

# The Value of Gambling (Research)

A session at the Finnish Anthropology Conference 2010:  
“Ideas of Value: Inquiries in Anthropology”

**Session Date:** May 11, 2010

**Chair & Organizer:** Pauliina Raento (pauliina.raento@helsinki.fi)

## A Brief Description

Gambling is a prominent part of Finnish culture and a major financial contributor to society. The complex phenomenon and its contemporary global change offer multiple leads for the curious academic, and gambling research in Finland is now growing. The presentations in this session address prime topics and upcoming approaches in the cultural and social-scientific study of gambling. The discussion encourages new openings. A summarizing commentary binds together the four paper presentations. The session demonstrates the intellectual value of gambling research and the value of interdisciplinarity in approaching multi-faceted topics.

## Contributions & Abstracts

### **The Introduction of the Roulette and the Changing Consumer Culture in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s**

RIITTA MATILAINEN

University of Helsinki

[riitta.matilainen@helsinki.fi](mailto:riitta.matilainen@helsinki.fi)

According to Gerda Reith, it has long been recognized that analysis of what may appear trivial or mundane can generate insights into fundamental aspects of social life. This is my starting point for studying the introduction of the game of roulette in Finland in the 1960s at the same time as Finns were experiencing extremely rapid structural and social changes. The focus of the presentation is to regard a new legalized form of gambling (i.e. roulette) and to its related discourses and practices as clues in an effort to analyze the changing consumer and leisure mentalities and cultures of Finns.

After some experimentation of roulettes onboard the ships travelling to Germany it became legal to place roulettes in high-class Finnish restaurants and night clubs in 1969. It needs to be noted that the first casino was established in Finland as late as in 1991. Before that restaurant, night clubs, and ships travelling to Stockholm and Germany were the only legal places for roulette playing in Finland. Many newspapers and magazines welcomed the introduction of roulette as a way of offering Finns a glimpse into the “big world” of gambling associated with casinos like that in Monte Carlo, beautiful women and chances of making or losing fortunes overnight. The roulette was considered a sign of Finland finally measuring up to the Western European standards and to the “continental” way of life and consumer culture. However, there was an interesting discrepancy between the image of the roulette and the reality of the game since the price of the chip was very low and so were the winnings in order to avoid accusations of downright gambling. Of interest are also class and gender aspects concerning the roulette. Roulette was marketed as a form of gambling especially suitable for middle and upper classes but was in fact

democratized and tamed to fit the image of Finnish state-governed gambling. The role of women was important in the introduction of the roulette; contrary to many other European countries many of the first croupiers were women.

The source material of the presentation consists of 14 contemporary newspaper and magazine articles, interviews of first Finnish croupiers (published in a book), official documents of the roulette operator Finland's Slot Machine Association (hence RAY), and legal documents such as memorandums.

## **The Good, the Bad and the Money: Gambling among African and Asian Immigrants in Finland**

PERPETUAL CRENTSIL

University of Helsinki

[perpetual.crentsil@helsinki.fi](mailto:perpetual.crentsil@helsinki.fi)

Gambling among African and Asian immigrants in Finland has its uniquely good sides and bad sides, although the gambling practices and attitudes among this group, as racial and ethnic minorities, have been understudied and less documented. Gambling among this group is rooted in social relations and culture and it has contradictory perceptions, experiences and effects. Gambling has even its positive impact on people as well as the economy of the society, although it can also bring about bad effects such as debts and other problems for the individual and families. Stories and narrations about gambling tell things about culture and the societies involved, where events and actions gain significance in a particular social and moral universe. This paper takes insights from the anthropological perspective on gambling as a social and cultural phenomenon (Binde 2007), which raises questions about culture, society, values, human agency, and social relations. Again, in gambling is seen binary structures and images of money as a test of morals and character, luck and ill-luck, good and evil/bad, rewards and unfulfilled dreams or desires, etc., which are structured within specific themes, values, and cultural constructions of the society and people involved. For instance, money, luck, sharing what one has, and social relations are highly valued. Money is an empowering substance and valued as a central denominator for economic activities, including gambling, but there are also ambivalent attitudes about it. These cultural constructions and values portray how meaning-laden gambling is in relation to general social and cultural matters, and makes it fit for inquiries to be made.

*Keywords:* gambling perceptions, values, money, African and Asian immigrants, Finland

## **The Social Value of Gambling Online**

JANI KINNUNEN

University of Tampere

[jani.kinnunen@uta.fi](mailto:jani.kinnunen@uta.fi)

Online gambling has become very popular in recent years. There have been gambling games online since 1990s. At first traditional gambling games were moved to digital environment without considerable modifications. Playing these games meant playing against the game operator. There was no need for interaction between players and usually there weren't even possibilities for players to interact. This is why online gambling is usually seen as asocial activity even today.

At the same time the internet in general have evolved towards more social environment, online gambling and new forms of social interaction have been integrated. There are plenty of online gambling games which players play against each other rather than against

the game operator. Unlike traditional gambling games, these games are not pure games of chance but they require also some level of skill from the players. Players compete against other players, which is the ground for social interaction also before and after these games in game-related online communities.

New forms of online gambling can attract also those players who don't play traditional gambling games. Money is not necessarily the prime motivation to gamble. Social rewards can be valued higher than monetary wins or losses. On the other hand money and other virtual currencies work also as meters which determine player's status in game-related communities.

## **A Game of Money, Skill or Threat? Reflections on the Ethical Discussion Concerning Online Poker in Finland**

JUKKA JOUHKI

University of Jyväskylä

[jukka.jouhki@jyu.fi](mailto:jukka.jouhki@jyu.fi)

Finland's Slot Machine Association (RAY) is a state-run gambling organization that will launch an online poker service for Finns in 2010. This article describes and analyzes the ethical discussion provoked by an article in *Helsingin Sanomat* (the leading national newspaper) on the issue, and considers the various moral viewpoints taken of RAY as an online poker service provider, as well as discussing online poker as a wider contemporary phenomenon.

*Keywords:* online poker, moral, discourse, Finland, ethics, state, gambling

### **A Commentary**

PAULIINA RAENTO

The Finnish Foundation for Gaming Research & University of Helsinki

[pauliina.raento@helsinki.fi](mailto:pauliina.raento@helsinki.fi) OR [raento@pelisaatio.fi](mailto:raento@pelisaatio.fi)

The discussion reflects on the four presentations; highlights the value of interdisciplinary gambling research; and addresses some future directions in research, especially from the perspective of Anthropology and related fields.

### **About the Participants**

PERPETUAL CRENTSIL is a post-doctoral researcher in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Helsinki. She is currently working on a project about African and Asian immigrant gambling in Finland

JUKKA JOUHKI is a post-doctoral researcher in Cultural Anthropology at the Department of History and Ethnology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. His current project explores online poker as a cultural phenomenon.

JANI KINNUNEN works as a researcher at the Game Research Lab of the University of Tampere, Finland. He has participated in several research projects about gambling. Currently he is working in the project "Social Play among Casual, Cross-Media Contents" and writing his doctoral dissertation.

RIITTA MATILAINEN is a Doctoral Student in Social Science History at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her on-going dissertation work focuses on Finnish gambling in the 1920s through to the 1970s.

PAULIINA RAENTO is Research Director of The Finnish Foundation for Gaming Research and Professor of Human Geography at the University of Helsinki. Most of her gambling-related research focuses on space, place, and culture in Las Vegas.