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## Evoking Luck

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Evoking Luck

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
Sociology

by

Kianna Simmons

BS University of Louisiana, 2009

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## **Abstract**

Gambling is a universal activity, although not a recently studied behavior in Sociological literature. This study uses symbolic interaction, play, and illusion of control theories to examine luck rituals at casino slots. Gamblers were observed through covert participant observations over a seven-month observation period in The casino, and yielded 388 observations. Analysis of the gamblers demonstrated the fact that luck rituals do exist and are used at the slot machines in a casino setting. Luck rituals are associated with participants' belief in their ability to control the uncontrollable. The illusion of control provides a framework through which the results are discussed. Illusions of control are particularly likely to occur in situations with a high amount of uncertainty. This study showed that more women and African Americans participate in luck rituals than men.

Keywords: Gambling, theory of illusion, superstitions, rituals

## Introduction

Gambling is widespread and crosses all demographic groups inside and outside of the United States. The British Gambling Prevalence Survey (BGPS) (2010) says that 73% of the British population (35.5 million) adults ages 16 and up participated in some form of gambling. Gambling by most definitions is the risking of something of value on the unknown outcome of some future event. Dictionary.com (2012) specifically defines gambling as: 1) play at any game of chance for money or other stakes; or 2) stake or risk money, or anything of value, on the outcome of something involving chance.

It is assumed that risk taking is something that occurs in many individuals' daily lives. Risk taking can be done through making any decision: for example, small risks like whether to follow or exceed the speed limit or larger risks such as paying the rent or buying a television. In the United States there are many venues in which individuals can partake in the activity of gambling. Individuals can go to a football or basketball game and bet on the outcome. Individuals can place these bets informally with friends or formally with a bookmaker. Furthermore, many assume that people go to a casino to gamble with a belief in the chance to increase one's wealth, though a casino does offer other activities. Once in the casino, bettors cannot do any side bets; strictly formal betting occurs only at the tables and the slots.

Gambling is a phenomenon in which people believe that they can get something for nothing. The entire objective is for the better to win or to break even (no money lost or won). One common conceptualization of gambling consists of an array of casino

games such as craps, roulette, slot machines, and card games (i.e. black jack or poker). In casinos, many individuals use the activity of gambling to divert from their reality, as “gambling is an escape from the routine and boredom of much of modern industrial life” (Bloch 1951: 217). Gamblers take a chance and risk their money in order to leave with more than they came in with. Some argue that “taking a chance’ destroys routine and hence is pleasurable” (Bloch 1951: 217). Research shows that gamblers attempt to control the chaotic world around them and reduce the risk of losing money.

This study seeks to examine the rituals gamblers do to evoke luck. In gambling, luck is sought and employed for the purpose of having control over future outcomes, and is done regardless of whether it is rational or not. I specifically look at the behaviors individuals use to maintain luck, which I refer to as luck rituals. I define luck rituals at a slot machine as repetitive acts done by patrons before or during the time the reels spin in order to evoke luck. More specifically, I think the luck rituals that participants use are in order to complete the fantasy of casino gambling and to maintain control.

For this study, I will examine how luck rituals are used in regards to playing slot machines, also known as the “slots.” Slots are chosen because they are a true game of chance that is to say that the slots involve no one else but the person and the game. Regardless of the individual playing the game, the slots give the same odds. The game requires no skills or prior knowledge in order to play, and with the slots, individuals have the least control over the game and its outcomes.

The study of luck rituals can give insight on a topic that has not been abundantly studied. In fact, most studies were conducted in the 1900’s, were done mostly by



psychologists, and were framed as a form of pathology. Studies on how individuals evoke luck are particularly scarce in the field of Sociology. John Rosecrance, an American sociologist, looked at the habits of bettors on horse racing. Most of the current literature, to my knowledge, is based on the behavior of gambling as an addiction. Historically, gambling was recreation for many and had widespread participation. Throughout the years gambling has been stigmatized, deconstructed and embedded into society. Though gambling has become more accepted in society and more people now gamble, there is still a lack of literature on non-pathological gamblers' behaviors. Researchers have mainly dwelled on the gambling behaviors of those that are considered pathological.

Gambling cuts across all classes, racial and ethnic lines, and in many cases a greater proportion of society are gamblers than are non-gamblers (Frey 1984). Gambling is a persistent and institutionalized form of behavior and gambling studies could be helpful from a public policy standpoint (Frey 1984). The studies of non-pathological gamblers could be advantageous since most gamblers are not addicted to gambling. Basing a majority of the studies on pathological gamblers leaves a vast majority of the gambling population out of the larger discourse on gambling. Though other disciplines have explored gambling behavior, there have been no definitive conclusions made about it.

This study takes a different perspective on gambling behavior. It assumes that individual's actions while gambling are used to assert control on the outside world, with the outside world being the world outside of the fantasy or reality. Drawing on an ethnographic approach, this study will describe and explain the rituals gamblers use to

complete their fantasy and seeks to explore the ways they feel that they are able to maintain some sense of control within an uncertain and uncontrollable situation-i.e. slot machines. Luck rituals allow an illusion of control. This study is significant because I believe these behaviors are important primarily because of the popularity of gambling around the world and across social groups, and also because of the amount of time, energy, and resources that people and cities put into it.

## **Literature Review**

### **History of Gambling**

Historically, people gambled for the “possessions of their dead, the possessions of their living friends and relatives, to settle legal disputes, establish rights to various resources, and on the outcome of athletic contest and other competitive events” (Aasved 2003: 3). Gambling began in American society as a form of recreation and then later became stigmatized and looked down upon, as society often assumed that individuals who gambled were addicted to gambling. The gambler was “condemned largely for his failure to perform the normal productive functions ordinarily expected of him, rather than because of the nature of gambling itself” (Bloch 1951: 1). Bloch (1951) framed gambling as a social ill and thought that it interfered with normal assumption of responsibility, which organized society compels. “Gambling addiction occurred when the individual consistently and continuously neglected his important primary duties and obligations to his family, employer, and community for the sake of gambling” (Bloch 1951: 219). Frey cited Bloch as stating that others saw gambling as dysfunctional because it was “disruptive to family, conducive to criminal activities, and disruptive of an

individual's normal capacity of work" (Bloch 1951, as quoted in Frey 1984 110-111).

This caused an individual to go against law and order and commit crimes in order to accomplish his purpose. Embezzlement was a common crime committed by gamblers (Bloch 1951). Bloch (1951) thought that gambling had characteristics that were similar to those of organized crime (Bloch 1951; Schelling 1967).

## **Government**

It is also important to note the larger social implications of gambling and casinos. Gambling is not only used by the participants but it is also used by the government. Studies have shown that "gambling is increasingly being recognized by national and local governments throughout the United States and the world as an effective means of generating revenues" (Aasved 2003: 3). Specifically, lotteries have become one of the biggest money makers run by the government. Marx stated that "the sanctioning of gambling by the political and economic structures represents an effort by elites to manipulate and exploit the masses of a society" (Frey 1984:112). Likewise, Cosgrave and Klassen argued that "the government seeks to regulate gambling as part of their own (governing) activities, and in doing so attempt to define and regulate the actions of citizens" (2001: 4).

Gambling has many dimensions and has much variety. It varies not only in the ways one can participate, but also in who participates and in the locations where the actual behavior can occur. Cosgrave and Klassen noted, "the legalization of a variety of forms of gambling has contributed, at least tacitly, to the social acceptance of gambling activity, and for many citizens, lottery players and sports bettors for example, gambling

has become a routine aspect of everyday life” (2001: 3). Gambling locations can be legal venues, such as casinos, internet and racetracks, as well as illegal venues such as homes and school properties. The individuals that participate in this behavior can also vary in terms of demographic characteristics, such as race, sex, socioeconomic status, religion and ethnicity.

### **Why People Gamble**

Smith and Preston (1984) investigated the motives individuals had for gambling and found that the predominant motive was for play and leisure. Kusyszyn (1976) claimed that gambling satisfied the needs of the participants for recreation and play. “Kusyszyn viewed play as providing people with wish fulfillment, conflict reduction, and escape from reality such as daily routine and the world of work and change from a passive to active life (Smith and Preston 1984: 326). Allport stated that the motive to gamble, once it had achieved a “functional autonomy” of its own, may dominate other primary considerations of the personality (Allport 1937; Bloch 1951 219).

The play and leisure aspect of gambling is something that is primarily enjoyed by the middle and upper classes. Unlike the middle class, the poor were often motivated by monetary gain when deciding to make a gambling trip (Smith and Preston 1984). Those with higher education levels were more likely to gamble with the motive of play or leisure. Conversely, those with lower educational attainment were more likely to gamble with the motive of winning money.

Gambling can be seen as a form of play for adults. According to Huizinga (1955) an activity is play if it is fully absorbing, includes elements of uncertainty, involves a sense of illusion or exaggeration but most importantly, exists outside of ordinary life.

Kusyszyn argues that gambling can be a release from reality and can transport the self into a play world, which is a fantasy world where the gambler is suspended until jarred back into reality by the finish of the last race or the disappearance of their money (Kusyszyn 1984). "In these worlds, individuals can abandon the superego (consciousness) and act on pure id (pleasure principle) instincts" (Kusyszyn 1984: 135). In the "play world" money can lose its market value (i.e. \$20 equals a pair of pants); according to Kusyszyn (1984) casinos use plastic chips to encourage the devaluation of money in order to encourage the loss of money's market value.

Gambling meets all aspects associated with Huizinga's (1955) definition of play. Namely, "gambling can be fully absorbing because players can go into a trance-like state pulling the arm (lever) of the one armed bandit (slot machine) for hours at a time until they are completely fatigued" (Kusyszyn 1984: 140). Gambling includes elements of uncertainty- this is demonstrated by merely looking at the definition of the word. Risking things without the knowledge of the future outcome most certainly creates a sense of uncertainty.

Huizinga's (1955) primary characteristic of play is that it must exist outside of ordinary life. Gambling's ability to always have a place (i.e. race track, casino, bingo hall, or card rooms) for it to occur coincides with this notion. Gambling as play gives individuals the chance to achieve a sense of freedom through absolute autonomy via their ability to choose the way they want to gamble. The sense of illusion and exaggeration heightens the gamblers' hope of winning. Both the aspect of autonomy and sense of illusion can be seen in the gamblers' "belief in control and how that control can direct behavior and transcend actual control" (Lefcourt 1973; Kusyszyn 1984).

Some gamblers think that they can affect their environment by doing things such as blowing on dice and rooting for their horses. These activities probably represent their belief in the ability to have control of an uncertain situation.

Gambling allows an individual to have a sense of agency in a generally uncertain and uncontrollable aspect of life. "Gamblers exhibit a freedom of choice in that, independent of their own free will, they can choose the game they most desire" (Kusyszyn 1984: 136-137). The illegalities of gambling allow participants to see it as action. Action is found "whenever the individual knowingly takes consequential chances perceived as avoidable" (Goffman 1967; Frey 1984: 113). Additionally, "by keeping gambling illegal and segregated and by expressing moral distaste for its existence, prevailing ethical and economic values are reinforced" (Frey 1984: 110). Action activities are consequential and fateful because something of value can be won or lost on the outcome and by committing something of value, players indicate their seriousness. As such, "gambling thus presents an opportunity display or an extrinsic desire to demonstrate self composition to the outside world" (Goffman 1967).

Society causes individuals to have contradictory pursuits for living their lives. Frey argued that "on the one hand, there have been cultural demands for routine, controlled orderliness, and predictability. On the other hand, there is the pressure to experiment, to take a chance, to be entrepreneurial" (1984: 109). The strong pressures from society to conform and routinize one's life make it hard to engage in the latter of the two pursuits. "Gambling permits one to protest against budgetary restraints and rationality while permitting thrill seeking, competitive aggression, and problem solving" (Frey 1984: 108). Gambling gives the participants a way to step outside of the norms of

society. This can be achieved in a socially acceptable, not completely illegal (depending on the time period) manner. Gambling opportunities and venues have multiplied, making gambling an increasingly accessible, socially acceptable and popular activity (Griffiths 1989; Desai et al. 2005; Chiu and Storm 2009).

Although it is not one of the main motives individuals attribute to their gambling, the belief in luck is something that affects a vast amount of participants. Due to the uncertainty in the act of gambling, many participants draw on luck, perhaps irrationally, to reclaim or regain control. Researchers have contended that a belief in good luck may be adaptive and that positive illusions surrounding luck can lead to feelings of confidence, control and optimism (Darke and Freedman 1997; Chiu and Storm 2009). Rudski (2004) also examined optimism and control, although his study looking at optimism and control incorporated the illusion of control and the use of superstitions.

George McCall (1963) spoke of the lottery and stated that throughout relevant literature the playing of the lottery is considered wasteful. For example, sociological writings surrounding issues of lotteries and gambling often framed these issues as social problems. McCall also stated that participation in this behavior required a belief in luck, spiritualism, and dream interpretation, all of which were disproportionately associated with black and lower income cultures due to their lack of access to actual resources (McCall 1963; Frey 1984). Frey (1984) refuted the idea and stated that individuals in the middle class and non-blacks played the numbers more than the lower class and blacks. For Frey, the belief in luck along with monetary gain was often believed to be the motive for gambling regardless of racial background or social class.

When participants get a win they attribute it to luck, rather than attributing it to some external factor, which is more likely when the outcome is a loss. Scholars have noted that “people frequently underestimate the likelihood of experiencing negative events and overestimate the likelihood of experiencing positive events- an effect which generally increases with perceived controllability” (McKenna 1993; Rudski 2004, 312). Luck is considered to be an irrational, erroneous thought. Thus, pathological gamblers and occasional gamblers have irrational and erroneous thoughts. Gaboury and Ladouceur (1989) had participants verbalize their thoughts as they gambled. The results showed that 70% of gamblers’ perceptions while gambling were irrational (Ladouceur 2004). Many individuals showed a sense of rationality when they understood that the game was based on luck but then had altered perceptions when they were in the act of gambling. We see that “adequate beliefs reflect the idea that the results of the game are determined by chance, while erroneous beliefs involve the idea of prediction and control over the outcome of the game” (Ladouceur 2004:556).

The research in this area is severely lacking and most of it is somewhat segmented and fractured. Further, the majority of the literature is older, with few studies being from the twenty-first century. While there are a limited number of sociological studies that examine gambling as a non-pathological behavior, most studies have been done by psychologists and physicians who primarily focus on pathological gamblers and how to help them with their addiction. These gamblers are believed to be the typical gambler, though statistics show that a majority of gamblers are more recreational.

## **Theory**



The symbolic interactionist approach draws meaning and significance to the game play behaviors and illusion of control. Symbolic Interactionism looks at human interaction and communication at both the micro and macro level. This perspective can be utilized not only to examine the act of gambling, but can also take the actual gamblers and the physical games into context (Evans and Hance 1998). Symbolic Interactionism can be used to frame the argument that “gambling cannot exist without a social system in which to gamble” (Evans and Hance 1998: 413). Goffman’s theories can show that while gambling, individuals pretend to be something they are not because the individuals around them do not have to know them or their true identities (1967). Individuals also pretend to have more money by losing what they have and acting as if it does not affect them because they have the money to risk (Goffman 1967; Evans and Hance 1998). Pretending actually helps the individuals, because to them “the nature of play is much less important than the appearance of play” (Frey 1984:113).

Previous work from the symbolic interactionist perspective has shown that gambling falls under at least four types of play: 1) chance (alea), also known as pure chance; 2) competition (agon), with games that involve skill; 3) mimicry role playing situations; and 4) vertigo (ilinx) which are mood altering experiences (Evans and Hance 1998; Young 2010; Aasvad 2010). Gambling can encompass all four aspects of play and can cause gamblers to go into a “different world.” In this alternate world of gambling, participants “are no longer aware of fatigue and are scarcely conscious of what is going on around them” (Evans and Hance 1998:413). Through this lack of awareness, individuals can lose their sense of rationality and begin to develop erroneous cognitions. These erroneous cognitions can give a gambler a bit of hope and

perceived control of an uncontrollable situation. While gambling, the participants start to “erroneously believe in winning and losing streaks and in false probabilities rather than in purely random occurrence of events” (Aasvad 2010:104). These aspects of play have also been explored in the theory of play; which comes out of the symbolic interaction paradigm.

## **Play Theory**

Play theory states that gamblers do not participate in the phenomenon of gambling for monetary gain, but solely for the entertainment. Aasvad (2010) looks at play as something that is essential to human needs, much like the needs for sex and food (Aasvad 2010). He also states that play was one of the main catalysts for the evolution of ancient societies (Aasvad 2010). Play is seen as something that is not serious and is separated from the main parts of the participants’ mundane life. Huizinga (1955) believes that this separation is necessary in order for an activity to be truly deemed as play. Play is also seen as something that can absorb the individuals that participate in it (Kusyszyn 1984: Aasvad 2010). This absorption into the world of play can produce a euphoric feeling for the individuals, and also result in a relief of tension that may otherwise be unattainable in the participants’ ordinary lives (Huizinga 1955; Aasvad 2010). This euphoric feeling can cause individuals to have the illusion that they have an ability to change outcomes, in particular the outcomes of their gambling endeavor.

## **The Illusion of Control**

Langer (1975) defines illusion of control theory as “an expectancy of a personal success probability that exceeds the objective probability of the outcome” (Langer 1975;

Hageman 2010). More simply defined, illusion of control is the mistaken belief that one can influence outcomes in situations where one actually has no control (Rudski 2004). Langer (1975) did several experiments on the illusion of control, namely, one experiment involving lottery tickets. She allowed some of the participants to choose their tickets and others were given tickets. Each group was later given an opportunity to switch their tickets for others with a more favorable outcome. Individuals that chose their tickets were less likely to exchange (Langer 1975; Thompson 1999). Illusion of control can be common even if the event is something that is based on pure chance.

In these pure chance situations individuals can still overestimate their degree of control. Illusion of control is based on both situational factors and personal-based factors (Thompson 1999). Situational factors include personal involvement (individual as active agent), familiarity (working with familiar circumstances or tools), foreknowledge of the desired outcome (knowing the outcome you want to receive) and success at the task (receiving successful outcomes). Personal based factors include the presence of depression or a feeling of wanting to be in control (Thompson 1999). Individuals have a tendency to confuse situations of chance with situations that involve skill. These different situations can be misconstrued by conflating characteristics involved with skill-based activities (e.g. familiarity, choice, involvement) (Thompson 1999).

Thompson et al. (1998) stated that Langer's (1975) theory was not a complete explanation (of what?) so they attempted to create a more thorough definition using the concept of control heuristic. Control heuristic can be defined as a short cut or simple rule and was created to look at the degree of influence over an outcome (Thompson 1999). Illusion of control theory did not show how the perceived connection of one's

actions and the desired outcome could change the participants' perspectives (Thompson 1999; Hageman 2010). The theory of the illusion of control is criticized for broadly describing the characteristics for the behavior; however Langer's theory was also criticized for the emphasis on skill-related cues as the predominant reason for the illusions.

This project draws on the theory of the illusion of control to look at the phenomenon of gambling. This theory is especially fitting in regards to what characteristics these participants exhibit in their behaviors. The theory demonstrates why gamblers continue to gamble, even with unfavorable outcomes, and why gambling is an activity that crosses all demographics. The theory also sheds light on why gamblers behave the way that they do when gambling. This theory shows that individuals will do different things to help gain a sense of control, and this theory was paramount in helping me explore the rituals gamblers used to evoke luck and a sense of control.

## **Research Design & Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study is aimed at learning and understanding a particular cultural phenomena, gambling, to speak to the greater system of meanings in our culture related to luck and chance. As such, I employed an ethnographic research design. This design allows the researcher to “explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems” and conditions (Creswell 2009: 232).

This research occurs in the natural setting of a public casino. Within the casino, is where the researcher records the participant behavior. Ethnographies use the natural settings for in-depth observations over a period of time. This design elucidates patterns in-group behavior that may not be otherwise recognized.

This paper examines the broad culture-sharing behavior of individuals and groups through an ethnographic inquiry into luck rituals evident in casino gambling. As previously stated, an ethnography is a qualitative strategy of inquiry where “researchers study an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time by collecting primarily observational and interview data”(Creswell 2009: 232). Further, “the intent of ethnographic research is to obtain a holistic picture of the subject of study with emphasis on portraying the everyday experiences of individuals observing and interviewing them and relevant others” (Fraenkel and Wallen 1990; Miller 1992). Ethnography has both observational and narrative aspects and does not focus on the experimental aspects that are normally associated with quantitative research. Ethnographies can be used to acquire points of view that are often over looked in other types of research.

### **Researcher’s Role**

My perception of gambling is shaped by my personal experiences with gambling. I have worked in a casino since February of 2011, first as a security officer and now as a slot attendant. In both positions I have been able to interact with guests as they game. In the past two years I have seen many different things happen in the casino. Presently, working as a slot attendant, I am constantly in contact with participants playing slot machines. This constant interaction enhances my ability to observe what the patrons

are doing. Walking on the floor for eight to ten hours allows me to hear the patrons' conversations about a variety of topics, including their reasons for performing different rituals. The participants often help each other "learn the ropes" when it comes to tactics they can take to enhance their ability to win. I have also talked and interacted with other employees who have been in the industry for many years. These interactions have taught me things about various phenomena that occur in the casino along with its culture, all of which has enhanced my knowledge of the slot machines and the gambling industry itself. These interactions and placement within the casino has allowed me to gain an in depth knowledge of the slot machines and importantly, the site itself. While working in this setting I was in graduate school gaining a sociological perspective and critical eye. My academic work, along with my placement in casino culture has given me the opportunity to critically explore gambling culture and luck rituals. This critical eye helped me notice certain patterns that were occurring that others might seem commonplace.

Because I am involved in the gambling process as an employee, my own perceptions may be tainted. While this may appear as bias, I believe it can also be a strength as I have a strong understanding of this particular casino culture and its participants. I did record the exact behavior that was witnessed. Then these observations are categorized using a detailed coding analysis. Further, I only recorded behavior I believed to be reasonably explained from within the casino or gambling culture. In many cases, behaviors may have ambiguous or unclear. These cases were not coded due to their lack of reliability.

My own world view, which is a “basic set of beliefs that guide my actions” (Guba 1990: 70) reflects a social constructivist perspective. This view “holds assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell 2009: 8).

## **Methodology**

Qualitative observations describe a research methodology in which “the researcher takes field notes on the behavior and activities of individuals at the research sites and records observation” (Creswell 2009). Observations can show things the way they are rather than as an exemplified phenomenon. Knowledge for the layman can be expanded because observations are easy to read and understand when described using rich description.

Data for this study were collected through hours of observations over a 7 month period, and then narrowed to fit the scope of my focus. Covert observations were done to obtain the information needed for this study. These observations were conducted at a land based casino in an urban area. I conducted my observations as a covert observer, meaning that I did not participate in the actions or behaviors. Rather, I solely observed the behaviors as they occurred. From a methodological standpoint, this observation process had benefits and drawbacks. The main benefit was that I did not interrupt the natural setting in which the behaviors occurred. Hatch (2002) describes the qualitative strengths of a documented observation as providing an understanding of “the cultures, setting or social phenomenon being studied from the perspectives of the participants” (72). In contrast, Janesick (2004) stresses the importance of an interpretation as offering “a clear description of unintended moments in the research, intuitive informed

hunches, ethical concerns and issues, and a serious description of the researcher's role in the entire history of the project" (156). The individuals did not know they were being observed and therefore did not have the chance to change or hide any aspect of their behavior. Since the group under observation was not aware they were being researched, the problem of an observer effect was avoided (Livesey 1995). One problem associated with only observing the participants was that I did not get their exact perspectives or feedback of the situation, which could provide insight into why individuals participated in the different luck rituals. The participants' feedback could also show whether or not the participants engaged in the behaviors consciously.

Overall I separated out 170 individual observations of luck rituals during a seven-month observation period. Data collection began in May 2011 and ended December 2011. The data were obtained on as many weekend shifts as possible. One potential limitation to this project is that the data were obtained on mostly night and early morning weekend shifts. However, in my interactions with other employees and in this space, I would argue are still applicable to other days and times.

The observations were conducted for approximately one hour on my eight to ten hour shifts. The observation was done on as many shifts as possible; usually about three to four shifts per week. These shifts were usually during the mid-evening to early morning (7pm to 3am or 8pm to 4am).

Initially, I observed and recorded the events I saw going on in the casino with no particular aim. Through these initial observations, it occurred to me that the players might be doing things to "help" their chances of winning, as they played, with a set of



unique behaviors. It was with that set of observations that I narrowed the scope of this project down to those behaviors that showed patrons interacting directly with the machines in some fashion. The individuals observed were subsequently selected based on their participation in these aforementioned behaviors. I observed an individual participating in the behavior at least five times before I recorded it as a ritual. I observed the behavior five times to make sure that the action was not a one-time event. I also heard the conversations that the patrons were having with one another and these conversations shed light on the things I saw while confirming my notions about the actions that were occurring. I also had informal conversations with other employees that reinforced the things I was hearing in the patrons' conversations.

To record these observations I used a small composition notebook so that I could immediately record what I was observing. I carried the notebook with me on the floor as I worked. It was located in the pouch I wear as part of my work uniform. With each observation, I tried to record the participants' perceived race, perceived sex and their attire. Later, I expanded on the jottings of the observations to detailed field notes.

After expanding on the notes, I began the coding process categorizing all of the observations and using open coding. According to Babbie (2004), "coding is the key process in the analysis of qualitative research data" (376). I used an inductive coding system, categorizing the data by similarities in the behavior. What emerged were the following ten codes: yelling, talking, touching, ticket rituals, button rituals, multi-gaming, other, not working, gestures and charm.

After the initial coding, these categorizations were organized by similarities of behavior. This process led to the development of the themes: evoking luck as physical contact with the machine, evoking luck as verbal language and evoking luck as non-verbal language.

I checked my code definitions to ensure that they were correct and conveyed exactly what I needed them to. I also checked my field notes before I transferred them from my notebook and then double checked after they were transferred. This study is not generalizable, it is exploratory. It may be transformative in that it identifies issues that may be applicable to any urban casino.

The validity of my findings (Creswell 2009) are insured in several different ways. These strategies include: rich description of data, long term and repeated observations, and peer examination. I used a rich description of the data by giving a full and accurate description of the setting so that the reader would feel as if s/he was truly there. I performed long term and repeated observations, which were done for approximately 8-9 months at the same site. I have used peer examination by having a fellow Sociology graduate student or faculty member examine my work.

I also acknowledge the limitations of this study. Namely, the lack of conversation with the guest brings in a problem of not knowing exactly why the gambling rituals are done. I can only speculate from the 2 years of working in the casino about the behaviors during my specified research period, and can not directly speak to the motivations of the participants. The days and times of the observations can also be a problem. There is not a large variety of times and days throughout my observations and as a result, this

could have potentially yielded a specific sample of demographic characteristics of the participants. The lack of literature in this field of study also brings up as I had little to work from academically in planning my research and informing my various questions and areas of focus. As such, this work is largely exploratory. Specifically, much of the information provided is from my personal lengthy observations and personal experiences rather published academic work. However, I also believe that a scholarly exploration of this culture and these rituals is one of my primary contributions with this project.

## **Ethics**

The names of the participants are not included in this project to ensure anonymity. Other identifying characteristics were also changed. All needs and rights of the individuals observed were completely respected and I did not violate these individuals in any way. There was be no photographic images of the individuals nor will any audio be used. I only recorded my observations in my notebook.

## **Findings**

### **Analysis**

Walking up to the casino from Main Street, the waving palm trees welcome you to the property. As one nears the imposing edifice, the shine and sparkle of the strategically placed lights grow more inviting. Walking up the stairs one gets an obscured view of the inside of the casino. Then the intimidating gold trimmed doors open widely to a small enclosure, which leads to the second set of doors. These doors lead the way to a wooden podium where a seated security officer is smiling and

checking identifications. Music is playing over the sound system. Upon entering the casino, the smell of grilling hamburgers and freshly cooked French fries enters one's nose. The sweet smell of caramel lattes can also be recognized. There is an abundance of smells. This can vary from the scents that other patrons are wearing, the different restaurants, cigarette smoke, and hint of the cleaning chemicals used by the casino staff. Throughout the casino there are different restaurants that range from high-end steak and Asian cuisine to the lesser priced burgers and Panini's. In the casino, every sense is engaged and every need is satisfied.

As one walks under the twinkling stars on the night's sky painted ceiling, several high definition televisions are on display, along with hundreds of two-foot machines sitting on three-foot stands. Progressing into the casino the flashing lights of decorated slot machines and the mechanical beeps grow more intense with each passing step. Walking through this sea of alluring refrigerator-sized slot machines, an array of faces in all different stages of emotions becomes blatantly visible. They range from ecstatic to sadly depressed. One can also hear the non-simultaneous sounds of the slot machines. The noises heard can vary from sounds of ringing bells for wins or recognizable music playing from various bonus rounds. Noise, is the perfect word for all the sounds combined. Nothing is in sync and all the sounds are loud, confused, and most definitely can be disturbing to one's thoughts...until individuals become numb to the noise, as most workers and regulars do.

After passing the two large sections of 100's of slot machines, one can see players huddled around tables playing blackjack and three-card poker. Going toward the middle of the casino one can hear other patrons' range of emotions. They vary from

happily cheering or talking (because of the money won), to sulking and occasionally weeping because all their money is gone. The pungent stench of loss mixing in with the funk of stale alcohol and burnt cigarettes can overwhelm one's senses. The cacophony of noises one can hear, all at once, walking through this large casino can also send one into sensory overload. Coming into a large casino can leave one with mixed emotions. This experience can leave one hyper-stimulated and wanting more, and for others it can leave a sense of fear and confusion.

The casino's large facility is constructed in way that is conducive to play and leisure. It allows individuals to participate in an activity that provides them with amusement and allows them to get away from the demands of their everyday life. The casino has five different entrances. The entrances are located at each major street that intersects the property. Once inside individuals are engaged through all of their senses. Visually, players will see thousands of slot machines. The price to play these slot machines ranges from one cent to \$500. Patrons will see large displays, such as two life size displays, a pirate ship and one of city landscapes. Patrons hear lots of different sounds including background house music and the slot machines' themselves with bells and whistles sounding off. Some of the machines even talk to you. Depending on the section, different types of music can be heard. The music from the slot machine bonuses can also be heard throughout the entire casino.

The casino is designed in such a way as to keep patrons distracted and disorient them from time and the real world. The only way one can see outside to be near one of these entrance/exit doors. Other than these doors, The casino has no windows throughout the casino. This makes it hard for individuals to know what it looks like

outside and as a result this throws off the gamers' perception of time. The fact that there are no clocks in the casino helps with the misinterpretation of time. Many employees do not wear watches, which makes it hard for the patrons to identify the time of day. Individuals will come in and stay for hours without even realizing what time it is or how much time has passed. The casino has strategically placed machines near every entrance/exit doors, restrooms, and restaurants. When a patron wants to leave they are drawn back in for "just one more spin."

There are many different perspectives on risk when it comes to gambling at the casino. A large portion of the patrons that come in play slots rather than the table games. Slot machines are one of the top revenue makers in this casino. One reason for this may be that slot machines are not complicated games. If patrons get confused, they can simply look on the machine for the help sections or ask a slot attendant to explain the game. The machines' help sections show the game's pay line and what constitutes a win. Like Blackjack, slot machines are a popular form of gambling. They may be considered more entertaining than the table games because the slot machines, unlike the table games, light up, have bright colors, play music and allow for free money to be won in bonus rounds. Further, patrons that enjoy card games played at the tables can also play them electronically.

## **Slot Machines**

This study focused specifically on the slot machines. These games require no skill, preparation, ability, or knowledge. The games place all people on the same level because slots are made to be completely random. This ultimately gives the individual that chooses to participate in this game no control over the outcome. Participants have

an illusion that they may control this uncontrollable system. With this illusion they may do things they feel will encourage a change in their overall outcome.

There are two primary types of machines, old-fashioned reel slots, also known as one arm bandits, and the electronic machines. The electronic machines consist of electronic slots and video poker. The old fashioned slots often have three to six wheels that spin. Each wheel has images printed on them. To win on these slot games players must match the images from the left most reel to the right in order to receive the designated rewards. The reels can be spun by either pulling the lever on the right of the machine or pushing the bet or spin button on the front of the machine. These machines merely make noises when matches are made; they do nothing extra like the electronic slots.

The electronic slots have touch screens which makes the game more interactive for the players. These slots, like the old-fashioned ones, have several spinning reels. The difference is that these spin digitally rather than having physical spinning reels. Due to these games being controlled by computers the players are more involved in the games they play. The electronic slots also allow the patrons to place bets at a quicker pace than when playing old-fashioned slots. These games give players the chance to participate in bonus rounds during play. Bonus rounds allow the players to win free money. This is considered free money because patrons can win free spins, uncover money in matching games, or choose from given options in which they wager no money. During the bonus rounds players may hear different kinds of music or voices that coincide with the games they are playing or see cartoons that act out various skits.

The other form of electronic games is video poker. The poker slots are simulations of various poker games. These games often come equipped with touch screens. The poker games are often multi-game machines and consist of different types of poker games and different types of keno (which is similar to the lottery concept of choosing numbers). Individuals can bet using the touch screen or the buttons on the front of the machine. Players can choose the cards they want to keep by pressing the hold buttons and discard the rest using the deal button.

Slot games give the player variety in their betting amounts. There is variety due to the pay lines a game has. Even with one pay line a player has the option to choose how many credits s/he wants to bet per spin. The slots, whether old-fashioned or electronic, can have multiple pay lines though many of the old-fashioned games only have one pay line. The slot machines with one pay line give players' only one way to win. The images have to be on the pay line or it is not a win. The winnings are often distributed in coins. That is why these machines are associated with the clinging of coins. Through the new technology the machines have moved away from distributing the winnings in the form of coins. The new way to pay is through the "Ticket in, Ticket out" system. Individuals cashing out now receive a digital ticket that can either be turned back into cash or put in another machine and turned into credits. Though the one-arm bandits are not the most alluring games for beginners, these are usually the slots suggested to casino novices. They are the least complicated to comprehend and will not leave the player wondering why his/her money is disappearing. The slot machines with multiple pay lines give players more ways to win. With multiple pay lines, players have the option to make even more variation in their bets. The patrons can choose either



more lines with a smaller bet or bet less lines and more money. The more the player bets the better chance they have to trigger a bonus round. Multiple pay lines can ultimately yield more money, though it may cost more to accrue this money.

The individuals I observed were patrons at the slot machines. The participants in the slot area varied on all demographic aspects though all individuals were males or females aged twenty-one and over. This was deduced through the checks of identification, by security, at each entrance. These individuals appeared to hold different socioeconomic statuses, which was indicated through the clothing worn and the amount one spent. The participants were observed while gambling in the casino at one of the many slot machines. They were observed as they used different strategies to evoke luck as they played. The setting was within the thirteen slot areas in the casino. These areas contain only slot machines with the table games being on the outskirts.

## **Themes and Codes**

I defined luck rituals as a repetitive act done by patrons after a “good” play or while reels spun in order to evoke luck. Patrons participated in these behaviors to complete their illusion of control. This illusion caused players to have faith in their own abilities to alter the randomness of the game. These codes were considered rituals because they were reoccurring, which I realized in my observations. The rituals were not normal behaviors associated with the gaming process, like putting money in a games or placing a bet, because they were not necessary for the game to be played. These actions were extra and did not contribute to the outcome, which as we know was already decided.

**Table 1**

| Evoking Luck as Verbal Language |                   |            |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|------------|
| Behavior                        | # Of participants | Percentage |
| Yelling                         | 17                | 4%         |
| Talking                         | 7                 | 2%         |
| Theme Total                     | 24                | 6%         |
| Total Observations              | 388               |            |

### **Luck Rituals as a verbal language**

One of the predominant forms of luck ritual I observed was verbal language spoken to the machine. I observed and subsequently coded “yelling” and “talking” directly to the machine. The code “yelling” refers to the patrons that were talking in a louder tone. “Talking” refers to a patron that was speaking in a regular tone of voice. Yelling and talking were verbal attempts to evoke luck and change the outcome of the spinning reels. These codes occurred after a bet was placed and the reels began to spin. These codes were used to ask for certain outcomes to occur. Neither of these codes was needed for the slot machines to perform properly. These were not done by all patrons that gambled, but they were evident in 6% of all participants observed.

#### **Yelling**

Several players referred to characters of certain slot games by name. One Caucasian woman who was casually dressed in a t-shirt and slacks talked to the *Wizard of Oz* machine she was playing. She said, “Come on king of the forest, Where ya at

wizard, Where ya at wizard.” She was obviously not talking to an actual wizard or king of the forest. She was referring to characters in the game. Having these characters show up meant she won in the bonus round and the machine awarded more money to the player. Another woman playing at the *Wizard of Oz* machine yelled, “go wizard go!” Her yelling was encouragement for the wizard that controlled the bonus round. The patrons asked for things needed to make matches and win money. An example of this occurred when a Hispanic man dressed in business casual clothing yelled “come on” at the machine when the image he wanted was directly above the pay line. Yelling is a different action than talking because of the volume the individual uses. For the most part patrons yelled things directly to the machine but some patrons just talked to the machine. It appeared that the talking ritual was mainly performed by African American woman and men. An African American woman’s bonus round ended and she began talking to the game after she did not win anything in the bonus round.

Yelling seemed to be popular mostly among Caucasian women. The previous chart shows a difference in the amount of yelling females did compared to men. Women yelled more often than men. Yelling occurred twenty-four different times among the luck behaviors.

**Table 2**

| Evoking Luck as Physical Contact with Machine |                   |            |
|---|-------------------|------------|
| Behavior                                      | # Of participants | Percentage |
| Touching                                      | 42                | 11%        |

**Table 2 continued**

|                    |     |     |
|--------------------|-----|-----|
| Button Rituals     | 37  | 10% |
| Ticket Rituals     | 16  | 4%  |
| Multi- Gaming      | 7   | 2%  |
| Theme Total        | 102 | 26% |
| Total Observations | 388 |     |

### **Luck rituals as physical contact with machine**

Physically interacting with the machine is the next relevant theme I will discuss.

The codes that emerged were: touching, button ritual, ticket ritual, and multi-gaming.

These were physical things done directly to the machine in order to evoke luck and alter the outcome of the spinning reels. These actions were engaged in by 26% of all the participants I observed. Two of the top three behaviors are in this theme. This theme stood out as the one that most participants engaged in.

#### **Touching**

Touching is the primary code within this theme. I consider it to be the primary code because both women and men participated in this activity the most. Touching is a physical interaction with the machine's monitor. The code "touching" encompassed not only when a patron was touching but also rubbing, hitting and tapping on a machine's monitor. This occurred after a bet was placed and the reels began to spin. As the reels spun the patron interacted with the reels through the monitor. The activity that the patrons engaged in the most was knocking on the monitor. For example, an African

American woman who was professionally dressed in a business suit was knocking on the screen as the reels spun. I observed that knocking was popular with African American and Caucasian women while African American men used a more aggressive tactic. The men appeared to beat or hit the machine's monitor. A comfortably dressed African American man in sweat pants and a hoodie was hitting the machine with an open hand as the reels spun. Another African American man beat the monitor before each spin. These actions did not disturb the outcomes that were already in motion. I observed these actions being done after several different bets.

Predominantly, African American women engaged in touching, though Caucasian women did as well but to a lesser extent. Both African American and Caucasian women knocked on the monitors. The theme chart above shows that women made physical contact with the monitor more than men. Touching occurred 42 times within 102 theme behaviors observed.

### **Button Rituals**

I define "button ritual" as the code for hitting the spin or bet buttons on the machine as the reels spun. In this code I included the action of pulling the lever. This is because the pulling of the lever is equivalent to the pressing of the spin button. They both cause the designated bet to occur. The bet or spin button was pressed multiple times in a row; once the patron placed their initial bet, the reels begin to spin. The patron also continued to hit the spin or bet button from the time the reels began to spin until the reels finished spinning. For example, an Asian woman dressed in a blouse and slacks was tapping the spin button from the beginning of the reels spinning to the time they stopped. Once the spin button was pressed the first time the ongoing presses did

not mean anything. The extra taps did not cause the reels to stop nor to slow down. The outcome of the spin would be the same whether the button was pressed once or continuously throughout the play. The players had different variations on the button rituals. For example, the patrons tapped, hit and pressed the button. Players also alternated between the bet and spin button after making their bet. A Caucasian male dressed in a button down shirt and jeans alternated between the spin and bet button each spin.

My observations showed that button rituals predominately occurred with Caucasian women. The Caucasian women I observed participated in button rituals in the form of tapping. The females I observed hit the spin button more than the males did. When the males did participate they predominately tapped the spin button. Men were the only ones that alternated between the bet and spin button.

### **Ticket Rituals**

“Ticket ritual” is a code for cashing out a ticket and putting the ticket or cash back in the same machine. This was often done after what the player considered a win or a “taxable.” A taxable was winning 1200 dollars or more, which is an amount that has to be taxed by the state. Often after a patron wins a taxable they assumed that the machine would not hit again and consequently, they would leave to play another machine. Working at The casino I often experienced patrons asking me if games have hit while I was there or if I knew the last time a game had hit. A casually dressed Caucasian woman cashed out her money and her ticket jammed and after an attendant fixed it she put her ticket right back into the same game and began to play again. Another Caucasian woman cashed out her money after winning and then put cash into

the same game. An African American woman wearing a t-shirt and jeans took her money out of the game after winning some money and then told her nicely dressed friend (who was in a blouse and jeans), “that’s how you win but you can’t put your money back in, I mean you can just cash out” and then she put a five dollar bill back into the machine. The players tried to change the outcome of their next spin by “tricking” the machine. The trick was cashing out but never leaving and this was believed to make the machine think a new player had come to play. The process of cashing out the ticket and replaying it at the same machine did not change the outcome of the slot machines. The outcome was random and would occur whether or not it was the same patron or a new one.

During my observations I overheard the patrons rationalizing this behavior. The patrons said that taking the ticket out makes the game believe that there is a new patron playing and may give them a better chance of hitting. The code “ticket ritual” appeared to mostly be done by Caucasian females with African American females very close behind in numbers. Women participated in this behavior more than men. I observed one Caucasian man participating in the ticket ritual behavior; however this does not mean that more men do not participate in this behavior on an everyday basis.

### **Multi-Gaming**

I used the code “multi-gaming” for patrons who played multiple games at one time. The patron put their money in multiple games and played them simultaneously. For example, an African American woman wearing a dress played two games but had money in three. Some of the individuals directed their attention to one of the games as they bet on two games. A Caucasian woman who I observed playing two games

simultaneously was only watching one of the game's reels spin. Playing multiple games did not alter any of the game's randomness. The only thing that occurred in this situation was that the patron added in the random systems of the other games. Regardless of the number of machines with money in them, they all independently have their own random system.

During my observations I heard patrons say that this was done to increase their chances of hitting. This was an attempt to optimize the chance of winning big money. My observations showed that women did this behavior and this was mostly done by Caucasian women and African American women. I did not observe a man participating in this behavior, which is not to say that this situation does not occur, but I did not see it during my observation period.

**Table 3**

| Evoking Luck as Non Verbal |                   |            |
|----------------------------|-------------------|------------|
| Behavior                   | # Of participants | Percentage |
| Other                      | 17                | 4%         |
| Not working                | 14                | 4%         |
| Gestures                   | 10                | 3%         |
| Charm                      | 3                 | 0.8%       |
| Theme Total                | 44                | 11%        |
| Total Observations         | 388               |            |



## **Luck rituals as non- verbal language**

In this theme I included the codes not working, gestures, other, and charms. I referred to this theme as non-verbal because the patrons were not speaking. It was separate from the physical interaction theme because the patrons were not physically interacting with the machine they were playing. These codes were mainly based on my perceptions and the body language of the participants.

## **Other**

Other is a code that I used for the patrons' use of other individuals during their gaming process. Often times, while the patron was partaking in the gaming process and went into the bonus round, rather than trying their own luck they enlisted the help of others. For example, a Caucasian woman who was casually dressed in a t-shirt and jeans got another woman, who appeared to be with her, to play her bonus round because she said that she had not been lucky lately. An African American woman who was nicely dressed in a blouse and some jeans went into the bonus round, which had a matching game, and she also had another woman make her choices for her. The players also used others to determine what they should do in situations dealing with the machines they were playing. A Caucasian man and a Caucasian woman asked an African American woman for advice on what they should do after they won some money. They asked her whether or not they should continue to play the game or if they should cash their money out. Using someone else's judgment was thought to be able to change the outcome of what might be chosen in the bonus round. However, it did not change the true outcome of the bonus round because if the patron was randomly chosen to win in the bonus round, they would win the bonus round. I have seen a player with hundreds of free games come out with a couple of dollars and in some cases,

come out with nothing. This behavior showed up mainly with Caucasian men and women and African American women. Women enlisted the help of others more than the men did and my observations showed that the Caucasian women did this most often.

### **Not Working**

I describe the code of “not working” as the situation when a patron found a machine that they saw was not working and then decided to play it. During my observations I overheard patrons saying that when the machine did not work there was a better chance of hitting. Some believed that the game would malfunction and they would win. Some items that indicated the machines may need maintenance were: when call attendant appeared across the monitor, the light over the bill validator (cash acceptor) was not lit up, the machine showed that a ticket was jammed, or lights were blinking at the top of the machine. For instance, A Caucasian man dressed in a button down shirt and jeans was playing at a game that tilted, and after he got it fixed he continued to play. He continued to play at this machine even though it tilted four times during the duration of his play. An African American woman called for help on a machine that would not accept her coupon, though there was an identical game right next to it. There was an African American man wearing a button down shirt and jeans who asked an attendant to open his machine because he did not like the light that was blinking at the top of his machine. These minor problems could be fixed. To my knowledge these problems did not cause the games to malfunction and pay out big money. These problems pertained to the printer and the bill validator being jammed or damaged. Once fixed, the outcomes of the game still occurred as programmed. Fixing

these problems did not cause the game to reset like some of the patrons may have believe.

I observed 14 individuals migrating to machines that were not working. The women appeared to do this more than the men did. I observed this among all the women except for the Middle Eastern women. The Middle Eastern and Asian men were the only males that I did not see participating in this behavior.

### **Gesturing**

I defined gesturing as things that were done in front of the monitor but without saying anything or making any physical contact with the machine. Gestures were done after the bet was placed and the reels began to spin. The gestures could be things like fist shaking and finger flicking. For instance, an African American man dressed in a jacket and jeans shook his fist in the air as his reels were spinning. Another African American man dressed in a button down shirt and khakis shook a fist with one finger out in front of the monitor as the reels spun. These actions were merely gestures. They were used to express the wants the patrons had, which was the want for the reels to do something in their favor.

Women mostly did gestures and Caucasian and Hispanic women were the ones that participated in the behavior the most. I observed that African American and Hispanic men were the only men that participated in this behavior.

### **Lucky Charm**

"Lucky charm" is a code for an object a patron used to evoke luck. The charm could be big or small and the patron held the charm or even rubbed it. A Middle Eastern man played with a handful of hundred dollar bills in his right hand and he put one bill in

at a time. There was a Caucasian man dressed in business casual clothing that was rubbing a cross necklace that he was wearing, before and after each item he picked in the bonus round. A female, who was with him, also participated in the behavior. When it was her turn to choose in the bonus round she rubbed his necklace as well. The charms were used for each spin and they were used to attempt to influence the outcomes of the slot machines played.

The lucky charm code mainly appeared to be predominant with males. This behavior occurred 3 times out of the 44 behavior occurrences in the non-verbal theme. Two of the occurrences were done by men. This may seem small but those that did participate in the behavior made sure not to miss incorporating their charm in their gaming process, which is something that I found to be particularly noteworthy.

## **Discussion**

If superstition is defined as “an irrational belief that an object, action, or circumstance not logically related to a course of events influences its outcome,” (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language 2000) it coincides with the acts I referred to as luck ritual. This shows that my notion is not completely new. Though it is a different perspective from the articles I found which focused on horse races, flashing lights and lottery tickets rather than casino slot machines, I applied it to luck rituals at casino slot machines. I did not find articles linking luck rituals to slot machines. Researchers note that “if there is a universal truth about superstition, it is that superstitious behavior emerges as a result of uncertainty- to circumstances that are inherently random or uncontrollable” (Vyse 1997: 201 Rudski 2004: 312).

I have been in the gambling and casino culture for over two years. The behaviors I observed emerged as I was on the scene in the casino. The various behaviors and aspects of the culture also began to emerge to me as I was conducting a review of the relevant literature. The literature review showed that these rituals did exist, which aligned with my observations and research. I then focused in on and named the behaviors based on the things I observed with what I deemed was with reasonable certainty. Meaning, that I feel these behaviors were accurately observed from my station within the casino and as a scholar. I also tried to focus in on the areas that were academically lacking as a result of the gaps and holes I found in the literature. For example, the literature did not illustrate the exact phenomenon that I wanted to explore for this study. I am confident that the observed rituals I observed and used for this study were luck rituals through via my examination of the literature on luck and ritualization, in addition to my own observations, and talking with other employees.

I focused on luck rituals because luck is something that is wanted and sought out by most, if not all, gamblers. Luck gets one the positive outcome that is desired. The rituals I observed were used to produce a positive outcome, just as luck is. Therefore, I determined that the rituals were luck evoking actions.

These actions I described were all luck rituals but there were some that emerged as more significant than others. The codes that emerged the most within the 388 observations were touching, button rituals, yelling and involving others. The most significant theme was luck rituals as physical contact with the machine. This theme contained two of the top acts that I concluded were luck rituals. These four behaviors

came from each theme that emerged through my observations. Within these four behaviors, women averaged 17 more occurrences of the behaviors compared to men.

I considered these ritual behaviors because they were done multiple times in a row. As previously noted, I watched the player do the behavior five times before I wrote it down as an observation. This was to ensure that what I saw was not a one-time event. The gaming process only required the player to first put money into the game. Next, the patron chose the number of lines they wanted to play when playing a multi pay line game. The line was already chosen for them on a single pay line. Third, the patron chose the amount of credits they wanted to bet per spin. By doing these steps, a person was then gambling at the slots. The behaviors I observed were extra steps in the gaming process because they were not required for the gaming process to occur. However, it was a necessity to the individuals that engaged in the behaviors. I refer to these behaviors necessities because the player made sure to perform the behavior every time they bet. These rituals were necessary for the individuals to feel as if they were affecting the outcome of the spins. The individuals logically knew that the games were random and therefore uncontrollable. Though once engaged in the actual activity of playing the game they attempted to change the outcome of the game. These acts were used to complete their illusion of having some kind of control over the uncontrollable. As we know, “random and uncontrollable circumstances are the antecedent conditions for the display of the illusion of control” (Rudski 2004: 312).

I noticed that when I worked earlier shifts I observed more individuals participating in the ritual behaviors. This did not necessarily show up in my findings because I only worked a few early shifts, but it was something I noticed while I was

working during the early shifts. I also noticed that during the early time shifts there were a larger number of older patrons, as compared to the ones that I observed on my night shifts.

My observations showed more women playing at the slot machines than men. These observations show something different from the BGPS (2010), which showed that more men gamble than women. BGPS found that 75% of men and 71% of women participated in some form of gambling activity. My observations showed more African Americans playing the slots. African American men and women outnumbered all of their racial counterparts I observed. This could be due to the fact that the city in which I did my research is predominately populated by African Americans. This city also has a higher number of women than men. Caucasian and African American women participated in almost all the observed luck ritual behaviors.

I was surprised not to observe more Asian individuals gambling at the slots. This was surprising because the casino caters to the Asian demographic. They have Asian themed slots games, an entire section dedicated to Asian people and an entire night in the masquerade. The casino also makes sure to place individuals that can be perceived as Asian at the tables where Asian patrons predominately play. Initially I was surprised to see that more women played the slots than men. After some thought it began to make more sense because often times the men that come in play at the tables rather than the slots. I was also surprised when I did not observe any men participating in the multi-gaming behavior.

In the slots department there are some stereotypes that are formed based on the way certain patrons conduct themselves. Workers have different stereotypes based on certain races. There are also stereotypes related to the different slot sections that The casino has. Workers believe that African American patrons do not tip after winning a taxable. There are also stereotypes associated with Asian people, namely that they are perceived to be nosy. They often ask other patrons or attendants about the amounts of other patrons' taxables. Often times they try to look over the shoulder of attendants to see the amount of the taxable. The slot areas are stereotyped as a result of the majority that play in them. Though these stereotypes do exist among the employees they did not affect the occurrences of the luck rituals. The individuals' race and gender did not determine whether or not they would participate in this behavior. I observed six different races participating in some kind of luck ritual.

I acknowledge that there are some limitations to my study. The fact that I mainly worked on weekends could be a potential limitation, and the times that I worked can also be considered a limitation. Though I have worked weekday and earlier time shifts, the majority of the shifts I observed on were late night weekends. The times that I work provided me with a higher volume of people but they were also younger, as opposed to the older individuals that played during the day. The racial composition of the city and the city where I conducted the observations may also not be generalizable to other groups and people, however, I think the higher proportion of non-white individuals is a strength for the study as most research usually centers around white participants.



## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to employ ethnographic observations in order to explore gambling culture from within the casino, a place where it was not regarded as pathology or illness. I ended up finding rituals that individuals used to evoke luck while gambling at the slot machines. I find this to be most interesting because as someone who understands the various games available in the casino, the slot machines are the most probabilistic and require little input and no actual participant control. Prescribed by illusion of control theory, I did find that a great deal of rituals occurred. There were many behaviors that I observed that did not serve to actually win the games, however, they did seem to have occurred as a way to gain some form of imaginary control. This research has demonstrated the need/desire for control and to seek control to get particular outcomes even when this is irrational and not possible, such as with slot machines and in this casino. It is evident that luck rituals do exist and are practiced in this casino, and I would further extend to gambling culture. Rosecrance (1985) also found that gamblers used superstitions either to hold on to 'good luck' or to 'change one's luck.'

These observations of luck rituals aligned perfectly with the illusion of control theory. The rituals occurred due to the desire on the part of the patrons to complete the fantasy that goes along with the participation of gambling. The individuals observed used these actions with a notion that the actions would alter their games' ending results. This notion was an illusion because the games the participants were playing were games of pure chance. Regardless of the efforts of the individuals, the games' results were predetermined once the bet was placed and therefore could not be altered. These

actions gave the participants the illusion that they were having some type of control over their game's outcome. The actions were done due to the uncertainty of the game, which caused the participants to find some way to maintain control. This can be validated in the sense that one does not act this way when the outcome of a situation is known. For example, when one goes to a soda machine and makes a choice the outcome is known. Once the purchaser puts in the money and makes a selection the individual does not have to guess what happens next because they expect to get the beverage they have selected. With this situation individuals do not do any alternative rituals with the hope of receiving the beverage they want because their choice has already been made.

One particular limitation of my study is that I am unable to speak to motivations or behaviors that were not witnessed. I did not conduct interviews or speak with participants. As such, I am not able to speak to the motivations and how or whether the participants frame what they did as something to evoke "luck" or as some form of control. However, to a person that frequents the casino or other gambling scenes, I am confident that if I were to interview participants, these findings would be confirmed. I also suspect that I would be able to extend the findings and lay out even more rituals those that are not as easily witnessed or were more ambiguous to mere observation.

Future research should include interviews with participants so that I would be able to explore, understand, and depict their perspectives and how they go about forming their rituals. We would be able to learn about the motivations, thought processes of people, and potentially various actual outcomes and perhaps even speak to how reinforcements work in the gambling sphere. The questions provided by an interview could address the participants' feelings and cognition about luck and winning.

The participants would also be able to become more aware of their actions. Interview questions could seek to find out the participants general thoughts about rituals and luck. More specifically it could further examine the participants' motivations and awareness of their actions.

While superstitions and luck rituals have been applied to areas of sports and religion, they have yet to be applied to gambling. My research provides insight into a less observed group in the field of sociology and from within that group. This study looked at gambling as something other than a social problem and from within the casino culture. Rather, it showed how this behavior could be seen as recreation and play for adults and a relief or escape from everyday life rather than it as a problem to the individual and society. In this sense, my work makes a contribution by looking at gambling in a different way.

In application to rituals, this study illustrated how these patrons were attempting to grasp some kind of control in an uncontrollable environment via luck rituals. Even while gambling in a fantasy world created by the casino's atmosphere, which is outside the scope of "real life," the patrons were still trying to exert this phenomenon of control. This juxtaposition of rationality and irrationality highlights just how strong belief systems were to individuals. In spite of the irrationality of the system, it spilled over from everyday life to play. This study could be replicated in more casinos in this city and could then be conducted in other states in order to see if these actions are universal.

Gamblers are not so different from the athletes, pilots, or even religious people that utilize rituals in their everyday life. Life itself is an uncontrollable situation so many

individuals try to find some way to control the different aspects of their life. This is often done with various ritualistic behaviors. Once rituals are reinforced by a positive outcome, individuals will continue to use the rituals in various situations. This study illustrates the depth and importance of individuals' rituals and illusion of control.

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## **Vita**

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