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reflections on bingo culture**

Katherine Mann

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together': reflections on bingo culture**

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Eds: Carrie Clanton, Sophie Day, Olivia Harris, John Hutnyk, Sian Lazar

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## 'Sit anywhere you like, we're all friends together': reflections on bingo culture

*'From the moment you arrive, you'll be caught up in the special Stardust atmosphere. One of our friendly team will help you with everything you need, explain the game options available, and help you decide how many game books to play with. Congratulations, you've just begun your Stardust experience!*

*Before you cross off those magic numbers, find a seat in the main hall – choose from smoking and non-smoking. Sit anywhere you like, we're all friends together at Stardust!*

Stardust members' introductory pack.\*

*'When big games are on, you even cough and you're in trouble'.*

Jean, one of the participants in this study, on playing bingo at her local club.

### Summary

This paper constitutes a response to stereotyped notions of life at the bingo hall, notions which have created barriers of derision, snobbery, patronising fondness,

even taboo, between bingo as a socio-cultural fact and mainstream society. Research interviews and observation sessions were carried out in an attempt to question clichés on the basis of accounts of lived experience and personal reflection. The idea that the bingo hall represents, particularly for working-class women, a place of social focus, almost of social refuge, is challenged and assumptions about bingo's social side critically explored. Rather than upholding the notion that game players have autonomously restructured bingo culture to suit their needs and lifestyles, I argue that other forces, over which players have little or no control, have shaped social life at the bingo hall, namely notions of opportunity, possibility, and safety in a male-dominated, capitalist society. I therefore also discuss the presence of money at the bingo hall, and I speculate upon its impact on socialising there, as well as on the taboos surrounding gambling and competitiveness. The suggestion that bingo might not constitute an entirely positive and socially-affirming experience for some players is explored, and set against those cultural stereotypes which characterise the bingo hall as more a social centre than a place to win money.

### Introduction

Some time ago, a close friend recalled to me the details of her first experience of playing bingo. Curiosity had led her into a London bingo hall filled with slot-machines, floor-to-ceiling carpets and white-haired ladies. Bingo was a game she neither had played before nor has played since, and yet, as

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\* Stardust is not the real name of the bingo chain used in this study

concentrated silence fell over the place, each player poring over game cards and checking numbers off with large felt-tipped markers, this friend realised, to her surprise, that the numbers on *her* bingo card were being called at an alarming rate. Before she knew it, she was, on this very first visit, a winner – or would have been, had she been courageous enough to shout out 'bingo', 'house', or *anything* that would have drawn attention to her win. However, drawing attention to her win would have, by association, drawn attention to herself, and, instead of risking this, instead of taking her prize money, and with her friends about her hissing, 'Shout bingo! *Shout bingo!*', she sat in self-conscious and intimidated silence.

As well as making me laugh, this friend's recollection made me curious. What was it about either her or the bingo hall that had made the prospect of winning such a dreaded possibility, that had made so awkward the necessity of raising one's voice, of winning, in front of strangers? What was it that had made the inside of that place so unfamiliar, its culture so separate and enclosed? In addition, an interest both in the notion of money, and in the structure of social groups within a context of monetary exchange, prompted me to ask more specific questions about socialising and the winning of money. And so grew my interest in bingo.

In undertaking this research, I hoped to come to a better understanding of the kinds of social life typically fostered at the bingo hall. As well as questions relating to choice,

access and identity – who would be drawn to such a game, and why –, I hoped to address wider concerns. I wondered both how social life at the bingo hall might be affected by the secrecy and 'separateness' of bingo/gambling culture in general, and also how the potential for monetary gain might affect the social values and relationships formed there. In terms of this latter point, the increased capitalisation/commercialisation of bingo as an industry and the effect of this on social relationships formed at the bingo hall, I felt, would also make for an interesting point of analysis. As my study progressed, it became obvious that to address these themes without giving consideration to the notion of the bingo hall as a gendered space would be to misrepresent the atmosphere and history of the game. The unease and stigma frequently attached to women's relationships with competitiveness and gambling, and the issue of female control concerning leisure and lifestyle choices, therefore, were thematically 'fundamental to the research.

The research for this paper took place over a period of two months during the summer of 2001, in one of the three bingo halls in my local area. Each of the people I interviewed played regularly or worked at this site, and could therefore offer informed comments on the culture they felt themselves to be a part of. This particular bingo hall is situated at the junction of a main road into one of Britain's seaside resorts, not far from the sea. It is a large purpose-built site belonging to a sizeable and well-known national chain, with

seats for over six hundred players, a small bar area, a canteen, and a lobby filled with around forty slot-machines. As one interviewee noted, it is located 'between two estates' and gathers its clientele primarily from them.

### **The game and its background**

In order to enter the games area of a bingo hall, one must satisfy certain legal requirements in either becoming a member of the club or being the guest of an established member. Becoming a member involves completing a short form of personal details such as name, address and age group, and returning it to the bingo club. Although it can take up to two weeks to process applications for membership, temporary member's cards can be allocated after twenty-four hours.

The game itself, as one of this study's participants pointed out, is quite 'simple', and is appealing to many players for that reason. Starting with a game board or book, players listen out for the randomly selected numbers which match those on their respective grids, crossing each off as it is called. The winner, of course, is the player whose numbers happen to be called and checked off first, with this element of chance defining the game very much as luck-based rather than demanding skill of any special kind. At many of the commercial halls, books of game cards can be bought, each book containing three grids per page, each grid containing three rows of nine numbers. These are used for games played during the

main sessions. In between these sessions, mini-cash or slot bingo can be played. This involves using a plastic game board, one of which is kept by every seat, with others located at free-standing units around the hall. On these boards are two grids showing sixteen numbers each. For each kind of bingo, the basic principle of matching numbers on the grids with those called may be applied to different game templates: players may be looking for one or two rows of matching numbers, one or two diagonals, the grid's four central numbers, or a 'full house' encompassing all of the numbers on the grid.

These kinds of number games date back many centuries, to tumble in 17th century Italy, for example (Dixey 1996), to the games of tombola and housey-housey enjoyed by British servicemen during the late 19th century, as well as to the better-known game of lotto played at that time more generally (Reith 1999). The modern game began to find its present form during the 1960s, a decade which saw the passing and implementation of the Betting and Gaming Act. As Munting writes, this 'generally permissive' Act occurred during what has come to be regarded as a relatively permissive period in British history. In spite of this, it was a policy which aimed to control and contain a generally frowned upon, selectively illegal, but nevertheless thriving activity, namely gambling. Its result, however, was to catalyse an explosion in game participation, and, in Munting's words, 'an avalanche of casinos and bingo clubs'

flooded public space (1996:47). Dixey (1988), in her rather fond depictions of 'traditional' pre-1960s working-class lifestyles, describes women meeting at corner shops, local cinemas and other community places to chat and share time. A number of social and economic changes following the immediate post-war period, however, included the closure of many cinemas, the reshaping of housing estates, and the shifting of emphasis from post-war community spirit to aspirational living, leisure pursuits and individual material gain. On the back of these changes came a dramatic rise in bingo playing, particularly amongst middle-aged working-class women, who, as Dixey argues, sought out a new communal space to share time with friends and acquaintances. Bingo playing has been associated with, if not burdened by, this stereotype ever since.

Prior to the 1960s legislation, bingo was controlled under the Small Lotteries and Gaming Act (1956). Through prohibiting personal monetary gain, this Act betrayed 'Establishment' views toward gaming in general, reinforcing as it did frequently-made associations of gambling with evil, of speculative financial gain with avarice and idleness. Typically, upper or middle-class opinion shied away from 'overt association with gambling' (Munting 1996:44). Newspapers and television broadcasts, too, would commonly give race commentaries and results without referring to betting outcomes. Bingo itself came under vicious and often deeply patronising attack by these various

media streams, with the Times, for example, bemoaning the rise of 'this cretinous pastime'(Sept 14th 1961), and with the British Gaming Board itself reporting that the very 'housewives' who had taken up bingo in their millions on the back of government legislation, nevertheless, 'should not be exposed to the temptations of hard-gaming' (quoted by Dixey 1996:137). The ghost of Christian teachings on material acquisition which used for their cornerstone St Paul's characterisation of money as 'the root of all evil', seemed to underpin these kinds of prejudice. Seebom-Rowntree's anti-gaming tract of 1905, for example, draws on these scripts, describing gambling as 'a national evil', which, since it has escaped the 'wealthy few' to 'all classes of the community', has 'like a cancer...spread its poisonous roots throughout the length and breadth of the land'. In this explosive preface, the author associates gambling with the lower classes and with 'poverty, weakened character and crime'. During bingo's 1960s heyday, these kinds of attitudes fell in judgement upon working-class *women* in particular. Dixey writes, notably in the present tense, that even now 'those in positions of power find it difficult to comprehend why people should play bingo' (1988:92).

Given this history, it is unsurprising to find that bingo is not, in terms of its social or moral status, a very well-respected activity. Indeed, it is to be expected that, as Reith writes,

'Bingo sessions are conducted in the afternoons and evenings of most

weekdays in buildings which, despite being part of the local community, are essentially *separate* sites. Often situated in disused cinemas or town halls, entry into a bingo club is an entry into a distinct world, which is secluded from the one outside and governed by its own set of rules and conventions.' (1999:105)

### First visits and first encounters

When I first arrived at the bingo hall to register as a member, I encountered a young and timid woman who, in her burgundy and gold uniform, was employed to give out information and receive customers. Instead of responding confidently and autonomously to my initial queries, though, she would turn around to verify her answers with a rather stern woman who sat behind her. This woman was much older, probably in her sixties, with thin hair piled upon her head and lots of gold jewellery. She smoked all the while, and throughout the exchange smiled neither at me nor at the young woman behind the counter. Although she wasn't wearing a uniform and didn't appear to occupy any official capacity there, she possessed an intimidating and commanding presence. I later found out she was a bingo regular, which intrigued me. I wondered whether the social hierarchies at the club were based on longevity and familiarity rather than on official status, and felt this would explain both my own and the young woman's discomfort. During this first visit, I felt uneasy asking questions, even though they simply related to information about

membership and were not forward or unusual in any way. There seemed to be a tension between the eye-catching advertisements and décor designed to draw people in to the hall on the one hand, and the frosty strangeness of the social atmosphere on the other. I sensed an exclusivity, a lack of welcome at the club. I felt as though I was being perceived as some kind of intruder.

It was assumed at the club that bingo-players would know what they were doing, that they would know how to play the game, that they would know how to pay and how to claim prizes, that they would know where to go on entering the hall and where they were entitled to sit, and so on. However, when I first entered the games area of the hall, I was very aware of how unfamiliar it was and that I didn't know any of these things. I walked through the lobby, past the 'members only past this point' sign, towards the dully resonant number-calling which grew louder as I proceeded through each doorway. Nobody acknowledged or assisted me as a new face, however, so, having entered the games area, I sat down at the edge and watched. Eventually, I plucked up the courage to ask a woman if I could share her table. Firstly, she was quite surprised that I had spoken at all and didn't seem to know how to respond. She mumbled something about having a bad leg and that there would not be much room for me at the table. I said I wouldn't be long but that I was new to the hall and didn't know anyone, so she shuffled over and moved her

stick, all without looking at me. I still felt conspicuous and self-conscious as I watched her blot out numbers with a felt-tipped marker, cursing to herself with each losing game. I wondered whose lucky seat I had just appropriated and what boundaries I had crossed in speaking to her.

As I watched the other players across the vast seating area, I saw very few who were talking to each other. All were waiting, concentrating, hooked on to the rapid and mesmerising flow of numbers being called out over the public address system. There were no windows, just heavy burgundy curtains and gaudy, cheap-looking carpets. I was struck by the slick and incessant speed of the number-calling and the lack of space between games. No sooner had one finished before the next one would start, and the number-calling would begin over again. I went to play bingo numerous times during my fieldwork, and only felt marginally more comfortable with each visit.

The game itself was at first quite enjoyable to play, with the build-up of anticipation and the challenge of following the rapid number-calling. However, I found the social fabric of the place to be quite disengaging; I never felt integrated or welcome enough to enjoy the game with the other players I saw there. After the novelty of playing had worn off, I began to find the experience dull and overburdened by an emphasis on winning.

Initially, I had hoped that through playing bingo, I might befriend other players who

then might be willing to take part in an interview. However, it didn't take many visits to the club to realise how difficult this would be. With bingo games end-to-end and numbers called relentlessly and virtually without a break from 11 o'clock in the morning until well into the evening, there was no healthy gap for conversation. My naïve attempts to strike up conversation with bingo players sitting alone hunched over four separate game boards in the yellow light were not met with any great enthusiasm, and the oppressiveness of the clipped conversation taught me a certain amount about the social conventions of the bingo hall. Although these initial experiences certainly contributed to my study, they forced me to question my preconceptions. I had had certain expectations of bingo, gleaned from an idea of cultural stereotypes, from television advertising, from the anecdotes of friends, as well as from academic writing. Although I had come across accounts of bingo's more eccentric notions of socialising and social conditioning, the idea of the bingo hall as a safe and friendly place for women particularly pre-empted my own first visit. Yet how certain of these preconceptions were shown to be mistaken or somehow lacking the flesh of direct experience was key to the failure of this approach, as well as in my firm realisation that the bingo hall does indeed foster a very particular kind of social life.

Having encountered the difficulties of finding willing interviewees, I decided to approach one of the managers at the bingo hall to see

whether he might be able to suggest anything, or perhaps add a bit more substance to my initial perceptions. I telephoned the bingo hall, and had a short conversation with the manager on duty that day. Many customers, he explained, are 'not very sociable', very suspicious of interviews and reluctant to discuss their life in or outside of bingo. Spouses, children and other family members are often unaware as to the extent of club members' involvement in bingo, and there is still a great deal of secrecy surrounding gambling. Photography would not be permitted inside the bingo hall and the taping of interviews, as far as he was concerned, would be out of the question. He implied, for good measure, that it would be more than his job's worth to guarantee interviews, or to allow them to be carried out on the premises. Given this conversation, I wondered who was responsible for propounding this kind of secrecy and intrigue, and came away feeling at once stymied and curious.

I finally recruited work colleagues as interviewees, plus the bingo hall manager I had spoken to. In order briefly to introduce the participants in this study, I shall refer to them as Amber, aged 21 and working in a rest home along with Carol, aged 44; as Diane, aged 38 and Jean, aged 50, both social services employees working in a home for people with learning disabilities; and finally, Carl, aged 24, duty manager of the bingo hall.

Three of the five interviewees were introduced to the idea of bingo by older

family members who played regularly. Amber's parents, for example, were and still are regular players, as were relatives of Carl, Jean originally went to an older style church hall bingo with her grandma during the 1960s. Carol was first persuaded to go to the bingo hall by her sister, and Diane by a female friend. Diane had been an employee at a bingo hall when she was 16, however, and so she knew the ropes to a certain extent. When asked what they remembered about these first visits, some of the interviewees recalled early wins and early nerves. Diane, for example, referred to the bewilderment of numbers bombarding her, exclaiming, as she remembered the occasion, 'Oh my god! Trying to keep up with all those numbers!'. As it turned out, she won on this first occasion, but 'was so nervous they'd tell me I'd made a mistake'. Part of this nervousness was due to the social atmosphere of the hall. When she called out her win, Diane remembered that 'it felt like the whole world was staring at me', adding that, 'everybody seemed to know each other and I was the outsider'.

Amber considered it to be 'quite nerve-racking' going to bingo on your own or for the first time, explaining that people do not generally go on their first visit alone. She said it could be embarrassing shouting out your win, because everybody stares, especially at new people. Carl mentioned that new members who win attract unpleasant comments. In spite of considering new members to be on the whole 'courteously, politely' treated, Carol,

too, added that players who seem to win often, whether beginners or regulars, may provoke disgruntled reactions from less lucky players, saying flatly, 'well, you know what people are thinking'. When I pressed her on this, she explained that if someone wins more than once or twice, 'I hear comments like 'oh the same old faces', 'they've won before and it's not fair', and sometimes something stronger'. I felt she was being polite with her words, tempering these losing players' true reactions out of a reluctance to use stronger vocabulary during the interview. During my observation sessions, players indeed expressed this kind of disgruntlement, and quietly cursed the caller as a 'bugger' and a 'devil' for not calling the numbers which would make them winners.

### 'Low-level entertainment'?

The attitudes expressed by the participants toward bingo were often ambivalent. Carol, when referring to her first visit, said that although she was persuaded by her sister to go, she wasn't herself 'really that keen', and Diane had originally to be 'dragged along' by a friend. Indeed, Diane seemed to be someone for whom bingo wasn't that important, saying that sometimes she is surprised or embarrassed that she goes at all. As we discussed bingo advertising, she again used the word 'embarrassed' to describe her associations with bingo, referring to the game as 'definitely not upmarket or anything' and one which she feels she is 'quite young' to play. When describing the bingo of her teenage years as

a cashier, she referred to it as 'very much an old ladies' game then'. When asked whether she ever plays during the day, a time which, according to all of the participants, sees more elderly clientele, she replied that to go then would be 'almost a waste of my life'.

An awareness of bingo's status as a socially classed activity was implicit in all responses, even if class categories were not always themselves directly used. Both Amber and Carol had friends who couldn't believe that bingo could be considered an interesting pastime. It took a year for Amber to persuade her reluctant friends to come along, while some of Carol's friends 'think I'm too good for bingo'. Nevertheless, Carol was quite defensive about her interest in bingo. When I raised the subject of bingo advertising, she referred immediately to the 'embarrassing' television ads, for example, with Lily Savage ('that man who's a woman...that woman who's a man'), which she took as a misrepresentation and an insult: 'It's not like that at all. It takes it all down to a lower class, even though we're all working class people'. She added that 'you don't find a schoolteacher or a scientist at a bingo hall'. When trying to describe the kind of person who typically plays bingo at the hall, Carl stated that there were not many 'professionals', such as teachers or lawyers to be found. The typical player would 'certainly not [be] middle-class', but would be 'the kind of person with a greater propensity for spending', a member of the 'traditional

working-class'. Carol and Carl were the only interviewees who directly used the category 'working-class'.

Carl described bingo, and often its players, in quite disparaging terms, referring to the game as 'low-level entertainment' and as having 'not much thought in it'. Justifying his presence as a businessman and manager, he made several remarks relating to cunning money-spinning techniques used to gull and tempt the customer. At times, he showed a kind of contempt for the players, with comments like 'we are so good at taking money out of them' and 'we are making stupid money out of people'. Following the interview, Carl showed me around the bingo hall under his management, stopping at various points to explain things. He referred, for example, to the catalogue detailing items such as jewellery, small radios, clocks and so on which can be selected, bought in bulk and offered as gifts or prizes to the customer. Carl's tone implied a question as to the quality of these goods, and he seemed to revel in hoodwinking the customers who were drawn in by these incentives. Jean, for instance, said during our interview, that although she didn't take them too seriously, the bingo birthday cards and the bottle of 'birthday bubbly' were always happily enjoyed as a 'treat' every year. Later, as Carl and I walked around the hall, he pointed out a revolving display unit containing some of the gifts on offer. He explained that players might be offered a loyalty card whereby they play for four weeks and on the fifth week 'they can have

one of these watches for a fiver', often a good offer at Christmas time, for example. With a smile, part-conspiratorial, part-arrogant, he added, 'we get those for eight quid so we make a killing'. The difference of £3, which the bingo hall 'gives away', is more than made up for by the five previous weeks of bingo play. Continuing the tour around the bingo hall, Carl pulled out a mini-cash bingo board, which now, he explained, have two grids of numbers on them instead of one. 'This is where we can get them,' he said, 'More money. I don't like it but there it is'. I found these words a little disingenuous, given that Carl had spent a large part of our conversation emphasising his autonomy as a manager, his skills at 'playing with numbers' and developing money-making strategies.

When I asked Carl whether he thought gambling was a 'good thing', leaving him to interpret this on his own terms, he described a scenario in which a compulsive gambler spends all the household money, leaving nothing over to provide for the children. His tone was by turns scornful, judgemental, mock-resigned and world-weary: 'How can people become addicts?', 'If people are spending through bingo, what are their children getting?' and 'If I had so little money, I can't imagine I would gamble it all away'. When the subject of the bingo hall's responsibility was raised, however, he said 'we don't have to make decisions for people', referring a little derisively to the Gamcare poster, 'barely noticeable' in the lobby. I did not intend

any of my questions to imply a moral agenda, but was interested to see how he interpreted and influenced the direction of the interview. He seemed to want to collude with me, and took my interest to be looking *down* on rather than looking *at* or *into* bingo culture. In spite of being part of this culture, he wanted to present his position as superior and detached from the 'addicts' and the irrational players duped by tacky gifts. He reiterated his position and freedom as manager, and referred, too, to the fact that he had been to university to study law. When I asked him about this, he replied that he had had a very bad experience, and had left after eight months. The only people with whom he had formed any kind of bond were three others, who had all as it turned out in some way been involved with bingo. Out of the safety and familiarity of the bingo environment over which he had some control, Carl relied upon his experience of the bingo hall to create a common ground for friendships at university. Although he was quite disparaging about bingo players during the interview, then, ultimately bingo had helped him, at university, to develop a social life.

These kinds of contradiction were common to all of the interviews. Bingo was at once validated as an important and enjoyable

social activity with a distinctive and valuable culture, and disparaged as tacky and mindless with all the negative associations of frivolity with money, secrecy, addiction, and superficial back-biting social relationships. The participants were aware of bingo's lack of status, and responded to this either with shame, embarrassment and disassociation, or defensively. In Carl's case, there may have been a number of reasons for his fluctuating relationship with bingo life. I felt it was important for me to recognise, through the process of the interviews, my position and outlook as researcher, to see how comfortably my reflections on aspects of bingo life sat with those cultural flags interpreted and described by the interviewees who took part in the study. My presence and personality surely influenced the responses of the participants, particularly given our lack of cultural common ground. Carl was not the only interviewee who responded to my apparent difference, the fact that I neither looked nor spoke like a bingo regular, the fact that I did not live 'on the estates'. The reactions of interviewees to the interview situation ranged from wariness, defensiveness, and reserve, through to great friendliness, generosity with time and attention, even attempts to collude with or flatter me as somehow a person of perceived authority and intelligence. Carl wanted to impress and collude with me, to emphasise that he was 'better than bingo', that he had been to university, that his role at the hall was to manipulate rather than be manipulated.

### 'A woman thing'

I used a visual prompt during interviews to gauge participants' responses to bingo advertising they might have received through the post. Pictured on the advert were three so-called winning bingo players, two women and one man, with captions quoting the winners' jubilant remarks. One of the women was white, middle-aged with short dyed-blond hair and gold jewellery; the second woman was black with long dark hair and a little younger than the first; the man wore spectacles and looked younger than the women pictured. Each of these images was immediate and distinctive and I asked each participant how likely it would be to find each of these people in a bingo hall. Basing their responses on the image of each photographed person, four out of the five participants considered it very unlikely that the bespectacled man or the black woman would play bingo, while all felt that the white woman at the top of the advert would definitely be a regular. Class, education and social status entered explicitly into these responses too.

In response to the advert, Diane, pointing to the man, ventured that she'd be 'very surprised to find him at a bingo hall. He's a man...and he looks intelligent'. Jean, too, perceived the man, from his looks, to be 'too intelligent' for bingo. She suggested he would be more likely to be a visiting 'journalist or someone studying it.'. Both Amber and Carl concurred, with Carl suggesting that this man would probably come only once in a while as a curiosity. This

was interesting in the context of my own position and the participants' relationship towards me as 'someone studying it'. The notion of the educated visitor was useful in terms of addressing questions of otherness, familiarity and exclusion at the hall, and related to the discomfort of my own first visit. Certain social groups were regarded as 'other', and their presence deemed inappropriate or out-of-place at the hall. The fact that it was the man in the advert rather than the either of the women who, according to Diane and Jean, seemed 'too intelligent' for bingo, was a further point of interest. All the participants said they would expect to find the woman at the top of the advert in a bingo hall. Jean nodded knowingly, saying 'she's definitely a bingo lady, there's no doubt about it'. When pressed, she wasn't sure what it was about the woman that suggested this, but she felt firm in her opinion. Diane had very quickly landed upon this woman as a likely bingo player, saying 'she looks like the average woman in the street, 2.4 children, 3-bedroom house. Y'know, Mrs Average'.

Numerous references were made by all of the participants to bingo's gendered nature. Recalling her thoughts of playing bingo as a young mother some twenty years ago, Jean explained that it was important to have 'somewhere to go which didn't last too long in the evenings'. She had young children at the time, like many other players, and bingo felt 'more of a mother's thing', a place where there were 'not so many men as there are now'. 'That was my

<sup>1</sup> GamCare (established April 1997) is the national centre for information, advice and practical help with regard to the social impact of gambling. It aims to promote responsible attitudes toward gambling.



time', she explained, a time when mothers enjoyed their Saturday nights out and 'didn't talk about nappies'. Carol equated her first visit to the bingo hall with her identity as an expectant mother, recalling that, as she crossed off her numbers during that very first game, she felt her baby moving around inside her as her belly tensed with excitement. As time passed, bingo became, for her, a way 'to escape the children'. In spite of the increase in male attendance at bingo, Carl considered the clientele to be still predominantly female, about three quarters of players. Diane described bingo as 'not a very masculine thing to do', and suggested that, through girls being encouraged to play bingo at brownies, for example, women may be socialised into regarding bingo as a feminine activity. Although Jean felt that nowadays there were perhaps as many male players as female, she later added that her husband 'wouldn't be seen dead at bingo'.

Many of the interviewees referred to the positive aspects of this association. Jean, remembering her early years at bingo, explained that going to a bingo hall was 'not particularly threatening', adding that 'you could go on your own because you can do that with bingo'. She expressed her doubt that she would ever go alone into a pub or club the way she could go alone to bingo. Diane, too, emphasised these ideas. 'Speaking as a woman', she said, she would walk into a bingo hall 'quite happily' 'without the stigma of going out alone',

highlighting the difference, like Jean, between the bingo hall and other public places, such as pubs and cinemas.

In many ways, the participants reflected with fondness and nostalgia on bingo as a 'feminine activity', recalling the presence of the female bingo community as enjoyable and nourishing, with its common ground of traditionally female concerns, such as child-rearing and home-making. However, the poor value attached to the idea of working-class women and/or bingo even by the women themselves was also evident, with the advert's typical bingo player described by Diane as 'Mrs Average', and with bingo regarded as suitable enough for working-class women but not for intelligent men or husbands.

### Winning or socialising?

All of the interviewees referred to the 'social side' of bingo life, yet as each interview progressed, many contradictions came to light. Jean, for example, felt that using the word 'gambling' to describe bingo as an activity would be misrepresenting its emphasis and atmosphere somehow: since bingo has a 'social side' it should not be seen merely as cold-blooded gambling. Referring to going alone to bingo, she said, 'you can go on your own, but you're not on your own', 'familiar faces' appear and groups may loosely assemble. However, as her descriptions continued, she began to contradict her emphasis on socialising and to elevate winning as a more of a priority. 'You go to play bingo, to win money,' she said, 'not to

hold a conversation'. At the same time, she disassociated herself from people who value winning above all else, saying that although she doesn't go to bingo because she needs the money ('I don't mean to be snobby or anything'), she knows some women who go three times a day, including evenings and weekends, that 'to some people it's a drug'. Later, with a slightly guilty smile, she reiterated the importance of winning over socialising, saying that 'I know women who would rather put their last £5 on it than pay the rent'. When I pressed Jean more on the nature of bingo's 'social side', she used phrases like 'that's an acceptable behaviour' and such, explaining that there may be 'socialising at certain times', for instance in between games, in the queues, when you'd decided to sit a game out, and so on. However, talking would only be tolerated at certain times, for example between the slot-games; 'when big games are on, you even cough and you're in trouble'. She described bingo as 'very territorial', and that new members should be warned: 'there are certain places where you don't sit...if you did they'd tell you to get out'.

We tried to flesh out notions of socialising according to bingo culture, and Jean ventured, 'if you *want* to, you can make friends...', but twisted her mouth doubtfully, indicating that bingo fosters particular kinds of friendship. There are familiar faces, she said, 'I don't know their names, I don't see them outside of bingo, but I always say hello', for instance, 'I've been sat opposite these two old girls for four or five years, but

I don't know their names. It's the bingo life...no-one says to you 'hello I'm Susan, what's your name...' because it's not what you do'. Laughingly, and perhaps tellingly, she compared it to the Masons, complete with secret handshakes, volunteering the idea that these kinds of social codes are far more important than the hall rules, such as switching off your mobile phone.

Diane described the bingo hall's social life as 'almost institutionalised', with people sitting in the same seats and so on, and Carl, too, explained that some regulars have their favourite seats. This, he said, is usually 'a luck thing', and that if you're sitting in 'their seat' they won't ask you to move, but will arrive earlier next week to get it back. Carl referred to the element of recognition at a bingo hall: familiar smiles and the same people each week. He described how a typical conversation might progress between two players standing in a queue, for example. It would largely be based on 'moaning', the free meal isn't good enough, they haven't won any money, has the other had any luck recently, and so on. However, he continually reiterated that, at bingo, 'people don't like talking to each other'. Diane recalled, as a member of staff at bingo, seeing that 'there were an awful lot of lonely people who went to socialise. Just for that two hours, they'd have someone to speak to'. Although she said she felt that, for her, socialising was the more important aspect of a night out at bingo, Diane did add that she didn't consider bingo players to be 'that

friendly. I think it's quite superficial, the friendliness'.

Although Amber's social life was quite intertwined with bingo, in that many of her friends happened also to play bingo and so formed a larger network extending out of the bingo hall, she identified a certain kind of typical bingo player, who is generally 'quite reserved' and 'not the type to sit and chat'. In terms of her own social group, which was more defined than those of the other interviewees, there was a great deal of gossip, backstabbing and intrigue, with people making innuendoes about girl/boyfriends and where and with whom they'd been seen the night before, and so on. Amber seemed at once to enjoy these kinds of social dynamics but also to be quite afraid of them. She dropped comments into the conversation like, 'don't go out with anyone from a bingo hall', and 'oh, you've got to watch he doesn't try it on', when I mentioned the possibility of interviewing one of the older callers. She herself was going out with a man, a friend of her father's, whom she met through bingo. Her father did not know they were having a relationship. It seemed, from Amber's words, that the bingo hall could be quite a predatory and threatening environment for a young woman. When Amber learned she had been the first interviewee, she was quite worried that I should be discreet with other participants over what she had told me.

Carol was the only player I spoke to who freely admitted that for her bingo was more

a place of welcome solitude than a social outing. She explained that although originally she used to go with her sister, now she generally goes alone, enjoying having a place 'to sit on my own, not surrounded by people I have to talk to'. When describing a night out at bingo, she used words like 'peaceful' and 'solitude' as well as 'attention-grabbing' and 'adrenalin'. Although she acknowledged the element of recognition mentioned by the others, 'you see the same faces', she explained that, for her, winning was more important than socialising at the bingo hall. In response to my question as to where her priorities lay in this respect, she said, 'I do win quite often, so I suppose I've got to say winning. I don't go down there to socialise and it's always nice to win'. She said that generally bingo players remain acquaintances rather than anything closer.

In referring to the social life at the bingo hall, all interviewees alluded to a certain kind of bingo player – Amber's 'not the type to sit and chat', Jean's 'women who would rather put their last five pounds on it than pay the rent', Diane's 'institutionalised' bingo goers who seek out their favourite seat, Carol's 'more serious' players, and Carl's 'moaners' who 'don't like to talk to each other'. Yet each participant was keen to disassociate themselves from these stereotypes. When Carol, for example, referred to the disgruntled remarks winners seem to attract from less lucky players, she said that she never reacted in this way to others' good fortune. When Jean was describing certain

players' propensity for sticking to particular seats, she said that she herself didn't work by such a system. However, later during the interview, it transpired that she'd been sitting opposite the same 'two old girls for four or five years'. Jean also referred more than once, with a look of curiosity and intrigue, to the type of person who plays bingo secretly and very seriously. She did not count herself as this type. Amber also referred to different kinds of bingo players, those who were 'not the type to sit and chat', explaining that she felt these players were part of a different kind of group or type from the people she knew. However, when the subject of gambling addiction was raised during the interview, she said that, following an £1800 win, she felt she was becoming addicted; that at one time her bingo playing was quite secretive as she felt others close to her would be horrified by how much money she sank into the game. I did not have any reason to doubt the words of the interviewees, but was intrigued as to what might be the origins of these contradictions. Perhaps there is a harder-nosed and more secretive kind of bingo player, a distinctive and elusive type. Or perhaps the participants perceived this to be the case for other reasons, considering it necessary on some level for that stereotype to be labelled as 'other'.

### Changes

Diane ventured some interesting points on the subject of bingo's changing face. 'When I was younger', she said, 'it always seemed like a seedy place to go, whereas now it's a

lot more technological, with purpose built halls and better seats. It has gone up in that sense, but will always be a poor man's casino.' Carol, too, felt that bingo had become 'more technological' and that now players are 'more serious about it somehow'. Jean recognised this element to the contemporary bingo hall, saying 'it's all done by computers now', with no more traditional calling. She acknowledged the health and safety regulations around smoking and mobile phone use, for example, also as 'a sign of the times'. Jean felt, too, that there were noticeably more men than when she first played, when bingo was more of 'a woman thing'.

Jean referred to the fact that bingo 'is not just a game anymore': 'you can have dinner, then the afternoon session, then tea'. Carl, too, explained that 'Bingo is not just about bingo, but about food, about atmosphere, about staff...'. He felt that the stakes in bingo were too low to draw the 'hardcore' gambler who would be more likely to go to a casino, and that bingo's aim was 'to offer entertainment'.

Again, there seemed to be a certain amount of ambivalence in respect of bingo's changing face. Contemporary bingo was seen to hold a higher status than in previous years, and to provide a more complete social experience. However, Carl was the only participant who did not seem to regret these kinds of 'progress'. The many changes described by the participants – the increased technology, the introduction of health and safety

regulations, the staff, the food – seemed designed to enhance the enjoyment and comfort of the customer. Yet, these were changes which also encouraged players to spend more, to be 'more serious' about the game, to leave traditional bingo culture behind. Diane's comment that bingo had 'gone up', that it had enhanced its social status, implied that the game had become more acceptable in a mainstream context, and that this process had been underpinned by a shaking off of working-class associations.

### Reflections

Given the potential for financial gain contained within the idea of commercial bingo as a shared leisure activity, the game itself could be regarded as representing a kind of interface, its halls and clubs a space where material and social value systems meet and combine. To trace the origins of these collisions involves understanding notions of choice in respect of leisure and lifestyle, and contextualising choices made against a larger social and political picture. Money itself is one aspect of that context. Parry and Bloch refer to money as the 'agent of individualisation and of the dissolution of communal bonds'(1989:5), and describe the long-standing socio-philosophical tradition in which money is regarded effectively as precipitating the growth of depersonalisation and social separation. As Bond, too, writes, his tone underpinned by a kind of folk truth, 'we think we live in an age of science, but it's also an age of alchemy: we try to turn gold into human values.' (1974:xi). Against

and in respect of this, bingo may appear as peculiar and unique. It is a game first of all, and is based on the winning rather than on the earning of money. It does not involve monetary exchange between players. That is, although money changes hands, the members of the bingo hall, its community of players, are not involved in exchanging money with one another. The presence of money at a bingo hall, then, is qualitatively different from its presence in the community at large. There is no trading, no bartering, no monetary negotiation. And yet the prospect of monetary gain has a defining presence at the bingo hall, with the game fundamentally encompassing the element of competition. In the context of bingo, competition harbours a degree of contradiction, in that although players may wish to win the money, to 'beat' others in the race for the prize, they also wish to enjoy with those same others the process and excitement of the game. Other bingo hall members are fellow players, even friends, but are also competitors. The 'social side' of bingo culture, then, the very presence of others, is, from the start, based on contradictory foundations, not only in terms of the potentially divisive effects of monetary gain, but also in terms of the competitive manner in which this gain is realised.

In his study of economic anthropology, Wilk notes the contradictions at the root of social relationships involving money. 'Many anthropologists', he writes,

'have seen how exchange and gift-giving can create community and interpersonal relationships. Paradoxically, fighting and conflict can often lead to the same end; opponents and enemies are locked together as surely and often as closely as friends and allies' (1996: 4).

Although bingo players would not regard themselves in conflict in any violent sense, the possibility that 'opponents' may seem and even feel as close as 'friends' or 'allies' is perhaps suggestive in this context. Gorer equates gambling with sport as providing an impersonal and uncontroversial topic of conversation 'for a nation tongue-tied with shyness'. 'A spot of gambling', he writes, with a kind of bawdy irony, 'makes the whole world kin' (1967:84). During my observation sessions, indeed, the numerous conversations I overheard involved discussion of wins, near-wins and losses, of marker pens running out, of small change needed, of meals, of staff, and so on. Rarely was anything outside that immediate space and experience referred to. The speculation that bingo does not foster anything greater than 'superficial' acquaintance between players, as ventured by Diane is in keeping with these assertions. Although it risks fetishizing the bingo experience, consolidating the bingo player as deviant from a middle-class mainstream, Reith's conception of the 'fluid gambling identity' of those who cross the threshold 'out of the ordinary world and into the world of play' (1999:128), is also relevant in this context. Just as the majority

of the participants in my study did not see their bingo acquaintances outside the bingo hall, Reith's gambler embraces a 'gambling identity...in which the everyday self is left behind and another persona, more pertinent to the ritualised social situation in which the gambler finds themselves is adopted'. The perceived separateness of the bingo hall from 'the ordinary world' would seem to make for a particular kind of social interaction, one which, contrary to common perceptions of bingo life, promotes anonymity and impersonality.

In its 1969 report, the Gaming Board, revealing its unease about the formal and organised association of women and gambling represented by the bingo halls, noted the need to 'encourage the bingo proprietors to develop the social side of the activity' (quoted in Dixey 1996:138). This characteristic of bingo life has influenced wider cultural notions of the game. Drawing on the work of researchers such as Dixey and Talbot, Deem writes that 'the chance to win at bingo is not unimportant, but...the social aspects of the game are as or more important' (1986:54). Reith, too, notes that, since the emerging bingo halls of the 60s created a gendered space for women, 'the sociable aspect of bingo [has become] paramount' (1999:106). Research by Downes et al (1976) and by Dixey (1987) indicate the preference of the vast majority of bingo players to play with others rather than alone. However, the views of the participants in this study were at odds with this, with almost all expressing ambivalence toward socialising at

the bingo hall. For some, the bingo hall is a place to enjoy solitude, for others it is a place demanding discretion about personal matters, a place only for superficial friendship and riddled with unspoken social codes, fads and judgements. Although the interviewees in this study drew initially on received wisdom about bingo culture, which characterises the bingo hall as a focus for social life, the 'social side' described by the participants came across as neither entirely comfortable nor especially positive. Unlike in previous research, too, the chance to win was, for these players, more important than the 'social side' of the game.

So why, given these reservations, did the bingo players who took part in this study enjoy bingo? And why, more generally, is the bingo hall still commonly described primarily as a place to socialise rather than to win money? In her Armley research (1996:147), Dixey argues that bingo, played generally by those occupying the least powerful positions in British society, has been claimed by them and restructured to suit their needs and identities: 'working-class women have adopted this activity which was offered by commercial concerns, and fashioned it in order to make something useful and meaningful for themselves' (1988:92). Dixey's agenda is clearly to valorise the activities of an undervalued and disempowered social group. However on the basis of my research I would argue that bingo, for some players, does not constitute a particularly positive experience. It does not demonstrate control

or autonomy, but is merely what is expected, what is possible, what is safe.

The familiarity and regularity of the bingo setting, the seeking out of favourite seats, the adherence to unspoken codes as well as to hall regulations, the likelihood that bingo players will be working-class and/or female and in some way 'known' to each other, all provide a degree of safety or, in Dixey's words, 'at-homeness'. A certain sustenance may be derived from these kinds of safety, even if they are not enjoyable as such. Rojek notes the tendency in modern-day leisure pursuits for rules and limits to prove satisfying, even comforting. He writes,

'The institutionalisation of leisure, in the shape of members' rules, newsletters, festivals, and competitions, has extended the power of discipline throughout leisure activities. The individual pays homage to the obligations of his/[her] chosen leisure enthusiasm almost as a condition of participation' (1985:20).

The 'power of discipline', in this context, comes not only from within but also from without, from the 'commercial interests' noted by Dixey and from wider social structures. The leisure choices made by women, especially working-class women in this case, are dependent upon a vast array of social factors and opportunities. A woman is subject, as Rojek writes, 'to the ethics of sexism which supports some female activities and dismisses others' (1985:18), and this is

before factors of class, social status and education are taken into account. Clarke and Critcher, moreover, argue that leisure, as a cultural, economic and social fact, 'demonstrates *why* capitalism works', since it is popularly regarded as taking place during 'free-time' when people can exercise autonomous choice and control. However, the illusion of 'free-time' reflects the illusion of 'free trade' contained within notions of the capitalist marketplace which 'far from being the antithesis of freedom, has been represented as its realisation' (1985:233). It is possible, too, that advertisements which wilfully confuse material and social priorities may distort the way in which social relationships at the bingo hall are framed or interpreted, especially since the bingo hall is portrayed as a safe social centre. Interestingly, it is generally women who, in bingo's advertising literature, are targeted in this dualistic way, with captions combining the value of friends and family with the value of winning: 'All my friends cheered when I got my first full house – it was so exciting!', 'With my winnings I treated my family to a fantastic long weekend', 'On my birthday, Stardust helped my friends and me celebrate in style'. The aim of advertising is, after all, to analyse and make commercial use of people's value systems, and if bingo chains can make their customers feel less guilty about gambling, about wanting to win, their profits may be significantly improved.

However, although there may be reasons why social interactions at the bingo hall are

or have become negative, superficial, or oppressive in some way, there may also be reasons why players may be led to describe them in negative terms. This paper's rather unflattering portrayal of bingo's social side may reflect the participants' awareness of prevailing social snobberies, and their need to dissociate themselves from a poorly-regarded and derided leisure activity. Their negativity may have been a response to the interview context, rather than their genuine feeling. In her research, Dixey refers to the clichés non-players commonly associate with those who enjoy bingo: 'many shared the myth of bingo players as irresponsible women who gambled away their housekeeping money' (1988:99). She also notes that, where players felt themselves to be 'upwardly mobile', they were less comfortable allying themselves with the stereotypical image of the bingo player. Carl and Diane exemplify this point, yet all of the participants seemed inclined to resist the negative stereotype of the traditional bingo player. Feelings of guilt, too, emerged as the participants described their relationship with bingo culture, particularly when priorities around winning were expressed, revealing the taboos surrounding competition among women. The implication, then, is that these bingo players were comfortable neither with other bingo players, nor with the bingo hall where they spend their leisure time, and nor, importantly, with the game's public image.

## Conclusion

Although it is important to analyse the condition of choice in this case, particularly given the background of socio-political pressure and cultural preconception which impacts upon bingo life, academic analysis can be at risk of undermining the prerogatives and self-perceptions of the very subjects whose words lend impetus and data to research. Most of those with whom I spoke were mildly amused at my research interest: to them bingo is 'just a game', just something simple to do which encompassed nothing serious, which amounts only to crossing numbers off a grid. I hope that, in analysing the elements of choice and control within bingo culture, I have not disputed the abilities of these players to assert choices and express preferences. Their responses to questions regarding the characterisation of bingo's social life, nevertheless, seemed to reveal more negative or mixed feelings than positive ones, a stark fact which I found both surprising and engaging. Contextualising these responses within a wider social picture, within the tensions underpinning social relationships involving money, within notions of leisure and access, particularly in respect of women, has proved fruitful to my analysis of previous research on the subject as well as of more general cultural stereotypes. Many questions were raised, however, which fell beyond the remit of this paper, concerning the increasing numbers of male players, for example, and their experiences of bingo's social side; concerning the impact of recent legislation on attitudes toward gambling; concerning internet bingo and anonymity.

The boundaries imposed during one research project may open up ideas for the next.

Exploring the paradoxes contained within people's desires to gamble, Hart writes that for most, gambling is,

'an opportunity to win a lot with a little occasionally. This means that they must normally lose. And in a way, they want to lose, treating the 'flutter' as a form of consumption, a chance for a rare buzz of excitement' (2000:160).

It would be a mistake to overlook the adrenalin rush of the gamble, which for many bingo players represents a significant draw, stimulating the kind of excitement not present in everyday life. Rather than using the bingo hall as a site for social networking, as an extension of outside communities, perhaps the bingo player more accurately regards his/her bingo life as necessarily separate, a place to buy excitement, perhaps to win a prize. Reith's crossing of the threshold from the mundane into the playful is echoed in Hart's analysis, as he continues, 'Betting under those circumstances is like taking a holiday. It is nice while it lasts, but real life consists in the daily grind' (2000:160).

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