

# **UNLV Gaming Research & Review Journal**

**Volume 20, Issue 1, Spring 2016**

**Special Issue:  
Goffman in Las Vegas: Gambling,  
Fatefulness, and Risk Society**

Guest Editor  
Dmitri N. Shalin

**UNLV International Gaming Institute**

# **UNLV**

**International Editorial  
Advisory Board**

DR. MIKAEL B AHLGREN  
The Pennsylvania State  
University

DR. KI-JOON BACK  
University of Houston

DR. BILLY BAI  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

MR. ANTHONY CABOT  
Attorney: Lewis & Roca

DR. K.S. CHON  
Hong Kong Polytechnic University

DR. WANDA M. COSTEN  
University of Tennessee

DR. MEHMET ERDEM  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

DR. NERILEE HING  
Southern Cross University  
New South Wales, Australia

DR. CATHY HSU  
Hong Kong Polytechnic University

DR. SUDHIR H. KALE  
Bond University, Australia

DR. GARY LOVEMAN

DR. LIA NOWER, J.D., Ph.D.  
Center for Gambling Studies  
Rutgers University

DR. DOUGLAS M. WALKER  
College of Charleston

**UNLV Gaming Research & Review Journal**

**Publisher**

International Gaming Institute  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

**Co-Executive Editor**

Bo J. Bernhard, Ph.D.

Executive Director

International Gaming Institute

E-mail: bo.bernhard@unlv.edu

Brett Abarbanel, Ph.D.

UCLA Gambling Studies Program

University of California, Los Angeles

Email: BAbarbanel@mednet.ucla.edu

**Associate Editors**

Ashok Singh, Ph.D.

Anthony Lucas, Ph.D.

Sarah Tanford, Ph.D.

International Gaming Institute

**Subscription Office**

Bo Bernhard, Ph.D.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

4505 S. Maryland Parkway, Box 456037

Las Vegas, NV 89154-6037

Telephone: (702) 895-2935 Fax: (702) 895-1135

E-mail: gamingjournal@unlv.edu

E-mail: bo.bernhard@unlv.edu

<http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/grj/>

Formatted by Nicole Schultz, International Gaming Institute

© Copyright 2016 UNLV International Gaming Institute

*May not be reproduced without written permission of International Gaming Institute,  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas.*

**ISSN (Print): 1531-0930    ISSN (Online): 2327-8455**

# UNLV Gaming Research & Review Journal

Volume 20, Issue 1

Special Issue: Goffman in Las Vegas: Gambling, Fatefulness, and Risk Society

Guest Editor: Dmitri Shalin

## CONTENTS

### Foreward to Special Issue

**Bo Bernhard, Ph.D.**

**Erving Goffman, Fateful Action, and the Las Vegas Gambling Scene.....1**

*Dmitri N. Shalin*

**Erving Goffman’s Las Vegas: A Changing City .....39**

*David D. Schwartz*

**Las Vegas as a Symbol: Goffman and the Competing Narratives of the Sin City .....55**

*Michael Green*

**Goffman, Action and Risk Society: The New Subjectives of Risk.....61**

*Stephen Lyng*

**From Vegas to the World Stage: Goffman: Strategic Interaction on a World Stage .....79**

*Jeffrey J. Sallaz*

**The Evolution of the Concept of Social Action: Parsons and Goffman .....87**

*Philip Manning*

**Doubling Down on Goffman: A Commentary on Dmitri Shalin’s ‘Erving Goffman, Fateful Action, and the Las Vegas Gambling Scene’.....97**

*James F. Cosgrave*



# Foreward to Special Issue

Bo Bernhard, Ph.D.  
Co-Executive Editor  
e-mail: bo.bernhard@unlv.edu

This one is an issue for the gambling and sociology ages.

It started, as many adventures do, with a bit of wonder and the discovery of new documents. (I once had a graduate student announce in a research methods class, with great delight, “they shouldn’t call it a ‘literature review.’ They should call it... a ‘treasure hunt!’”) Dmitri Shalin embarked upon his own treasure hunt, and happily, he approached us at the *UNLV Gaming Research and Review Journal* with a vision that immediately captured our sociological imaginations, and ignited the minds of several other scholars you will meet in this issue. As such, it gives our editorial team profound pleasure to publish this issue on “Goffman in Las Vegas: Gambling, Fatefulness, and Risk Society,” guest edited by Dr. Shalin.

To sociologists, he hardly needs any introduction, but for those who may be less aware: Erving Goffman was the 73rd President of the American Sociological Association, and perhaps the most cited American sociologist of all time. He is one of those thinkers whose thoughts have crept into our own public, private, and collective consciousness, in ways we do not always “cite,” as it were. In this special issue, we find illuminating answers to many questions that have long baffled gambling researchers about the man himself – as well as his famous work. Specifically, it helps answer questions of what, exactly, Erving Goffman was researching during his extended periods in Las Vegas, and how, exactly, these observations informed his most famous works. In doing so, we now need to wonder less, as we now have answers to “one of the great what-ifs of gambling academia,” as Dave Schwartz aptly puts it here.

The team of scholars convened for this special issue come from different hallways of academe, and joined forces to critically assess the contribution that Erving Goffman made to our understanding gambling as a prototype of action, the role of risk in society, and Las Vegas as a gambling metropolis. Each contributor to the special issue explores particular facets of this problem-nexus.

Drawing on these newly-found documents and interviews, Dmitri Shalin’s lead article tracks Goffman’s interest in gambling as a personal pastime and as the subject of scholarly research. Via his new discoveries, Shalin helps us understand the importance of Goffman’s immigrant roots, and the reasons that these “newcomers” in America had such a keen interest in gambling. This in itself would represent a fascinating sociological point, but Shalin then continues by tracking Goffman’s footprints in Las Vegas, his stint as a casino dealer, and the resulting seminal study of gambling that Goffman published in 1967, in which he demonstrated why a willingness to “take a gamble” or “engage in action” is paramount for success in American society. Goffman’s work, Shalin argues, helps us understand the commodification of risk and unequal distribution of life chances in society.

David Schwartz and Michael Green then focus their analyses on the momentous changes that Las Vegas was undergoing at the time when Goffman took up a job as an observer-employee in a casino. This period saw the emergence of mega-resorts, the formation of Nevada Gaming Commission, and concerted efforts to eradicate the mob element from the casino business. The authors also make an important academic

point: Goffman did his research at a time when the field of gambling studies was just starting to gather momentum, and as such, his contributions to this field beg for a re-examination.

Next, Stephen Lyng explores Goffman's thesis that risk taking has a corporeal dimension, and that our bodies and emotions are profoundly implicated in what Lyng famously calls "edgework," or deliberate self-endangerment, and that contemporary society offers various avenues for infusing personal life with a sense of adventure and self-mastery. We were particularly honored when Dr. Lyng accepted our offer to opine on these matters, as his (edge)work is already mandatory reading for scholars and students everywhere – and especially those interested in risk, which speaks, after all, at the soul of the gambling act.

Having replicated Goffman's own methodology as a casino dealer in studies of casino gambling in both Las Vegas and South Africa, Jeffrey Sallaz makes a case for "scaling up" Goffman to more conventionally macro-level topics like globalization. He also argues that Goffman's analysis of front- and back-stages of social interaction can be extended to other macro-institutional facets of gaming, helping us understand how the structures of the gambling business can impact agency, a famed and foundational sociological concept, among casino employees.

In the next article, Phil Manning focuses on the theoretical and methodological issues raised by Goffman's study of gambling. He shows the evolution of Goffman's theoretical views, his debt to Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton, and the special way in which Goffman deploys the method of participant observation in his least known ethnographic project – his study of casino gambling in Nevada. As Manning argues, Goffman's work remains vital for contemporary sociology, and urges the field to extend its reach into the domain of macrosociology.

Finally, James Cosgrave uses Shalin's important new research to re-frame Goffman's vital contribution to the field of gambling studies, with a particular focus on how the gambling and commercial gaming world has evolved since Goffman's time, and on how Goffman's views might have evolved alongside these changes.

Taken together, these articles represent a genuine leap forward in our understanding of all that Goffman meant for gambling, and to sociology, and to those of us interested in their intersection.