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WOMEN AND POKER MACHINE GAMBLING:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE OF MAGIC, RITUAL, AND EMOTIONALITY



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for the degree
of Master of Arts in Social Anthropology
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“Fantasy Fortunes”

An abstract photograph of poker machines, reflecting how a player can become absorbed in a machine, as if in another time and space.

Abstract

Gambling is a phenomenon that has been present in most societies in a variety of forms for millennia. Poker machines are a more recent invention (since 1895), and have only been a form of gambling in New Zealand legally since 1 April 1988 (Grant 1994:289). More recently the poker machine appears to have become a favoured form of gambling for women and a stigma has become attached to women who enjoy playing the machines. Gambling appears to be a socially and culturally acceptable pastime for men, but not for women, as it apparently contravenes socially constructed ideals of womanhood. There have been reported cases of women gambling on poker machines and destroying their lives and those of their families, through embezzling money to feed their habit; the result for these women has been a prison sentence. While I acknowledge that this is a grave problem, which appears to have become more serious since the arrival of poker machines, I argue that this is only one side of the phenomenon.

The other side to this negative discourse, which focuses on the evils of playing the poker machines, is the positive effects that poker machine playing can have for some women, and this is the focus of my thesis. I have interviewed eight women ranging in age from 39-72 and the discussion in my thesis concentrates on the emotions and feelings the women experience and the reasons why they play the machines. I am aiming to portray the subjective reality of the women's lived experience from a feminist perspective using feminist research methodologies, and have undertaken many hours of participant observation in gambling venues around Auckland. Many women will not openly admit to playing the poker machines because of the stigma. Therefore one of my aims was to show that not all women who play the poker machines become pathological gamblers and ruin their lives, in an attempt to begin breaking down this stigma. There are many women who have agency and find playing the poker machines a pleasurable, positive experience, and this is the experience for the women I interviewed.

Dedication

In memory of my mother

Bernice Caroline Calkin

With her, I shared many happy hours

at the Casino and R.S.A.'s

playing the poker machines.

These memories gave me the

inspiration to write this thesis.

Thank you Mum

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Glossary

- Action card** This card is given to players by the Casino, and each time a player uses a machine they place the card in the slot. Every time the play button is pressed on the machine it collects points and depending on how many points are accumulated, there are corresponding gifts to exchange for the points. The card also enables the Casino to keep track of the amount of money a player spends and the number of his/her visits to the Casino, along with other information. (These cards were previously called Gold Card or Lucky Stars Card).
- Sky City Casino** The Auckland Casino which opened on 2 February 1996, shortly after the Christchurch Casino which was New Zealand's first Casino.
- Casino** Generally refers to the Auckland Sky City Casino unless otherwise stated.
- Club** A local R.S.A. Club.
- Hooked** A colloquial term used by poker machine players to describe when a person becomes so attracted to the machines they want to play all the time.

Hot and Cold	Terms used by poker machine players to indicate when a machine is ready to pay out (“hot”) or is not paying out (“cold”).
Hungry or Empty	Terms used by players when the poker machine is taking money all the time and not giving back very much in return, as winnings. It may mean the machine has just paid out a jackpot, or is near the start of a cycle and not due to give a big prize back to a player for a while.
Jackpot	The Casinos and pubs have their machines linked to a jackpot which is an amount that accumulates until a pre-set time when it will be won by a player. The Casino has many different jackpots running. R.S.A.’s usually have a maximum of \$1,000 and other venues have varying types of jackpots.
Multiple-Pay Machines	“Machines that pay out on more than one line depending on how many coins are played” (Scoblete 1994:168).
Pakeha	Non-Maori person, New Zealand born usually from European descent.
Payline	“The line upon which a player is paid at slots. Generally corresponds to the number of coins played” (Scoblete 1994:168).
Pokies	A shortened version of “poker machine” affectionately used amongst players, generally only in New Zealand and Australia. The pokies are called slot machines and fruit machines in other parts of the world.

Pub	A local public house, hotel or bar, some of which have poker machines.
Reel	“One of the loops inside a slot machine upon which the symbols are painted” (Scoblete 1994:170).
R.S.A.	Returned Servicemen’s Association.
T.A.B.	Totalisator Agency Board.
Video Slot Machine	“The use of a video display to simulate the spinning of reels” (Scoblete 1994:173)

Part A

