IRB Action by Dr. Paul Jones, Co-Chair  
Protocol Title: **The Last Boys' Club: Order, Ritual, and Community in a Las Vegas Casino Sportsbook**  
Protocol #: 0803-2680

*COPY*  
*6/16/08*  
*OP*

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects  
UNLV IRB Approved  
MAY 22 2009  
Expires MAY 22 2009

This memorandum is notification that the project referenced above has been reviewed by the UNLV Social/Behavioral Institutional Review Board (IRB) as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes 45 CFR 46. The protocol has been reviewed and approved.

The protocol is approved for a period of one year from the date of IRB approval. The expiration date of this protocol is May 22, 2009. Work on the project may begin as soon as you receive written notification from the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS).

#### PLEASE NOTE:

Attached to this approval notice is the official **Informed Consent/Assent (IC/IA) Form** for this study. The IC/IA contains an official approval stamp. Only copies of this official IC/IA form may be used when obtaining consent. Please keep the original for your records.

Should there be any change to the protocol, it will be necessary to submit a **Modification Form** through OPRS. No changes may be made to the existing protocol until modifications have been approved by the IRB.

Should the use of human subjects described in this protocol continue beyond May 22, 2009, it would be necessary to submit a **Continuing Review Request Form** 60 days before the expiration date.

If you have questions or require any assistance, please contact the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at [OPRS@humanSubjects@unlv.edu](mailto:OPRS@humanSubjects@unlv.edu) or call 895-2794.

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects  
4505 Maryland Parkway • Box 151047 • Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-1047  
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VITA

Graduate College  
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Degrees:

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Dissertation Title: The Boys' Club: An Exploration into the Social World of a Las Vegas  
Casino Sports Book

Dissertation Examination Committee:

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Committee Member, Bo Bernhard, Ph.D.  
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Graduate Faculty Representative, David Schwartz, Ph.D.