The public problem of ‘Aboriginal gambling’: winning the struggle for an urban space

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Abstract
Gambling by Aboriginal people is increasingly identified as a significant public problem in Australia, eliciting responses mainly concerned with measurement and harm minimisation. We adopt the utilitarian philosophy of John Dewey to critically examine the way this ‘problem’ is socially constructed. We recast our roles as pragmatic researcher-activists in the ongoing struggle to have Aboriginal practices taken seriously. We draw particularly on the work of a group of senior Yolŋu Aboriginal consultants and re-present their story of gambling alongside other research on the Aboriginal use of urban gambling spaces. This helps us develop a nuanced explication of the public problem, one that challenges existing discourses and proposed solutions. We identify an Aboriginal space being produced within existing casinos which is only supported reactively by government and casino owners, and met with anxiety by community service providers. We propose the radical idea of Aboriginal urban gambling venues as indicators of what is needed for a successful, state-supported, socially inclusionary and non-exploitative space for Aboriginal people, and what obstacles may stand in the way of achieving this. Through this process, we assess how, as participant researchers, we can help to reformulate of the public problem in a way that is more closely aligned to Aboriginal needs and aspirations.

Keywords: gambling, Aboriginal practices, urban space, utilitarianism, Northern Territory
Introduction

Gambling by Aboriginal people has emerged as a significant public issue both in the Northern Territory (Wild & Anderson 2007) and across Australia more generally (Stevens & Young 2010). Research and policy efforts are increasingly geared towards the identification of risk factors for gambling by Aboriginal people as well as the individual and collective harms associated with gambling (for example, Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council of NSW 2007; Stevens & Young 2009; Breen et al. 2010). In this paper, we take a step back from this problem-response framework to critically examine how the ‘problem of Aboriginal gambling’ is socially constructed. We adopt Dewey’s (1927) conception of public problems that, rather than existing as social facts waiting to be discovered, actively emerge from a process of collective action where existing habituated understandings are exposed as inadequate. The emergence of a public problem elicits a response from various actors who struggle both to redefine and to solve the problem from their various perspectives. As such, public problems can be proscriptive, reflecting and reproducing hegemonic interests to the point that they provide a conceptual straightjacket that limits the range of imaginable solutions (Addelson 2002).

In this vein, we argue that the contemporary discourse of Aboriginal gambling, from both policy and academic perspectives, fails to animate the public problem in inclusionary ways. As such, it disables the production of alternative directions and solutions that may benefit the range of parties involved. Indeed, we wrote this paper out of a shared commitment to the ongoing struggle to have Aboriginal practices of constructing everyday urban life, knowledge and agreement taken seriously within the policies and practices of government and other social institutions. To do this we draw particularly on the work of a group of senior Yolŋu (Aboriginal) bilingual, bicultural consultants who have been engaged over many years as teachers and researchers. The Yolŋu consist of many Aboriginal clan and language groups whose traditional country is in northeast Arnhem Land and who number in total about five thousand individuals. In order to challenge contemporary research and policy discourses that pathologise Aboriginal gambling we re-tell the story of the history of Yolŋu gambling and draw on other recent research we have conducted on the use of urban gambling spaces by Aboriginal people. Through this process, we assess the ways in which, as participant researchers, we can help to reformulate the public problem in a way that more closely matches Aboriginal needs and aspirations. In doing this we see governments, researchers and Aboriginal people as all participants in collective action capable of producing new responses to the problem of Aboriginal gambling, who, put more broadly in Addelson’s (2002) terms, are engaged in the pragmatic question of ‘How we should live?’

The public problem

To understand the emergence of Aboriginal gambling as a public problem we draw on Dewey’s (1927) work of political philosophy, *The Public and its Problems*. Dewey argued that the ‘truth value’ of any language statement
is a product of its practical consequences or efficacy. If social productions of statements of fact meet little resistance, then the ‘truth’, while socially constituted, can become reified or habituated. As such these orthodoxies or unreflective conventions are rarely challenged and largely invisible. It is only when these habituated conventions fail in the real world that public problems appear. Further, in Dewey’s view, the ‘public’ actually comes into being by virtue of the emergence of public problems. In this sense, the public is all those affected by a problem to the extent that there is an emergent need for a societal response (Dewey 1927: 15). Government instruments are actually called into being by a public problem and, in turn, define what or who the problem is. Addelson (2002) develops this point to argue that the nature of the problem is not given in the nature of things, it is in fact:

defined in terms of solutions that are (or can be) made available by certain people for other people. Public problems are defined by strategies and a range of solutions. Public problems are, in a broad sense, politically constructed – which is not to deny that there are sufferings, dangers and risks. But public problems are particular definitions of suffering, dangers and risks made by particular people and suited for particular solutions. They label what and who is the problem. (Addelson 2002: 128, original italics).

From this perspective, the public problem of Aboriginal gambling is not an objective condition lying in wait for the alert to discover, but emergent. Gambling, however it may be defined, as well as the notion of it as a problem, is part of an ensemble that includes casinos and open spaces, card-playing, alcohol and its abuse, the imperative to share and care, government initiatives and reports, children, kinship obligations, academics, the ‘moral majority’, research projects and papers, narratives and meta-narratives, and the notion of harm minimisation. Thus, viewing the public problem of Aboriginal gambling as constituted by participants in collective action allows us to suspend the questions of moral authority or the proper role of the state long enough to identify the participants and their differing constructions of the problem.

In this vein, we see ourselves as participants in collective action rather than as objective or distanced theorists. In Addelson’s terms, activist researchers may need temporarily to lay aside unifying top-down theory in preference for a pragmatic orientation towards a struggle for the reconstruction of specific, historically-located public problems in ways that allow for the production of new, emergent solutions. Indeed, the development of a public problem by definition opens new possibilities for creative action (Dewey 1927). Theoretical work needs to be employed selectively to take seriously the issues identified by Aboriginal participants in collective action and thereby to identify blind-spots and anxieties within the orthodoxies of contemporary gambling research and policy. This approach allows us to be respectful of both government and Aboriginal community members, and the participants in their worlds – even though these can be quite different. It also allows us temporarily to avoid the
metaphysics of western science as well as the individualism of western ethics and political philosophy. We approach gambling as a public as well as a social and an individual phenomenon.

The emergence of Aboriginal gambling as a public problem

Over the past decade there has been a trend towards increasing urbanisation of remote Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia, particularly in the primary towns of Darwin, a northern tropical coastal town, and Alice Springs, a desert settlement in the country’s interior (Taylor 2011). For those residing within an ‘Aboriginal domestic moral economy’ (Peterson & Taylor 2003: 107), urban pressures have highlighted a recurrent problem of how to (re)produce respectful and authentic Aboriginal lived realities within Western environmental, architectural, legal and commercial structures. One particularly ubiquitous social practice, the group card game or ‘card circle’, has been an important way in which Aboriginal people have managed social relations in grassy parklands in and around Darwin and Alice Springs. This non-commercial gambling is documented as an important way for Aboriginal groups to construct and manage spaces for economic, cultural and social activities (Altman 1985; Goodale 1987). However, the gambling landscape of the NT changed dramatically with the introduction of poker machines (the Australian variant of the Las Vegas-style slot machine) into the Darwin and Alice Springs casinos in the early 1980s, followed by their widespread introduction into the pub and club network from 1996. These gambling venues, particularly the casinos in Darwin and Alice Springs, emerged as key sites for Aboriginal engagement with urban space (Foote 1996; Young et al. 2011).

As gambling by Aboriginal people became more visible, a discourse emerged in the academic and policy literature framing ‘Aboriginal gambling’ as a significant public problem (for example, Wild & Anderson 2007; Young et al. 2007; Stevens & Young 2009, 2010). While we suggest that at best this label is conceptually bereft and at worst harbours racist overtones, in that the terms ‘whitefella gambling’ or ‘Greek gambling’ are equally ludicrous in their conflation of ethnic labels with complex and diverse behaviours, it has nonetheless captured the imagination of both researchers and policy makers. There has been an associated shift in emphasis from Aboriginal card games as a generally positive mechanism for resource distribution and self-determination (for example, Altman 1985; Goodale 1987) towards the identification of risk factors for problem gambling along Western public health lines (Stevens & Young 2009; 2010).

For example, Gambling Research Australia, the commissioning research body of the federal government, recently called for large-scale projects to examine the negative consequences of any identified shift by Aboriginal people from unregulated (that is, communal card games) into regulated gambling space (that is, casinos, pubs and clubs). Gambling problems, defined primarily in terms of a westernised, individual model of pathology and harm minimisation, are the inevitable focus of such research efforts (McMillen & Donnelly 2008).
it emerged as a public problem, Aboriginal gambling required a solution and the nature of Aboriginal gambling, and remedies for it, have been the focus of government-funded research efforts (Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council of NSW 2007; Breen et al. 2010).

In this context, the analysis by Collins (2007) of the emergence of excessive gambling as pathology is instructive. Collins argues that while excessive gambling is not new, the patterns of gambling and their associated emotional states and how they have been constructed as a specific mental disorder are (Collins 2007: 356). Indeed, pathological gambling, as a diagnosed form of mental illness, is relatively recent and only emerged as a public problem late in the 19th century (Collins 2007). In the context of gambling, this new category was created by the ‘psy’ sciences (that is, psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis) that invented new ways of talking about the person and new means of inspecting the population and the individual. These new ways claim to reveal deficiencies, differences, problems and deviations from the norm which have made new domains both visible and calculable (Collins 2007: 357).

In this analysis, it is the very process of observation and measurement itself, not the emergence of a naturalistic pathological gambler category, that made the phenomenon of the pathological gambler increasingly visible and consequently ‘real’ to scientific enquiry (Reith 2007: 11). It means the public problem is about how to save individual, flawed or failed consumers from themselves (Bauman 2007; Livingstone & Woolley 2007). In this context, the current pathologisation of remote Aboriginal consumption in general (Austin-Broos 2011) almost inevitably results in an anxiety regarding all Aboriginal gambling. We argue that this mainstream representation of the public problem diminishes our ability to offer alternative strategies for regulators, industry and gamblers. We seek to challenge the convenient genealogy of the pathologised subject of the Aboriginal gambler by introducing remote Aboriginal people as participants in the social sphere in new ways. As researchers, we specifically search for ways to reframe the public problem to include Aboriginal understandings of gambling, to which we turn in the following section.

**Participants in collective action: ancestral coming together spaces and their ordered practices**

*The Yolngu address the problem*

Commencing in 2004, Charles Darwin University (CDU) developed a program of gambling research, part of which was designed to examine gambling by the Indigenous population of the NT. This program was funded primarily by the Community Benefit Fund (CBF), managed by the NT Department of Justice, ‘to provide funding support for gambling-related research and amelioration programs concerned with problem gambling’. A key piece of research was reported in ‘Regulated gambling and problem gambling among Aborigines from
remote NT Communities: a Yolŋu case study’ (Christie et al. 2009). This report was produced via a two-day meeting of the Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultancy Initiative (YACI), a group of senior bilingual, bicultural Yolŋu knowledge authorities who come together to conduct collaborative cross-cultural research on public problems as diverse as water management, health interpreting and the education of the Yolŋu leaders of the future (see www.cdu.edu.au/yaci). In general, workshops take place over two days and are held almost entirely in Yolŋu languages, facilitated by CDU academics, including the first author, fluent in those languages.

Knowledge production from a Yolŋu perspective involves a great deal of negotiation, discussion, patience, humility and agreement making. Their epistemology does not involve searching for an objective truth ‘out there’, but rather, as in Dewey’s conceptualisation, an agreed understanding of the situation and an agreed way to move forward together. Like a Yolŋu ceremony (a parallel that will be developed further below), a research workshop involves collective reflection on where we have come from and why we are here. It begins with the question: ‘What does the Government want to know? Why do they want to know it?’ and ‘How might we help them to identify and solve the problem?’ People speak in turn, making comments, asking questions, affirming and revising. The conversation moves backwards and forwards around the room, issues are raised and considered, left to one side, key words brought up and noted, diagrams drawn on the whiteboard, stories told, protocols reviewed and statements made. Conducting all discussions in Yolŋu languages allows key Yolŋu concepts to be used and expanded before the complex work of translating important ideas into English is undertaken.

The YACI consultants were commissioned by the CBF to document ‘the perspectives on gambling held by people from remote Northern Territory communities who still live customary lifestyles and speak Australian languages (Christie et al. 2009: iii). The workshop, like all others, began with a focus on methodology. We discussed ways of eliciting and documenting consensus and variations of opinion in a way consistent with traditional Yolŋu practices of negotiation and agreement making. The terms of reference were then discussed, opening up questions about the commissioning research body (in this case the CBF), its roles, history and intentions. This led to some analysis of the ways in which Yolŋu agendas and perspectives may differ, as well as the diversity of perspectives within the Yolŋu world. At the end of the workshop each participant made a video recording which summed up their personal perspectives, particular key differences, recommendations and further comments. Contributions made in Yolŋu languages were transcribed and translated. The first author trawled the transcriptions and drew out key points of agreement to produce a draft report. After this difficult and complex process, and further discussion with the consultants, the draft report was presented at a CDU gambling research seminar and, after further clarifications, to the NT Department of Justice. Before we turn to the reception of the report by these stakeholders, we first discuss the meaning of gambling spaces for Yolŋu. We
outline the role of specially-designated ancestral spaces for traditional social, economic, political and cultural life (the garma), followed by the ancestral and contemporary roles of gambling (dopulu) in producing those spaces.

The garma space

Traditional social, political and economic lives in the pre-contact Aboriginal world mostly involved groups of people in extended families moving from place to place (on land to which they could always claim some kin link), continually meeting up with other related groups. The complex kinship system included strict requirements to avoid certain forms of interaction with people with whom one had a particular relationship (for example, a man must obey quite different avoidance rules when with his sisters, his mother-in-law or his grandmother-in-law). These rules demanded the careful use of spaces to facilitate practices of coming together and keeping apart. To allow for these rules to be observed, an extended family resting in the bush or the desert would always be deployed in several small groups, usually within viewing distance of each other. Larger groups occasionally gathered together to conduct large open ceremonies (often with a secret/sacred shelter off to the side for related business) where old people would reunite to renew their ceremonial practices and alliances, and younger people would meet under the watchful eyes of their elders. The perpetual ritual work entailed complex practices of exchange, revealing, concealing, meeting and segregation. While older people had (and continue to have) considerable political power, specially-designated spaces and finely defined and enforced kinship roles also participated in maintaining social order alongside a strong ethic of personal freedom.

In the Yolŋu languages of eastern Arnhem Land, any large open space designated for public ceremonial performances is called a garma. All around Australia similar designated spaces have been identified where larger groups of people would come together for ceremonial celebration (for example, the bora grounds of Queensland and NSW). In the Yolŋu lands, garma sites continue to be produced and renewed to enable and control intensive, generative and celebratory work on the parts of many different groups with different agendas – totemic groups, age groups, secret-business workers and kin groups. Garma represents more than simply an open, welcoming and supervised space. It also represents the creative and generative work which occurs when participants in collective action – people, songs, totemic objects, dances and other ritual practices – come together to celebrate, to renew old links and build new ones, to answer the question of ‘How should we go on together?’ in a setting of safety and mutual respect.

The notion of the garma and its generative practices inform the way in which the Yolŋu consultants engage with each other and with public problems. These methods at work in the YACI consultancies can also be found in Yolŋu conceptions of school curriculum (Ngurruwutthun 1991). The garma practices also imply a Yolŋu expectation of the good faith and commitment of the commissioners of research, an issue to which we will return later.
The game: dopulu

Card playing was introduced to Yolŋu by Macassans in the 19th century. With the arrival of the missionaries and mission settlements, card playing became a common way of producing and energizing a non-ceremonial garma setting. Our story traces this complex connection through to its contemporary urban contexts. The Yolŋu consultants at the YACI workshop firmly and somewhat unexpectedly retold some ancestral stories through which the ritualised practices of the garma, at some time in Yolŋu history and before the arrival of the missionaries, incorporated the exciting, sociable and economically-effective work of card playing. Before Europeans arrived, Macassan trepangers had been visiting the northern shores of Australia for so long, and usually on such good terms with the coastal Aboriginal people, that some of the clan groups belonging to the Yirritja moiety adopted some of what they had brought – bells, glass, flags, card playing, knives, tobacco, Muslim rites, calico and alcohol – into their totemic system (half the Yolŋu population belong to the Yirritja moiety and some of the Yirritja clan groups retain Macassan religious items in their ceremonial practices). Dopulu is the Macassan verb for card playing, appropriated into all Yolŋu languages. At the workshop, the older Yolŋu told of their own elders, many years ago, playing dopulu ceremonially with handmade cards marked with charcoal. This game playing, of course, did not involve stakes in the form of money, as this was not then in circulation on the mission settlements.

In an often recounted moment of Yolŋu history, the Macassans were permanently sent away by the Australian government in 1906 (Macknight 1976: 125). Macassan gambling practices had already been noted negatively by the French explorer Jules Dumont d’Urville: ‘The time that these men spend on shore after returning from the regular voyages entailed by this fishery is used by them to gamble away the little money that they have amassed’ (d’Urville in Macknight 1976: 47). But Australian Aboriginal gambling only became a public problem, in Addelson’s sense, with the arrival of the missionaries in 1926, two decades after the forced departure of the Macassans (Macknight 1976: 125). In the colonial context of small mission communities, Yolŋu needed to find new ways to manage avoidance relationships and deal with the modern world. The card circles not only provided spaces for controlled movement within kinship avoidance rules, they also increasingly served to enable the carefully managed redistribution of money – a problematic new commodity which could be accumulated disproportionately and convey immense economic and political power. Card circles were one of the many ways in mission life whereby people could come together from a complex network of kin connections, in a productive, collaborative (and maybe somewhat subversive) space and, while having a good time, carefully address a variety of traditional (and contemporary) social-political-economic problems. As always in Yolŋu life there are ongoing problems which need to be addressed slowly, strategically and collectively: how to feed the family, who has left and where they have gone, who has arrived or is expected, who is in hospital or in jail, plans for seasonal...
burning and hunting, and the dissemination of rumours and gossip. Card circles became a syncretic solution to many social and economic problems in mission life.

Before the arrival of missionaries, *dopulu* was a simple cultural-religious practice. The virtuous struggle of the Methodist missionaries to manage and convert the complex and heterodox morality of the Yolŋu produced Yolŋu gambling as a public problem. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had a special antipathy for gamblers who ‘made a trade of seizing on young and inexperienced men, and tricking them out of all their money and after they have beggared them, they frequently teach them the same mystery of iniquity’ (Wesley 1872: 7). In 1936, the Methodist Conference, the decision-making body of the Methodist Church, made clear in their *Declaration on Gambling* that ‘belief in luck cannot be reconciled with faith in God’. Today, long after the Methodist withdrawal, their religious practices coexist with frequent large card circles, starting early and continuing well into the night. The Methodist conception of gambling as a public problem is no longer dominant. In the workshop with Yolŋu consultants detailed earlier in this article, Maratja, a non-gambling bible translator and committed Christian, made clear that he considered being excluded from open and honest negotiations over the nature of the public problem much worse than actual card playing (Christie et al. 2009: 29).

In more recent times the public problem of gambling has become dominated by the bio-political discourse of the state. As a poignant example, on the way to the workshop, two of the consultants had seen, pinned up in a small airstrip on the north coast of Arnhem Land where their plane had landed, an unofficial sign made by the local police using cartoon cards and dice: ‘It is an offence to play cards for money or be present at a card game being played for money ... Stores will no longer be selling cards...’ (Christie et al. 2009: 15). While this is factually incorrect in that, according to a careful reading of the *NT Gaming Control Act*, card playing is not illegal, it is reflective of the moral panic of the NT Emergency Response (NTER) in which agents of the state had the power and inclination to arbitrarily condemn all gambling by Aboriginal people as pathological and requiring coercive control. The NTER explicitly lists gambling as the only excluded service targeted by the associated policy of income management (Lamb & Young 2011). Indeed, the Yolŋu at the workshop were indignant at the enlistment of the police and the NTER in the battle over Aboriginal gambling. They argued that only a small percentage of non-Indigenous gamblers are pathologised as problem gamblers, whereas *all* Aboriginal gambling is rendered pathological.

Regardless of the construction of the problem by the state and waning Christian ethics, there is widespread agreement (among Yolŋu) over the positive distributive effect of family card circles (although the anthropological literature remains contested, see Brady 2004). One of the consultants told the story of walking towards a card game with $40 in his pocket. He can feel the eyes of other people on the side of his head. Everyone knows that he has money in his pocket which he should share with others, and he feels uncomfortable. He joins
the card circle under a particular tree or streetlight, usually in a small group with his own extended family, but occasionally in a wider group with more distantly-related stakeholders. He has a good time, the money disappears, one of his other relatives has won, and he walks home happy. Or maybe he wins, and suddenly he has enough money to ‘make-em-up’, to buy the parts for his outboard motor or something for his mother-in-law. The powerful ethic against the personal accumulation of wealth and the practices of ‘demand sharing’ (Peterson 1993) were acknowledged: ‘even the losers are handed enough (money) to feed their kids as they leave the game’ (Yinjinya, quoted in Christie et al. 2009: 11). Card playing involving extended families is seen by the Yolŋu consultants as productive of win-win situations.

Policy implications

In the workshop there was very little discussion on the ‘problem’ of individual gambling. Problem gambling was consistently seen as a collective (rather than an individual) problem, and required a corresponding collective solution. Rather than addressing the needs of individuals, the Yolŋu recommended that governments sit down with old people and work something out together to restore a healthy social fabric under traditional governance:

There has to be from within the community some leaders with a clear mind and with some vision, with some wisdom, to say okay, we have to balance … to have a vision to see ahead, to move forward … Yolŋu have a discipline through our rituals and ancestral song that is like counselling in the Western society, and people can come out of it and really see themselves where they should really be … The real development must come from the people, because they are people with a destiny … The Government must work with the people, talk to the elders of the community and everybody, come to an agreed issue point … The Government must stop calling us disadvantaged … We need to be supporting each other, don’t take the control away from us, pushing us down. That’s part of the cause of the gambling problem (from the summary of quotations in Christie et al. 2009: 16).

In this spirit, the Yolŋu consultants offered an invitation to government to engage on very open terms when they worked together with the university researchers, to produce a report. The Yolŋu authored report asserted that:

At this stage there are no specific recommendations from the Yolŋu consultants. When the Community Benefit Committee members have read the report, they are asked to provide feedback to the Yolŋu Consultants. The Yolŋu Consultants have made clear that there are two further stages to this process: Providing further information and analysis or recommendations to the CBF on the basis of their feedback, and providing feedback to the communities on the outcomes of the consultancy, and future directions of the CBF. (Christie et al. 2009: 9, italics in original).
Having presented a strikingly unusual conception of gambling (and its ‘problems’) as well as a properly negotiated invitation to engage over the ‘problem’ on Yolŋu terms to identify a shared conception of the public problem, we were interested as researchers, as were the consultants, in the response we would receive from government.

At one level, the NT Department of Justice was clearly impressed with the report. Indeed, in a letter of thanks to the consultants, the Acting CEO of the NT Department of Justice wrote that the report had been sent to:

All staff in the NT Dept of Justice who work on gambling issues, NT Police, the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Gambling in Australia, members of Gambling Research Australia, members of the Services Advisory Council Responsible Gambling Working Party, the Indigenous Services Section of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, members of the NT Community Safety Working Group, and non-government organisations in the NT that work to promote safe gambling.

In this way, dozens of copies of the report ended up in the wider assemblage of organisations potentially involved in collective action, defining what and who is the problem. However, the NT government persisted with their definition of the problem in terms of individual pathology, despite the reverse intent and content of the report. For example, the letters of thanks to each of the consultants focused only on those small parts of the report that had addressed ‘problem gambling’ as it is understood by governments:

Because the research was undertaken in language, we are able to learn how Yolŋu families help people who cannot control their gambling … As you note in your Report, sometimes children are neglected if parents become too involved in gambling.

The response by the Productivity Commission was almost identical. The Commissioner similarly wrote individual letters of thanks to the consultants for their ‘unique and valuable source of information’. However, the only quotation from the Yolŋu consultants to appear in the final Productivity Commission report (2010: 7.12) suggested that ‘governments could set up more programs like Alcoholics Anonymous in our communities, not in the main centres but on our communities’. The Commission appeared to cherry-pick one quote that reinforced their own perception of the public problem, that is, the problematisation and individual pathologisation of gambling by Aboriginal people. And none of the groups who received copies of the report have shown any willingness to sit down and talk with Yolŋu. We conclude that the structure and process of government is beset by limitations in the extent that it can actually engage on Yolŋu terms both in the nature of the ‘problem’ and in a process for addressing it. However, workshops and research efforts notwithstanding, Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people have been addressing the public problem in their own quiet ways.
The Aboriginal re-invention of commercial gambling space

Shortly after the Yolŋu workshops were conducted, the second author was involved in a research project examining the use of Lasseter’s Casino, Alice Springs, by residents of remote Aboriginal communities. As part of this, he and a colleague conducted interviews with a range of key stakeholders who had knowledge about the use of the casino by Aboriginal people. These included social service providers (in Aboriginal health provision, alcohol and drug treatment, housing services and remote outreach services), local and state government representatives, and local Aboriginal community representatives from Alice Springs and surrounds. As Alice Springs is a relatively small community, a snowball sample was employed that started with a list of key contacts developed from the second author’s research in the jurisdiction over the past years. Individuals were invited to participate in an interview and/or suggest others to whom the team could potentially talk. As some interviews involved two or more people, 15 separate interviews were conducted that included the participation of 36 individuals. The overarching goal of these exploratory interviews was to find out more about the catchments and markets of electronic gaming machine (poker machine) venues, particularly the importance of the casino to Aboriginal social and economic life.

As two researchers working on quite separate projects in different locations (that is, Darwin and Alice Springs), we were impressed, first of all by the insistence on the part of both Aboriginal groups (separated by language, culture and a large geographical distance) that both the Darwin and the Alice Springs casinos are sites for the ongoing reproduction of social relations. This is supported (albeit unwittingly) by the casino infrastructure, the poker machines, the warm (in winter) and cool (in summer) spaces open until the early hours of the morning, and the security and other staff. One of the Alice Springs interviews was with a senior Akarre (a language group from north-east of Alice Springs) woman, herself an author and cultural ambassador. She explained the purpose of the casino as primarily social, a place where you can get news from different communities, find out about funerals, send messages and meet people (she emphasised both black and white). In her words, ‘it’s a real good channel place … the Casino’s like a big wildfire’. Further, ‘it’s good entertainment, good gathering, good socialising, good for meeting Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people’. Most of the other Aboriginal people we spoke to also emphasised the sociability of the casino, in that people visited from the bush, from town, and town camps. These included different ages, genders and social roles. As one Aboriginal man from a remote community put it ‘if you’re looking for someone, Lasseter’s [casino] is the meeting place’.

Thus the public problem of visible Aboriginal gambling has been transformed by the invention, as it were, of the ‘Aboriginal casino’. At least two parallel space-production practices have emerged. First, the casino companies and their non-Aboriginal clients are working together to produce a space in which all sober, reasonably dressed people over a particular age are allowed to enter for recreational purposes. Second, the Aboriginal patrons are also producing for
themselves, on their own terms, an urban space for their own ongoing work of reproducing social order and culture. Ironically, the Yolŋu and the central Australian Aboriginal casino patrons are both revisioning the casino space to achieve the sorts of connectedness in safe urban environments that government agencies – often enjoying very limited success – have been trying to provide.

Understanding the production of the casino in collective Aboriginal action suggests a new way of looking at the the ‘problem’ of ‘problem gambling’. Unlike the individualised, psychologised etiologies with their particular solutions (McMillen & Donnelly 2008: 407), the Yolŋu consultants identified the problem, at least for their communities, to be that money, honestly invested, is not satisfactorily redistributed by the casinos’ electronic gaming machines. The problem of gambling is thus the casino’s failure to mobilise the redistributive effects of social gambling. For example, at the end of a night at the casino, there are few winners from whom one can cadge the taxi fare home. Of course, casinos by their nature are economically exploitative, as are the smaller clubs and pubs that rely upon gambling revenues. In terms of the profits of electronic gaming machines, venues give back little to communities in a proportionate sense and the mechanisms for the redistribution are inequitable (Young et al. 2011). The inequality of resource distribution associated with regulated gambling has raised questions about how this system may change to incorporate the clearly productive Aboriginal uses of gambling spaces in ways that are not economically exploitative. Not seeing the casino as a site of wealth generation, the Yolŋu nonetheless embraced the other opportunities offered by its spaces and practices. The complex work of renewing and confirming extended kin connections while observing complex avoidance laws, the social and economic work that these connections entail, and even the serious political work of resource use and ceremonial planning are all taking place in the mixed space of the casino.

Towards an ‘Aboriginal venue’?

To this end we propose the collaborative production of an urban space which has all the positive aspects of an urban casino but which is organised through the state imperative of negotiated community benefit rather than the profit motive of the capitalist enterprise. Such a collaboration, we suggest, would entail the production and supervision of unique spaces which, while almost precisely what the Aboriginal consultants had in mind as they spoke to us, would require a radical re-thinking of some current policies and practices on the part of governments. These ‘Aboriginal venues’ would be an alternative to casinos, designed specifically to preserve all the positive aspects of casino spaces which Aboriginal people have worked hard to produce.

Inferring from the Yolŋu stories, the imagined space is attractive and secure with many sub-spaces for various activities. There is a sense of excitement, music, the possibility of a substantial gambling win, good reasonably-priced food and supervised alcohol consumption. More importantly, it would offer a relaxed time with extended family and more distant relations. It would differ from a
commercial casino in that children would be welcome, there would be outside
grassy spaces for gambling in card circles and, most importantly, poker machine
profits would be immediately recycled into the venue rather than disappearing
down the maw of the casino. There would be no need for memberships;
everyone would be welcome. In addition, government or NGOs could have a
space from which to offer social services to meet previously identified needs
such as finding safe places for women to sleep and secure places for their
belongings (Holmes & McRae-Williams 2008). If they were successful, we
would expect a drift of Aboriginal clients from the current casinos to Aboriginal
venues designed specifically to address Aboriginal social, political, cultural and
economic agendas. We might also expect a drift from poker machines to card
circles, where, as the Yolŋu point out, the profits are retained by the group,
the activity is social and people have a choice as to whom they play with. The
idea could be proposed in various places to see what reception it received.
Then a pilot venue could be developed, supported by Aboriginal communities,
organisations and the state. There would of course be problems, issues and
challenges on the way, but rather than seeing these as negative, we would learn
from them to develop models for other venues. It may be open to all, but the
ownership and control would be in Aboriginal hands.

Of course this is not an entirely new idea. Various attempts at Aboriginal
social clubs have been tried in the past. The first Aboriginal social club in
Australia, the Woden Town Club, Canberra, was opened on 3 June 1988, with
$596,000 in grants and loan guarantees from the Aboriginal Development
Commission (ADC) (Commonwealth of Australia 1988). The club acquired 47
poker machines in October of that year. Before long, there was some question
to about how nine of the machines had been acquired from the City Club.
Although Charlie Perkins, who was commissioner of the ADC and president of
the both the City Club and the Woden Town Club, was later cleared of personal
wrong-doing in the matter, the affair led to his resignation from the position of
Secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. After the removal of Perkins,
the ADC rescinded part of its funding for the Woden Club in December 1988,
causing it to go into liquidation in January 1989 (Sydney Morning Herald 1989:
7). The Government thereby abrogated the possibility of collective action to
address the problem the Woden Town Club was set up to solve. Unfortunately,
the potential impacts of the Woden Town Club, positive or negative, never really
had time to be manifest. The club was only open for six months before going
into liquidation and the poker machines were only purchased after three months
of operation.

Not long after, the Tyeweretye Social Club, an Aboriginal-owned club in Alice
Springs and the first of its kind in the town, was created in an attempt to
provide a safe, pleasant, family-orientated venue for Aboriginal patrons whether
drinking or otherwise (Brady 1998: 100). It boasted barbeques on the veranda,
pool-tables and televisions, grassy spaces for children to play and a small
supermarket selling food (Brady 1998: 100; Ferguson 2003: 87). Meals were
available and on Friday nights the club hosted popular Aboriginal bands (Brady 1998: 100). No commercial gambling took place at the Tyeweretye Social Club (that is, it had no EGM or TAB licenses).

Not long after Tyeweretye was announced, it became embroiled in controversy. Although a grass-roots Aboriginal initiative with its own board and membership made up largely of town camp dwellers (Shaw 1990: 12), there was significant opposition from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. A number of women from remote Aboriginal communities felt that the establishment of such a club would encourage men in their families to come to town more often, stay longer and drink more (d'Abbs et al. 1994). Prominent Aboriginal leaders such as Alison Anderson, then chairperson of Papunya Council, objected to the club on such grounds, preferring an abstinence-based approach to alcohol abuse (Thomson 1990: 2). Some non-Aboriginal opposition to the proposal was also evident, with the Chief Minister Paul Everingham’s representative in Alice Springs claiming that ‘it’s too late to teach Aboriginal people how to drink’ (Thomson 1990: 2).

Such objections gained sufficient currency with the NT Liquor Commission that Tyeweretye was denied its application for a beer-only liquor license in November 1990 (Bottral 1990: 3). However, Tyeweretye successfully fought this decision in the Supreme Court, arguing that the Liquor Commission made an error of law in allowing objections to be heard from those outside the ‘community’ of Alice Springs (Tyeweretye Club Incorporated v Northern Territory Liquor Commission 1992). The decision was reported welcomed by ‘the Aboriginal community, police, politicians and a royal commissioner on black deaths in custody’ (The Age 1993: 3). However, when the Tyeweretye Social Club finally opened in March 1993 it was picketed on its first day by 20 women from the Aboriginal community of Hermannsburg (Northern Territory News 2003: 12). Over time the club garnered a reputation for violence, deserved or otherwise, with reports of ‘massive brawls outside the venue... and repeatedly up to a dozen police cars rushed there with sirens screaming’ (Chlander 2006: 1). In 2001, a young man was stabbed to death in one such incident (Baxter 2001: 3). Although located in a low-density area, nearby residents and businesses complained of harassment by intoxicated patrons (Centralian Advocate 2006). No evaluation was conducted of the club in terms of its social impacts. However, given its failure to attract sufficient patrons to be self-supporting, it was unlikely to have had a substantial impact on the community in the manner intended. Ultimately, it was the lack of funds that led to the demise of Tyeweretye, which was never able to attract sufficient patronage, in part due to licensing issues (Richards 2009). The club defaulted on its start-up loan in March 2005 and soon closed (Thomson 2006: 4).

The two cited examples of Aboriginal social club initiatives apparently failed through lack of financial support. We argue that given revenue available to the government for gambling-related harm mitigation, it is worth revisiting the idea of a properly negotiated, government-subsidised, Aboriginal venue. We would argue that the primary point is that an Aboriginal venue, set up
for social benefit reasons, should not be expected to operate as a successful business. Instead, it should be subsidised by government, potentially drawing on the funds available to the CBF through the mandated 10 per cent tax on all poker machines in pubs. Land would need to be made available by government much the way it has for other ethnic groups in a series of clubs in Darwin (for example, the Italian Club at Marrara in Darwin). The location would need to be properly negotiated with Aboriginal users, not merely dictated by government. Unlike the Tyewerete Social Club, an Aboriginal Club would have poker machines which would place the establishment on a sounder financial footing in any case. Any profits would be returned to the Aboriginal club, rather than to commercial gambling businesses.

Of course there will be other difficulties in addressing these needs and issues. For one, the design and evaluation of such a space would involve a complex and largely empirical and participatory process. It would involve government and senior Aboriginal cultural authorities working carefully and respectfully together for a long and challenging period. The difficult question of supervision would need to be addressed. Community elders, the traditional owners of the city spaces, the Aboriginal security organisations (such as ‘Night Patrol’, the police and the Licensing Commission) would all need to work together in good faith to develop and test feasible arrangements. However, the immediate problem may be in reformulating the public problem of Aboriginal gambling in the working discourses of governments, so they can legitimately support the development of such a space in a post-colonial context.

Conclusions

We have reframed the public problem of Aboriginal gambling as coming to life through collective action and our research roles as agents and facilitators. Interested in how Aboriginal people can become active in defining ‘what and who is the problem’ (Addelson 2002: 128), we have also related the theoretical work done by some Aboriginal people as they address and interpret it. Despite the rigidity of government response to the problem, there has nonetheless been an informal process of Aboriginal reinvention of commercial gambling spaces across the NT. We have discerned an Aboriginal space being produced within casinos which is largely invisible, only supported reactively by government and the casino owners, and largely met with anxiety by community service providers, policy makers and researchers. We have argued that the idea of Aboriginal urban venues are worth revisiting as they give us clues as to what is needed, and what obstacles may stand in the way, if the state is to support a socially inclusionary and non-economically exploitative urban space of this nature. While we are unable to predict what form a properly negotiated space would take, we suggest that it should include the positive aspects of the casino, such as the glittering excitement, security and lack of drunken violence, with grassy areas on which to meet, socialise, play cards and care for children.
Finally, we reflect upon our role as researchers in all of this. Addelson’s approach has allowed us to adopt a pragmatic-theoretical approach to redefining a particular problem. By maintaining sufficient distance from the problem to avoid highlighting certain sorts of political action and obscuring others, we can see how our engagement with senior Aboriginal authorities can help us to focus on the ways in which the question of ‘How should we live?’ can be disguised as a question of ‘How must we live given what the authorities take to be real and expedient?’ We can see a potentially viable solution to the public problem of Aboriginal gambling being enacted in the Aboriginal reinvention of casinos. We can discern a far more workable solution implicit in the struggle over Aboriginal rights to urban space in Darwin and Alice Springs. This solution demands engaged collaboration, which governments have to this point not taken seriously, as well as research-activism which we often fail to embrace.

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