



Commentary: Building Bridges: A Reflection on the Need to Decolonize Gambling Studies

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Abstract: This article is a commentary by Sylvia Kairouz, Ph.D., written for the Critical Indigenous Gambling Studies special issue of *Critical Gambling Studies*.

Immersed in my thoughts, I barely heard the phone ringing on this quiet Wednesday afternoon. In an unusual gesture, I picked up the phone to an unexpected conversation with a sympathetic person from Kahnawà:ke. This very first encounter was pleasantly affable, and we agreed to plan for a longer conversation about our shared interests in the gambling field. This fortuitous encounter was a turning point in my career trajectory as a gambling scholar. Unfolding into many other conversations, formal and informal, several trips crossing the Mercier bridge to Kahnawà:ke, and a trustful and flourishing relationship with members of the community and institutions, we witnessed the birth of a fascinating research project.

When invited to write this commentary, I felt privileged to have this space to raise a critical reflection on the context of (de)colonization as well as on inherent issues of sovereignty, citizenship and social justice. I am honored to share this space with outstanding Indigenous scholars. Using my own story as a gambling researcher, I will share some reflections based on my own experiences and my inspiring encounters with the community of *Kahnawà:ke*. Speaking autoethnographically, I will engage my own reflexivity on the importance of developing a decolonizing methodological apparatus in research. I will also discuss the intersection of aspects of decolonization movements in public health and neoliberal economic and political trajectories of Canadian state formation. These neoliberal agendas and the data they produce implicate discourses that perpetuate the stigmatization and characterization of Indigenous peoples and communities as dependent on assistance from the settler state.

Decolonizing the Self

My work with the people of *Kahnawà:ke* has pushed me to question my own vision as a senior researcher, to deconstruct my formal academic heritage and its epistemologies, and to ontologically delve into the realms of subjectivities and lived experiences, my own and those shared by my research collaborators. From the perspective of a knowledge producer, I happily adopted the posture of a learner, of a listener working to better understand the history of a Nation, humbly hearing their narratives of trauma and grievances, and profoundly feeling the resilience of a community. I have experienced the privilege of being admitted as an outsider and I am grateful to them for accepting my own history, as an immigrant and a war survivor. After being offered a safe space to share traumatic and buried memories of a civil war, I could openly reflect on the experience of grief and the loss of a homeland. I engaged in this dialogue with the posture of a pluricultural scholar. I learned through my experience as an immigrant, to recognize my intellectual responsibility to situate my knowledge into the context, the history, and the sociocultural reality of Indigenous peoples.

I am deeply committed to participating in building new forms of knowledge that the people of *Kahnawà:ke* will edify. As an outsider, and as an immigrant within the settler-state, I was encouraged at the beginning of our relationship to reflect on the fundamental importance of working to decolonize my own thinking prior to any research collaboration that I might have with this community. To achieve this end, I had to deconstruct my own ways of doing research and build new modes of apprehending the reality of Indigenous peoples. I recognized that, as gambling scholars, most of the knowledge we have constructed about Indigenous peoples has perpetuated

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imperialism in the way research data is collected, analyzed, interpreted, and presented. As I moved away from a positivistic approach based on the quantification of a universal subject and a history written by the West, I began my role as a listener and an avid learner. I continually remind myself that I am walking down this road of inquiry with a biased knowledge of the gambling field that was carved out by processes of colonialism, by the rationalities of academia, and from my own trajectory. Educating myself through readings produced by Indigenous peoples, from poetry to sociology, has created a place in my repertoire of research 'know how' to open my mind to decolonizing methodologies. I wanted to move away from discourses about Indigenous gambling reality, that are deeply embedded in colonial ideologies and practices and supported by related institutions, bureaucracies, and scholarship. To do so, I needed to recreate a mindset that is respectful of Indigenous communities, their traditions, values, knowledges, and specific contexts alike. I was guided by the vision Edward Said (2003) expressed in his work *Orientalism* "The more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision" (p. 259).

Decolonizing Research

I argue that prevailing gambling research epistemologies are embedded in doctrines and research methodologies associated with a political and socio-cultural imagination of the 'West' (Said, 2003). They are largely developed in the tradition of academia and disciplinary frameworks of positivistic doctrine and empiricism, and reflect limited visions, ideologies, and methods of inquiry. A sophisticated methodological apparatus complements the investment of much academic gambling research in the edification and validation of complex systems of quantification to monitor risk, harm and pathology among people, communities, and populations. A view of gambling as a risky endeavor and a disease has contributed to the construction of the vulnerable and the sick, including what Kelm (1998) defined as the Indigenous ill. Public health surveillance systems as described by O'Neil (1993), perform disciplinary and regulatory functions that go beyond their purpose of tracking health conditions. This has created, in turn, new forms of language, techniques and quantification methods based on a restrictive set of values, morality and subjectivities. It also neglects the diversity of ways in which gambling is imagined and practiced and the meanings it confers in different settings. I contend that gambling studies has sustained what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) defines as a positional superiority of Western knowledge, reproducing a colonizing structure of power and silencing cultural experiences and imaginaries of the 'other'.

The economic and political trajectories of Canadian state formation along with aspects of decolonization movements in public health impact gambling harm prevention in several ways. While neoliberal ideologies in gambling prevention can be instrumental in securing political support for prevention initiatives, these agendas are often enacted in a way that can be problematic for advancing the well-being of gamblers and communities. These agendas and the data they produce rely significantly on a productivist construction of citizenship that may propagate a negative representation of the gambler, and a stigma towards Indigenous peoples and communities as being dependent on a settler state.

Shaping the public health discourse along the risk and pathology continuum and systems of classification and representation is a constructed form of knowledge that sustains relations of power and domination, with detrimental consequences for peoples whose lands have been occupied by colonial powers. Although harm reduction frameworks recognize the multilayered determinants of gambling, from cell to society, they are underpinned by a Western cultural orientation to gambling, and a neoliberal conceptualization of harm, prevention, and pathology that supports settler political interests. By collectivizing experiences of gambling harm with reference to relative vulnerability, these orientations marginalize several populations and groups, namely Indigenous peoples, women, and other minority groups, negating their own views, their history, and their cultures of gambling and healing.

Critical studies have made some headway in uplifting alternative modes of knowing, delving into qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of gamblers, the living conditions of communities, their history, and imaginaries. Still, the continued process of decolonizing methodologies in gambling studies continues to be an essential endeavor. In her book, Smith conceptualizes the challenges for engaging in decolonizing practices while reimagining and bringing forward Indigenous epistemic approaches, philosophies, and methodologies. As stated by Reith and Dobbie (2014) "different types of research inquiry are productive of different types of knowledge and different kinds of research subject" (p. 28). Gambling studies are tainted by the colonial heritage in research generally and in the gambling field specifically. In the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation movements, it is time for gambling research to reflect on new frameworks in which the voice of Indigenous stories, methods of data gathering, and imaginaries will be an integral part of knowledge construction and reproduction. Furthermore, as described by Smith (1999), the research agenda should unfold along "a program and a set of approaches that are situated within the decolonization politics of Indigenous peoples' movement... connecting local, regional and global

efforts which are moving towards the ideal of a self-determining Indigenous world" (p. 115) focusing on the goal of achieving social justice. An Indigenous research agenda can be sustained through processes of decolonization, transformation, mobilization, healing, and embedded in practices and methodologies. A crucial step towards achieving this goal is the building of capacity and empowerment of Indigenous students and young scholars. It is of great importance to create spaces for conversation and collaborations between inside and outside scholars, to meet and rally with what Kovach (2009) described as the burgeoning Indigenous research movement. This will contribute towards the transformation of the academy to generate diverse epistemological and methodological approaches to urgent issues. This special issue is a commendable, emblematic, and promising initiative that will advance gambling research in this direction.

Decolonizing the Gambling Landscape

The criminal code of Canada gave the authority for the provinces to "manage and conduct" gambling offerings. State monopolies are the sole operators deemed legal in the province of Québec. Indigenous Nations in the province, therefore, are not recognized as the legal operators of gambling on their own land. Indeed, the reflection on decolonizing gambling research is needed but it must be done alongside a critical conversation about the larger sociopolitical and legal context in which gambling unfolds. This should involve critical reflection on the current state of colonization and support of Indigenous assertions of sovereignty, the right for self-determination, and social justice. These matters remain unresolved, and, as this special issue illustrates, gambling studies scholars have an important role to play in this larger reflection. Contributors to this special issue have offered valued knowledge on the cultural and historical embeddedness of gambling within Native North America. They have reminded us of the ongoing struggle of Indigenous Peoples to strengthen their sovereignty in a context of colonial systems of gambling governance. They have also provided a refined analysis of how Indigenous-provincial gambling revenue agreements entrap Indigenous Peoples within neoliberal structures and perpetuate the political and economic heritage of settler-colonial society. This duly raises the need for insider gambling scholars to empower research epistemologies and generate knowledge to support strategies for interventions, especially among Indigenous youth.

Driving back from Kahnawà:ke, I contemplated at distance the sight of the City of Montreal at Golden hours. This peaceful view clashed with my feelings of rage and a slight hope. I felt myself heading back to my colonizing community with the rage of keeping my voice silent as a gambling researcher but also as a citizen of the

colonizing society. While crossing the Mercier Bridge, I suddenly started thinking over the emblematic meaning of the expression "to build bridges", simply defined in the English dictionary as to establish a relationship, to foster understanding and appreciation of cultural differences. I decided to adopt that motto in my own research with the people of Kahnawà:ke as one step towards decolonizing my thoughts and my research.

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