

# AFRICAN NUMBERS GAMES AND GAMBLER MOTIVATION: ‘FAHFEE’ IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA

STEPHEN LOUW

## ABSTRACT

Since independence, at least 28 African countries have legalized some form of gambling. Yet a range of informal gambling activities have also flourished, often provoking widespread public concern about the negative social and economic impact of unregulated gambling on poor communities. This article addresses an illegal South African numbers game called fahfee. Drawing on interviews with players, operators, and regulatory officials, this article explores two aspects of this game. First, it explores the lives of both players and runners, as well as the clandestine world of the Chinese operators who control the game. Second, the article examines the subjective motivations and aspirations of players, and asks why they continue to play, despite the fact that their aggregate losses easily outstrip their aggregate gains. In contrast with those who reduce its appeal simply to the pursuit of wealth, I conclude that, for the (mostly) black, elderly, working class women who play fahfee several times a week, the associated trade-off—regular, small losses, versus the social enjoyment of playing and the prospect of occasional but realistic windfalls—takes on a whole new meaning, and preferences for relatively lumpy rather than steady consumption streams help explain the continued attraction of fahfee. This reinforces the need to understand players’ own accounts of gambling utility rather than simply to moralistically condemn gambling or to dismiss gamblers behaviour as irrational.

---

AFRICA HAS A LONG BUT little studied tradition of gambling. Some of the first records, which include the oldest known ‘weighted dice’, date back to

\*Stephen Louw ([stephen.louw@wits.ac.za](mailto:stephen.louw@wits.ac.za)) is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. Most of the player interviews were conducted in relevant local languages by my research assistants, Thapelo Lekgowa, Liziwe Tyutu, and Keitumetse Letsoalo, under my direct supervision. I conducted all other interviews in English. Ethical clearance was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), University of the Witwatersrand, Approval no. H14/05/43. Participation in the study was voluntary, and an informed consent was obtained for each interview. Interviews with fahfee players and operators were coded, and no identifying information was recorded. These codes are used in the text to preserve anonymity. Funding for some of the original research was provided by the South African Responsible Gambling Foundation (SARGF), and thereafter by an FRC 2015 Ad Hoc Grant by the School of Social Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

3500 B.C.E. in Egypt,<sup>1</sup> and there is evidence of extensive gambling across much of pre-colonial West Africa, despite the large Islamic population, and more limited gambling throughout Central and Northern Africa. There is far less evidence of pre-colonial gambling in Southern Africa.<sup>2</sup> During the colonial period, most African countries passed a raft of measures restricting gambling, typically in conjunction with other sumptuary laws intended to control African social life. At least 28 post-colonial countries have since relaxed these controls,<sup>3</sup> mostly because gambling revenues, especially from state lotteries, are an attractive source of rents for the new elite, and cautiously permit a limited range of gambling activities, particularly in hotel based casinos.<sup>4</sup> After South Africa, the largest gambling markets are Nigeria and Kenya,<sup>5</sup> and a well-developed casino sector in Egypt, although this is restricted to foreign tourists.<sup>6</sup>

Not all gambling is legal or regulated, and very little is known about the size, characteristics, or social impact, of unregulated informal gambling activities in Africa.<sup>7</sup> This sector has grown exponentially on the back of the expansion of Internet and cell phone connectivity across the continent, allowing a wide network of players to transfer money and place bets with the gambling operator of their choice.

As in the developed world, the biggest driver of online gambling is sports betting, which has prompted significant concern about negative social impacts,<sup>8</sup> as well as the loss of tax revenues associated with the

1. Patrick A. Pierce and Donald E. Miller, *Gambling politics: State government and the business of betting* (Boulder, London, 2004), p. 9.

2. Per Binde, 'Gambling across cultures: Mapping worldwide occurrence and learning from ethnographic comparison', *International Gambling Studies* 5, 1 (2005), p. 5; Thomas Q. Reefe, 'The biggest game of all: Gambling in traditional Africa', in William J. Baker and J. A. Mangan (eds), *Sport in Africa: Essays in social history* (Africana, New York, 1987), pp. 47–48.

3. World Casino Directory, 'African Gambling Law & Current Legislation', <<http://www.worldcasinodirectory.com/africagamblinglaw.htm>> (23 January 2017).

4. This was precipitated by the *Betting, Lotteries and Gaming Act* of 1966 in Kenya, which transferred responsibility for gambling control from the Police Department to the Betting Control and Licensing Board. Uganda followed suit with the *Gaming and Pool Betting (Control and Taxation) Act* of 1968.

5. For an overview of the growth of these markets, see Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC), 'Taking the odds. Gambling outlook: 2015–2019. South Africa–Nigeria–Kenya' (4th Annual Edition, Johannesburg, 2015).

6. Daniel Felsenstein and Daniel Freeman, 'Gambling on the border: Casinos, tourism development and the Prisoners' Dilemma', in Shaul Krakover and Yehuda Gradus (eds), *Tourism in frontier areas* (Lexington Books, Oxford, 2002), pp. 95–113. This tolerance of gambling for foreigners is an oft-cited factor behind terrorist attacks on tourists in Egypt. See Heba Aziz, 'Understanding attacks on tourists in Egypt', *Tourism Management* 16, 2 (1995), pp. 91–95, esp. p. 93.

7. Regulators generally treat gambling as a prescribed activity, meaning that, unless specifically permitted, any gambling activity should be considered illegal. In the academic literature, the term 'unregulated' is generally preferred, as this has fewer moralistic connotations.

8. For a small sample, see Divine Ntaryike, 'Douala students increasingly take to gambling', *Cameroon Post*, 19 March 2012, <<https://www.cameroonweb.com/CameroonHomePage/NewsArchive/Youths-Increasing-Attracted-to-Gambling-305789>> (28 September 2017); Tonderayi Mukeredzi, 'Young Zimbabweans warming up to gambling', *UN Africa Renewal*,

growth of an unregulated form of gambling. Politicians and the public alike are quick to blame this on unscrupulous gambling operators who prey on the unemployed and the poor,<sup>9</sup> whilst Kenyan's former Prime Minister, Raila Odinga, described gambling as 'a hustler philosophy' manipulated by governing elites for their own purposes.<sup>10</sup> In Uganda, a household survey found that a quarter of the adult population in Kampala City had engaged in some form of gambling in the past year, much of which was effectively unregulated, and claimed that the youth—defined as persons between the ages of 12 and 30, or 80 percent of the population—have 'embraced sports betting as a way of survival given the high levels of unemployment and under employment in the country'.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, many traditional games of chance continue to attract wagers amongst an eager public, including so-called 'street gambling', which is played openly with few if any legal consequences.<sup>12</sup>

This article addresses this lacuna, and explores the workings of a South African single-number lottery or numbers game called fahfee (alternatively *iFafi*, *Mochaena*, *iChina*, or *umshayina*). Whilst clearly illegal,<sup>13</sup> fahfee is an entrenched feature of everyday life for many South Africans, and one regularly encounters small groups of (mostly) black, elderly, working class women, gathered on street corners in the mornings and afternoons, socialising and placing bets with local bookies or 'runners'. National prevalence studies suggest that fahfee is played by around 2.4 percent of all persons who gamble, and is the preferred gambling mode for 1.6 percent of all

20 April 2015, <<https://southernafrican.news/2015/07/28/youths-warming-up-to-gambling>> (28 September 2017); Godfrey Marawanyika, 'Worried Zimbabwe blocks new sports betting licenses after surge in gambling', *Mail and Guardian Africa*, 20 May 2015, <<http://mgafrica.com/article/2015-05-20-zimbabwe-blocks-new-betting-licenses-after-surge-in-gambling>> (28 September 2017); Butange Ndemo, 'Gambling a major threat to poverty reduction', *Business Daily Africa*, 20 July 2016, <<http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Opinion-and-Analysis/Gambling-a-major-threat-to-poverty-reduction/539548-3303348-du1068z/index.html>> (28 September 2017); Vincent Achuka, 'Kenyans gripped by new gambling craze', *Daily Nation*, 29 November 2015, <<http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/lifestyle/Kenyans-gripped-by-new-gambling-craze/1214-2976326-fpsnf6z/index.html>> (28 September 2017).

9. Nangayi Guyson, 'Unemployment sending Ugandans into gambling', *The London Evening Post*, 24 May 2012; Elizabeth McSheffrey, 'In one Uganda slum, gambling is a prudent financial investment', *Vice News*, 26 February 2015.

10. Cited in Nzau Musau and Mwaniki Munuhe, 'Gambling is Kenya's next big scandal', *The Standard*, 6 August 2016, p. 6.

11. Joseph Mawejje, 'Socio economic effects of gambling: Evidence from Kampala City, Uganda' (Research Paper Series No. 126, Economic Policy Research Centre, Makerere University, Uganda, 2016), pp. 10 & 57.

12. Tariku A. Abdi, Robert A. C. Ruiter, and Tamirie A. Adal, 'Personal, social and environmental risk factors of problematic gambling among high school adolescents in Addis Abada, Ethiopia', *Journal of Gambling Studies* 31, 1, (2015), pp. 59-72.

13. Prior to the legalisation of gambling in the 1990s, fahfee was treated as a lottery offence—see, for example, *The State v Chan* 1962(1) SA 735 TPT. Today fahfee is clearly illegal in terms of Section 7(a) of the *National Gambling Act* 7 of 2004 as well as Sections 57(1)(b) and 57(2)(g) of the *Lotteries Act* 57 of 1997, as well as the equivalent provisions in the Provincial Gambling Acts.

South African gamblers.<sup>14</sup> Fahfee is played in at least six of South Africa's nine Provinces, and is particularly popular amongst low-income gamblers in Gauteng Province<sup>15</sup> and Limpopo Province. In a more recent study, the National Gambling Board estimates that there are approximately 100,000 daily participants, who spend an average of R2 a day, or R520 a year, on fahfee.<sup>16</sup>

Fahfee is widely depicted in popular literature. In *Madumo: A man bewitched*, for example, Adam Ashforth suggestively describes 'The whole of Soweto' as 'a patchwork of fahfee runners and collection points'.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, in *The Lotus People*, set in Durban's Grey Street Complex, or Casbah, Aziz Hassim describes fahfee as a game 'played by nearly everyone who could spare a ticky or more and provided a lucrative source of income for the street-wise operators' and entertainment for residents who placed bets 'with a cheerful smile and a gambler's abandon'.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps because of its ubiquitous presence, the game of fahfee—its origins, subjective meanings, and social impact—has largely escaped serious academic inquiry. 'The familiar', as G.W.F. Hegel famously put it, 'just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood'.<sup>19</sup> There are two important exceptions to this.

In Harry Dugmore's pioneering study of class and group consciousness amongst coloured working class women in pre-War Johannesburg study, fahfee is seen to have a dual significance, serving as a vehicle for popular entertainment and income generation in an impoverished community, and also, more profoundly, as a means to challenge the 'regime of uniformity, discipline and 'rationally' meted-out reward imposed by the capitalist mode of production'.<sup>20</sup> Embedded in everyday life, fahfee, alongside illegal liquor trading and participation in the Congregational Church, is said to form 'the bedrock of the defensive and largely 'apolitical' culture which the Coloured working class developed in Johannesburg

14. National Gambling Board, 'Socio-economic impact of legalised gambling in South Africa' (Pretoria, 2009), pp. xi, 8, 16; and National Gambling Board, 'Economic impact of gambling in South Africa' (Pretoria, 2013).

15. National Prevalence Study, 'Summary of basic data on Gauteng Province from the National Urban Prevalence Study of gambling behaviour' (National Responsible Gambling Programme, Cape Town, 2009), pp. 30 and 41.

16. National Gambling Board, 'Socio-economic impact of illegal and online gambling in South Africa: Final Report' (Pretoria, 2017), p. 47. This study draws on very limited fieldwork, and it is unclear how accurate these estimates are.

17. Adam Ashforth, *Madumo: A man bewitched* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2000), p. 162.

18. Aziz Hassim, *The lotus people* (STE Publishers, Johannesburg, 2002), pp. 102–103.

19. Georg Hegel, *The phenomenology of spirit*, Trans. A.V. Miller, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977), p. 18.

20. Harry Dugmore, 'Diamond ladies and a dream of hell' – Fah-fee, and the coloured working class of Johannesburg, 1918–1936' (African Studies Seminar Paper 266, African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, 1990), p. 2.

in the 1920s and 1930s'.<sup>21</sup> Dugmore's emphasis on the socio-political significance of informal women's organization and activities associated with both gambling and liquor is well taken. At the same time, as we show below, Dugmore's work can be criticised for misunderstanding gamblers' odds and the potential income streams accruing to fahfee players.

Detlef Krige's more recent analysis of the culture of the informal economy and 'popular economies' and 'speculative accumulation' through 'everyday risk-taking' in Soweto offers a fascinating ethnographic insight into the life-worlds of actors operating outside of 'the documented and sanctioned sectors of national economies'.<sup>22</sup> Drawing critically on Jean and John Comaroff's work on 'occult economies' and new forms of risk in 'millennium capitalism', Krige suggests that the meaning of the game has changed over time, and that fahfee, for both players and runners, has 'become less associated with leisure and social networking than with actors in the urban underclass trying to earn an income through ways that seem integral to how financial capitalism works: "making money with money"'.<sup>23</sup> Whilst intriguing, there is little evidence offered to support this periodization, and Krige is unable to demonstrate a shift in motivational dimensions over time.

My analysis builds on both these studies but, drawing on a broader gambling studies literature, historic sources, and contemporary fieldwork, suggests that fahfee participation is motivated by a complex blend of material and non-material factors, as well as a subtly different understanding of risk and income preferences. To this end, this article has two primary concerns. First, it examines the ways in which the game is run by operators, invariably of Chinese origin—known affectionately as the 'Chinaman' (alternatively 'banker', 'fahfee man', or '*ju fah gong*')—about whom very little is known.<sup>24</sup> Second, the article examines the subjective moral universe of fahfee players. In particular, it explores the motivational dimensions of fahfee play, exploring both the non-material and the material utility that players derive from participation. By focussing on gambler motivation, the article hopes to give some voice to the (mostly) black, elderly, working class women who play fahfee. In so doing, the article makes a small contribution to the ethnography of unregulated African gambling, as well as to studies of the political-economy of everyday life in South Africa.

21. Dugmore, 'Diamond ladies', p. 2.

22. Detlef Krige, "We are running for a living": Work, leisure and speculative accumulation in an underground numbers lottery in Johannesburg', *African Studies* 70, 1 (2011), p. 3.

23. Krige, 'We are running for a living', p. 19.

24. The partial exception to this is Ufrieda Ho, *Paper sons and daughters: Growing up Chinese in South Africa* (Pan Macmillan, Johannesburg, 2011); an autobiographical account of growing up as the daughter of a Chinese migrant, who worked as a 'fahfee man' in various townships in order to eke out a living for his family. Operators are *extremely* reluctant to be interviewed by community outsiders.

The research involved fifty-one interviews with a purposive sample of players and runners in Soweto (Emneni, Dube, and Moletsane), Waverley, Orange Farm, and Thokoza, all in Gauteng Province, and Ikageng township, Potchefstroom, in North West Province. As fahfee is illegal, sampling was necessarily opportunistic. In most cases, players were approached after they were observed leaving known fahfee 'spots'. Sample units were selected to cover as broad a spectrum of the playing black township public as possible, which means that male and younger players, as well as bookies or 'runners', were deliberately over-represented. The study also included three extensive interviews with Chinese operators, and one with the grandson of an operator, voices which, to my knowledge, have not been included in previous studies; as well as interviews with regulators, police officials, and data from betting books that were confiscated in a police raid on a large fahfee operation in Limpopo province.

*Fahfee: running and playing the game*

Informal lotteries are clearly not unique to Africa. The most well-known international examples include the numbers games or 'policy' that became popular in poor black communities in US cities like Chicago and Harlem; the *Jogo do Bicho* or 'animal game' that originated in Brazil in the 1880s; *Matka* in India; and the *luhecai* or 'underground lotteries' that are mushrooming in contemporary rural China.

Fahfee is, however, significantly different in at least one key respect: ownership and control of the game rests with community outsiders, almost invariably of Chinese origin, with no social and limited economic links to the communities in which games are played. In large part, this is the legacy of apartheid social engineering, which demarcated separate residential areas for different communities. It is also because Chinese operators generally use the profits generated to educate and set up their children in professional vocations. Their long-term goal is to get out of fahfee, and they have no vested interest in developing the communities within which they operate. Thus fahfee contributes to a net out-flow of capital from black South African townships.

Much of the appeal of fahfee lies in its simplicity. Players choose a number between 1 and 36, with a payoff of 27 to 1 plus the return of the original stake. In most cases, the operator pays the runner a small gratuity for collecting and processing bets,<sup>25</sup> whilst winning players are usually

25. There appear to be small local variances here. Krige ('We are running for a living', pp. 10–11) found that both the head runner and assistant runner (or 'puller') were paid a small weekly fee by the operator. By contrast, a former operator insisted he never paid any gratuities or commissions, and that the only way in which his runners earned money was by receiving commission from winning players, or for allowing the operator to use their property

expected to pay a percentage of winnings, often as high as R4 on every R27 paid out (or 14.8 percent of the winnings).<sup>26</sup>

Unlike the games cited above, in which winning numbers are linked to some third-party event, e.g. a combination of the daily numbers published by the New York Clearing House in Harlem numbers games in the 1920s, fahfee operators simply choose the numbers that are played themselves, a process known as *num ju*.<sup>27</sup> Players accept this, and claim it is fair as the 'bags' or 'wallets' in which bets are recorded and collected are only opened after the winning number has been announced.

Informal gambling in black South African townships is structured largely along gender lines. Although men and women both gamble, dice ('*madice*') is played predominantly by young men, typically in public places (taxi ranks, street corners, etc.), with high levels of associated alcohol consumption and violence.<sup>28</sup> Older township residents, like FG, are generally quick to voice their disapproval: 'The community gets affected in many ways. We gamblers are unscrupulous. Sometimes these boys, when it comes to dice players, are very rude. They will wait for you until you finish the game and rob you ... House burglaries happen because of these boys playing madice. I'm telling you, ... it is a rough game of thugs.'<sup>29</sup>

Although both men and women gamble, women tend to prefer to play cards in recreational establishments and private spaces, whilst younger men play card games like *batota* ('call-a-card') in public spaces, often alongside various dice games. This too is often associated with violence. As TM, a middle-aged Soweto man put it, 'there is a lot of fighting, especially when there is a disagreement.' With fahfee, he continued, 'there is no fighting. People just bet and the Chinaman comes with the number and the number is final.'<sup>30</sup> Safety, clearly, is part of the gendered appeal of fahfee.

as a fahfee 'spot' (Interview, retired middle-aged male fahfee operator who ran a route in Alexandra township in the 1980s, Woodmead, Johannesburg, 14 January 2017).

26. This appears to be a long-standing practice. In 1937, Vickers reported that 'The runners receive a commission of sixpence each and also retain four times the stake of the winning bets, so that the punter receives only twenty five to one' (C.H.Vickers, 'Fah fee: The chink's game', *The Voice*, 28 July 1937, p. 7). In his study, Krige ('We are running for a living', p. 11) found that runners deducted between R6 and R8 on a payout of R28. By contrast, LT explicitly denied that she ever had to pay commission on wins (Interview, 53-year old Zimbabwean lady working as a domestic worker in LT, Johannesburg, fahfee player, 19 January 2016).

27. Ho, *Paper sons and daughters*, pp. 128–129.

28. Philip Frankel, '*Ukujula*: Illegal gambling, crime and culture in post-apartheid South Africa. Three communities in the Vaal' (National Centre for the Study of Gambling, University of Cape Town, 2006).

29. Interview, middle-aged male factory worker, fahfee player, Ikageng, Potchefstroom, 6 February 2015.

30. Interview, unemployed middle-aged male, fahfee player, Moletsane, Soweto, 8 February 2015.

Fahfee players today are disproportionately female, middle aged and older, from lower income groups, and almost entirely black.<sup>31</sup> The interviews suggest that the demographic appeal of fahfee has widened slightly, possibly due to the stimulation of demand by other forms of legal gambling. DS, a young male player, explained: 'by law [historically] China [fahfee] used to be played by grannies and grandfathers, but the current situation is that us youngsters realise that there is money in gambling. There are so many people playing now.'<sup>32</sup> XA concurred, but identified a market niche for herself: whilst 'there are no judgements ... others are embarrassed that they are young and will send an elderly to play for them, and [then] you can make yourself commission.'<sup>33</sup>

Low economic and physical barriers to access help distinguish fahfee from most forms of formal or regulated gambling, especially casinos. Fahfee 'spots' or 'banks' are located conveniently along main roads, near taxi ranks, in shebeens, and in private houses; whilst bets are placed for as little as R1, and seldom more than R20. Whereas it costs a lot, in terms of both time and money, to gamble in the regulated gambling sector, fahfee is a low cost game, and incurs minimal transaction costs. As CR, an elderly spaza shop owner put it, she is able to 'place a bet a few houses away from [her] business' and is 'never away for more than 15 minutes at a time'.<sup>34</sup> The fact that fahfee is played near to people's homes or place of work has a further advantage: it helps facilitate the *social experience* of the game, and cultivate a sense of moral community amongst participants. As NN explained, there were several fahfee points in her street, but she regularly chose a particular house in which to play 'because some of my friends play there and we are able to share numbers to make their stakes of winning higher.'<sup>35</sup> Although other forms of gambling include a social component, fahfee participants place particular stock on this aspect. Discussing numbers, comparing notes and strategies, and pooling bets, as much as simply chatting and sharing the daily news, is an integral part of the fahfee experience. Older female interviewees in particular valued this communal experience, something that they do not associate with games like the state lottery.

The attraction of this sense of group-participation appears to be a long-standing characteristic of the game, a point noted by Raum in his references

31. National Gambling Board, 'Economic impact', 2013, pp. 39–40. This corresponds with earlier accounts, for example Anon, 'Fah Fee: All sections play this number racket', *Drum*, January 1961.

32. Interview, unemployed male in his early 20s, fahfee player and part-time runner. Ikageng, Potchefstroom, 6 February 2015.

33. Interview, retired female, fahfee player, Ikageng, Potchefstroom, 26 February 2015.

34. Interview, 56 year old female spaza shopkeeper, fahfee player, Orange Farm, Johannesburg, 17 November 2014.

35. Interview, female in her early 50s, occupation not given, fahfee player, Emdeni, Soweto, 30 April 2015.



to 'Chinese-controlled guessing games' (i.e. fahfee) in Zwelitsha in the Eastern Cape in the 1960s.<sup>36</sup> In a broader African perspective, this is consistent with Brenner and Servet's study of lotteries and savings in Senegal, which drew a clear distinction between the 'individualist attitude' of conventional lottery players and the more collectivist or social attitudes of people investing in the *tontine* (a type of rotating savings and loans association, which combines features of both a group annuity and a lottery).<sup>37</sup>

### *Managing the game: operators and runners*

Operators have, historically, always been Chinese. A 1909 newspaper report, which described fahfee operations in almost exactly the same way as they exist today, warned of the danger posed by 'the heathen Chinese' operator, who exposed the white residents of Kimberley to the twin dangers of gambling and inter-racial mixing.<sup>38</sup> This has not changed significantly, although I encountered two cases, one in Soweto and another in Polokwane, where local black residents were attempting to establish their own routes. In both instances, the 'black Chinaman', as they are dubbed, were not particularly successful, and players universally preferred Chinese operators. In part, this preference relates to trust and the integrity of number selection. As PK put it, a 'local black' operator could easily 'send someone to come sit in amongst us and spy numbers we discuss', something a social outsider (she believed) would find more difficult to do.<sup>39</sup>

Operators control designated routes, which they usually identify and establish themselves, in conjunction with local residents, who become their 'runners' or local bookies, or buy from other operators.<sup>40</sup> Operators are almost always male, although female family members often assist them, or take over their routes when they are no longer able to run them personally.<sup>41</sup> There is no centralised or overarching coordination of operators and their routes. Operators seen to encroach on established fahfee routes run the risk of community ostracization.<sup>42</sup>

36. Otto Friedrich Raum, 'Self-help associations', *African Studies* 28, 2 (1969), pp. 119–141. There is little evidence of fahfee in the Eastern-Cape today.

37. Gabrielle A. Brenner and Jean-Michel Servet, 'Proximity, confidence, and the tapping of savings: The case of African lotteries', *African Review of Money, Finance and Banking* 1, 2 (1995), pp. 47–59.

38. *Rand Daily Mail*, 'Fah Fee', 2 October 1909, p. 7. Vickers, 'Fah Fee', p. 7, suggests that the white community in Kimberley continued to play fahfee at least up until 1937.

39. Interview, 47 year old unemployed female, runner, Moletsane, Soweto, 18 January 2015. See also Ho, *Paper sons and daughters*, p. 133, and Krige, 'We are running for a living', p. 15, on the Chinese banker's 'outsider status'.

40. Interview, elderly male fahfee operator, Pretoria, 3 June 2015; and follow up interview, Centurion, 9 August 2015.

41. Interview, late-50s female fahfee operator, Johannesburg South, 7 August 2014.

42. Interview, retired middle-aged male fahfee operator who ran a route in Alexandra township in the 1980s, Woodmead, Johannesburg, 14 January 2017. This last point applies

A typical route starts from the operator's house, and includes a number of 'banks' (*choangs*) or 'spots', at which the operator will stop and take bets twice a day: once in the morning and again in the afternoon, when he retraces his steps back to the start of the route. Depending on population density, routes can cover large areas. Routes in urban townships are relatively short, sometimes with several banks along a single main road. In rural areas, by contrast, there may be one bank for a single village, and routes are sometimes over 100 km long.<sup>43</sup>

Operators sometimes control several routes at once, which are allocated to members of their extended family. Fahfee is a low stakes, high margin, business, with lots of small bets in the 2–5 South African Rand (R2–R5) range, and a large return to house of 22.22 percent. The business depends on scale, and operators run extensive routes in order to make decent profits. In one case investigated by the Limpopo Gambling Board, an operator was found to 'own' three routes, each of which had 36 banks. Records seized show that an average of only R200 was collected (*after* the winning bets were paid out) at each bank. Although small, the numbers add up quickly when we consider that there were 35 banks and thus 72 draws per route; a daily gross gambling revenue (i.e. the gross turnover less the amount paid over as winnings) of R14,400 for each route, or R43,200 in total.<sup>44</sup>

It is important to be cautious here. We know very little about the economics of fahfee operations, and this example is likely to overstate earnings for most fahfee routes. One retired operator, who, together with his brother and mother, ran a seven-bank fahfee route in Alexandra township in the 1980s, suggested that the only people capable of earning this sort of money were recent triad-connected Chinese immigrants, who typically 'muscled' South African born Chinese operators out of their routes and controlled large numbers of banks.<sup>45</sup>

Operators buy (or make) 'wallets' or 'bags', which, along with betting tickets, are given to runners to distribute to players along the route. Players mark off their chosen numbers and record the amounts wagered, and return these to the operator via the runner. When too many players

mostly to the South African born Chinese community, or SABCs as they are often called, rather than recent immigrants.

43. I encountered one route that stretched from the town of Polokwane to Ga-Mmaleboho village along the border with Botswana. General details on fahfee operators provided by Philly Masogo, Senior Manager: Law Enforcement, Limpopo Gambling Board, interviewed Polokwane, 22 July 2014; and confirmed in subsequent email correspondence, 11 September 2014. See also the results of the police investigation into another Polokwane-based operation reported in *National Director of Public Prosecutions v Nuanjan Liu & others*. Unreported. Case no. 7942/2007.

44. Interview with Philly Masogo, Senior Manager: Law Enforcement, Limpopo Gambling Board, Polokwane, 22 July 2014.

45. Interview, retired middle-aged male fahfee operator who ran a route in Alexandra township in the 1980s, Woodmead, Johannesburg, 14 January 2017.

place bets on the correct number, operators are sometimes unable to make payment, in which case all winning bets are recorded, and honoured the following day. This is known as ‘carry over’, and is essential to the relationship of trust and goodwill that operators cultivate with local communities.<sup>46</sup> In cases when operators were ‘hit’ especially badly, they would explain their predicament to players, and agree to spread out payments over two or three days,<sup>47</sup> further testament to the remarkable levels of trust at the heart of operator–player relationships.

Operators are often reluctant to accept large bets, fearing the consequences of having to honour an unexpectedly large payout.<sup>48</sup> According to a 1951 report, operators in smaller towns set strict limits in order to reduce their exposure to a maximum of £20–£30 per bet. Johannesburg punters were envied, for operators there had much higher or no limits, and, or so, it was (improbably) rumoured, would pay out ‘to the tune of [up to] £1,000 on a winning ticket’.<sup>49</sup> When I discussed this with the retired operator mentioned above, he laughed, and remembered how easily many of his players subverted his attempts to limit bets to R10 per player by placing multiple separate R10 bets with different runners at different spots along his route in Alexandra township.<sup>50</sup>

Operators do not interact directly with players. Although players see the operator arrive on each occasion, they have no direct contact with each other. Networks of runners pass on winning numbers to head runners, and collect money on the operator’s behalf. This helps create an air of mystery and respect for the operator, and is important from both a logistical and a symbolic perspective.

Logistically, the use of runners, who live in the community and invariably know and are accessible to players, reduces transaction costs. The cost of selling fahfee tickets is considerably lower than the cost of selling tickets for the state lottery, with the latter’s fixed overheads and very expensive compliance requirements. The use of an intermediary like the runner also provides some protection from the police, who are always seeking to extract bribes, typically relatively small amounts (R30–R50), levied on a regular basis. This is a significant cost to operators, who view bribery as an unfortunate but necessary ‘tax’,<sup>51</sup> and as a reliable source of income for unscrupulous police officers. To this end, police officers are

46. Interview, late-50s female fahfee operator, Johannesburg South, 7 August 2014.

47. Interview, retired middle-aged male fahfee operator who ran a route in Alexandra township in the 1980s, Woodmead, Johannesburg, 14 January 2017.

48. Interview, late-50s female fahfee operator, Johannesburg South, 7 August 2014.

49. Staff Reporter. ‘Fah fee gamblers bet on their dreams’, *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, Kimberley, October 17 1951, p. 5.

50. Interview, retired middle-aged male fahfee operator who ran a route in Alexandra township in the 1980s, Woodmead, Johannesburg, 14 January 2017.

51. Interview, late-50s female fahfee operator, Johannesburg South, 7 August 2014.

enthusiastic rent-seekers, and are often reluctant to arrest operators and jeopardise their own income-streams. When discussing the difficulties in taking action against fahfee operators, a senior law enforcement official in the Limpopo Gambling Board pointed out bluntly: the police ‘tell us that they cannot arrest operators as they are giving us money for lunch.’<sup>52</sup>

Police seldom harass fahfee players. Instead, bearing witness to the cooperative relationships involved, e.g. a runner, claimed that: ‘when arrested, Mochaena pays them [the police] a bribe. They don’t chase [ordinary] criminals; they chase Mochaena, as they know his time [route and schedule]. We fight for our Chinaman though. We tell the police to go chase criminals. We tell them we are feeding our children with this money and not stealing. What will we eat if they chase the Mochaena?’<sup>53</sup> Instead of criminalising fahfee and arresting operators, EG suggested, ‘they must rather make them pay tax.’ Fahfee operators, in turn, complain bitterly about this harassment, and some have lobbied the Department of Trade and Industries to have fahfee legalised.<sup>54</sup>

At a symbolic level, the use of local runners reduces the social gap between Chinese outsiders and (mostly) black punters and helps cement the perception of fahfee as a community-based game. It also offers some local residents a stake in the survival of the operator’s route. In this way, many poor black communities have a vested interest in the game. The situation of SL, who ‘rented’ her house out as a fahfee spot, is typical in most communities in which fahfee is played:

I get paid every Sunday by all four Mochaena’s who draw here. I get R15 × 4. I am able to buy mixed veggies and some chicken and my family will have a nice Sunday meal and I have a little to gamble the next day. There is [also] a monthly fee of R70, which is for keeping my yard clean. But you see if you get this money you need to be nice to people who come to your house on behalf of the Chinaman.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, in their study of ‘underground lotteries’ in China, Bosco *et al.* describe a ‘series of levels through which the bets and money flow’, mediated in large part by a runner-equivalent, the *xiao zhuangjia* or ‘small bookie’, who serve as the administrative intermediary between the *daz-huangjia* (chief bookmaker) and the *caimin* (players), and in so doing, allow the organisers of the game ‘to remain hidden and mysterious’, which adds to the intrigue and appeal of the game.<sup>56</sup>

52. Interview with Philly Masogo, Senior Manager: Law Enforcement, Limpopo Gambling Board, Polokwane, 22 July 2014.

53. Interview, middle aged unemployed female, runner, Orange Farm, Johannesburg, 8 March 2015.

54. Interview, elderly male fahfee operator, Pretoria, 3 June 2015; and follow up interview, Centurion, 9 August 2015.

55. Middle aged female domestic worker, fahfee player, Moletsane, Soweto, 20 January 2015.

56. Bosco *et al.*, ‘Underground lotteries’, pp. 41–43.

These parallels should not, however, be overstated. In other unregulated lotteries, ownership and control of gambling operations underpin powerful community-based accumulation strategies, which go beyond simple opportunities for small bookies and other intermediaries. In the numbers games in the United States, 'proto venture capitalists' were able to accumulate profits and invest directly back into legal businesses in the same communities in which games were played,<sup>57</sup> whilst the Brazilian *Jogo do Bicho* continues to provide a basis for a wide range of parallel activities, from community-based retailing operations and samba schools to more nefarious criminal activities, particularly blackmail, protection rackets, and narcotics.<sup>58</sup> In South Africa, operators have limited personal connections to the communities that play fahfee, and have made no equivalent investments.

*What are the odds?*

Fahfee is popular because it is widely regarded as fair, and players believe that they stand a reasonable chance of winning, far more so than in casino games or township dice and cards. The popular media encourages this perception, with sensational stories of parents who supplement meagre incomes and somehow manage to feed and educate their families with their winnings.<sup>59</sup>

This misperception has found its way into a variety of critical studies. In an otherwise innovative 1952 survey in Alexandra township, Gauteng, the authors went to great lengths to calculate the contribution of fahfee towards household incomes.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Dugmore is quick to accept that fahfee offers 'reasonably good odds', capable of providing 'a livelihood to

57. Donald R. Liddick, *Mob's daily number: Organized crime and the numbers gambling industry* (University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1999); and Dan Knight, *Black policy brought 18 million annually for community: We controlled our communities with this wealth power* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform / Amazon Digital Services, 2014).

58. Michel Misse, 'Illegal markets, protection rackets and organized crime in Rio de Janeiro', *Estudos Avançados* 21, 61 (2007), pp. 139–157.

59. For a representative sample, dealing with Sebokeng (Gauteng), Port Elizabeth, and Pretoria, respectively, see, Fanelo Maseko, 'Fah fee payouts 'better than the lotto'', *City Press*, 6 August 2003; Jimmy Matyu, 'Betting on fahfee gave our parents an income', *The Herald*, 24 January 2007; and Stephen Selaluke, 'Mo-china gamblers angry at cops: Residents protest against the police for stopping Mo-china', *Pretoria East Rekord*, 26 March 2015.

60. eNtokozweni Family Welfare Centre, 'Report of a budget study of four African families in Alexandra Township: May–June, 1952', Federation of South African Women, *Historical Papers Research Archive*, Collection Number: AD1137. See especially Appendix B. Interestingly, after reporting on declared fahfee expenditure, and summarising each household's aggregate losses and gains, the report concluded that, 'Although on the average a considerable sum was made from these two sources, this additional income was secured only at the cost of considerable strain, tension and fear of possible repercussions. A not inconsiderable amount of shame and guilt is usually also present with a consequent strengthening of the strain and tension involved.'

a reasonable number' of players, claiming that fahfee has a 'relatively egalitarian redistributive function' providing 'an elaborate revolving accumulation mechanism' in poor communities.<sup>61</sup>

These claims rest on a dangerous misunderstanding of gamblers' odds. Although runners receive regular remuneration, whether from gratuities for helping the operator or commissions from winning punters, for players this statement is demonstrably false. In gambling, the 'house edge' (or house advantage) measures the long run percentage of the wagered money that will be retained by the house. The house edge is defined as the ratio of the average loss to the initial bet, and is calculated as follows:  $(\text{number of favourable outcomes} / \text{total possible outcomes}) \times (\text{amount of winnings}) - (\text{number of adverse outcomes} / \text{total possible outcomes}) \times \text{bet}$ . In single-zero or European roulette, players have a choice of 36 numbers plus zero (or 37 combinations); and the payout is 35 to 1. Thus, for single zero roulette, the house edge is  $(1/37 \times 35) - (36/37) \times 100$ , or 2.7 percent; and the return to player is 97.3 percent.<sup>62</sup>

The house edge in popular casino games varies from as little as 0.28 percent for Blackjack (liberal Vegas rules) and 1.06 percent for Baccarat, to 5.22 percent for Caribbean Stud Poker, which is the highest house edge in any standard licensed game played in South Africa today. By contrast, if we consider that fahfee is typically played with 36 numbers, and the payout is 27 to 1, then the house edge is 22.22 percent, or a 77.78 percent return to player.<sup>63</sup> In many cases, operators exclude the last two winning numbers from each drawn, which, assuming players know not to bet on these numbers, reduces the house edge to a still massive 17.81 percent, or a 82.19 percent return to player. Furthermore, punters usually pay hefty commissions on winning bets. Simply put, from an expected value perspective, fahfee is a horrible game for players.

Clearly, it pays to be a fahfee operator, and attempts to portray fahfee as a viable accumulation strategy for poor people are far-fetched to say the least. Rather than offer 'reasonable odds', fahfee, over time, *will always* provide an incredible return to operators. This puts players at a tremendous disadvantage and ensures that the only real distributive impact is the transfer of the bulk of total turnover to the operator, and small payments to runners. Whereas, as we saw above, such transfers had positive economic consequences in the case of black-run numbers games in the inter-war USA; in South Africa, with its legacies of racial and residential segregation, revenues are transferred from black working class households to a small group of Chinese operators with limited ties to the communities who play the game.

61. Dugmore, 'Diamond ladies', pp. 12, 19, & 14.

62. I am very grateful to Steve Hall for his technical assistance with this section. For a helpful overview, see 'What is the house edge?', <<http://www.betbind.com/help/articles/what-is-the-house-edge.aspx>> and <<http://wizardofodds.com>> (23 January 2017).

63.  $(1/36 \times 27) - (35/36) \times 100 = 22.22\%$  house edge.

Why then do poor people play fahfee? To understand this better I return to the way in which the game is played, and to the subjective value that players attribute to both the experience of playing and the possibility of winning.

*Number selection: metaphysical and pragmatic considerations*

Number selection has long been associated with dream analysis. This is by no means unique to fahfee; the magical bases for number selection in lotteries are well known and widely documented.<sup>64</sup> South African fahfee numbers are set out in Table 1. Variations encountered in the literature or in interviews are noted in parenthesis.

Dream analysis is clearly shaped by social context, and it is interesting to note that when *Drum Magazine* published a list of fahfee numbers in 1952, No. 1 was described as ‘King—dream of a white man’.<sup>65</sup> When probed, players interviewed here insisted that this refers to any king and has no racial connotation. Similarly, players differed slightly in their description of No. 17, which was variously described generically as any young woman or, less frequently, as a ‘madam’ or white woman. These examples are suggestive of the changing way in which dreams are framed and understood in response to evolving political awareness and social consciousness.

Fahfee players are generally reluctant to accept that winning numbers are simply the result of random selection, and are always on the lookout for ways to discern patterns behind the operator’s choices. To this end, players keep comprehensive records of winning numbers, and are quick to offer a theory as to which numbers are likely to prove successful.

To reinforce this ‘illusion of pattern’,<sup>66</sup> or predictability, operators provide runners with boards (‘madodai’), which display past winning numbers and attempt to stimulate interest in the game, and a belief that cunning players can beat the odds. KS captured the strategic nature of the tussle between operator and player succinctly: ‘It’s like a story that is told by the Chinaman and the player has to guess what is going to happen by

64. Marina D’Agati, ‘I feel like I’m going to win’: Superstition in gambling’, *Qualitative Sociology Review* 10, 2 (2014), esp. 86–98; Terence Crump, *The anthropology of numbers* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990). For a fascinating study of the rituals and belief systems of Ghanaian gamblers, and the multiple ways in which witchcraft, divination and talismans are adapted to suit their gambling practices, see Jane Parish, ‘Witchcraft, riches and roulette: An ethnography of West African gambling in the UK’, *Ethnography* 6, 1 (2005), pp. 105–122.

65. Skappie, ‘Fah Fee—Secrets of the ‘House of numbers’, *Drum*, September 1952; cited in Harry Dugmore, ‘Diamond ladies’, p. 22, fn-69.

66. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, fast and slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2011), p. 117.

Table 1 List of fahfee numbers

No.	Associated dream	No.	Associated dream	No.	Associated dream
1	King [white man]	13	Big fish	25	Big house
2	Monkey	14	Granny/old women	26	Soldiers [bees]
3	Ocean/big water	15	Bad woman/prostitute	27	Dog
4	Dead man	16	Bird/pigeon	28	Shoes [small fish]
5	Tiger	17	Madam/white woman	29	Small water/river
6	Cow	18	Pocket change	30	Pastor/priest
7	Thief	19	Little girl	31	Fire
8	Pig	20	Cat	32	Notes/money
9	Hat [moon]	21	Elephant	33	Boys
10	Eggs	22	Boat/ship	34	Faeces
11	Car/carriage	23	Horse [house; month]	35	Hole
12	Dead women	24	Mouth	36	Penis

studying the previous numbers that were picked. Hence the necessity to keep a record of what numbers have been picked so one can compare.<sup>67</sup>

Other players, like AN, invoked a complicated set of associations between the physical and extra-sensory worlds in order to guide number selection, telling us that ‘If my eye twitches, then I will choose number nine. A muscle pull in the hip is a number fifteen.’<sup>68</sup> ZT, a frequent player and part-time runner, linked number choice to feelings in different parts of her body, an itch on her leg, for example, signified a number between three and eighteen; adding that she ‘won’t tell you exactly what number, as it’s my secret’.<sup>69</sup>

The randomness of winning numbers, PM insisted, is reduced through experience: ‘I rely on dreams most of the time. Some people are more successful at winning than others, because of their knowledge of the game. The more you play the game the more you get to understand how it is played and you can widen your chances of winning.’<sup>70</sup> Similarly, concatenation is often interpolated through cultural systems. According to XL, ‘your luck lays with your Ancestors. If you respect them and keep them happy by making them *Secheso* [a seSotho ceremony where people burn small offerings to please their ancestors] they will always give you luck and lookout for you.’<sup>71</sup> Decision-making should not, however, be

67. Interview, women in her early 20s, occupation not given, Moletsane, Soweto, 6 November, 2014.

68. Interview, middle-aged female domestic worker, fahfee player, Ikageng, Potchefstroom, 12 March 2015.

69. Interview, middle-aged female domestic worker, runner, Ikageng, Potchefstroom, 8 March 2015.

70. Interview, late 20s female student nurse, fahfee player, Moletsane, Soweto, 23 July 2016.

71. Interview, 20-something male, occupation not given, Orange Farm, 16 March 2015.



trivialised or reduced to these oversimplified narratives. For most players, dreams and magical conceptions of fate reinforce and support a variety of pragmatic secular considerations. WM captured the potpourri of, at times conflicting, motivational dimensions at stake:

One needs more than dreams to win at this game because you might dream today only to find out that the number will come up in a day or two from now. So the board is very helpful because you are able to compare previous games and see what number might come up. You see for me, I play with both dreams and the board, but most of the time I depend on the board because there are times where I wouldn't dream for a week and I need money, I will study the board and guess the number that will come up and I would win.<sup>72</sup>

*Player perceptions: the subjective meaning of fahfee*

In this section, I explore the subjective motivations and aspirations of fahfee players. Although these cannot simply be generalised to other forms of unregulated gambling across Africa, they highlight the uniqueness of gambler motivation, and the need for a more nuanced understanding of rationality when responding to (perceived) increases in unregulated gambling in Africa and the associated social costs. To this end, I return to the question: why do (mostly) black, elderly, working class women play fahfee? The answer to this is important, both sociologically and from a policy/regulatory perspective, and requires us to consider carefully fahfee players' own accounts of gambling utility. The interplay between material and non-material utility is particularly suggestive, and highlights the significance of windfall payments, as opposed to simple changes in absolute wealth, and contributes to our understanding of the multi-dimensional appeal of games like fahfee.

When asked to reflect on the benefits they derive from fahfee, players are quick to draw comparisons with the other numbers game widely played in working class black communities: the state lottery (Lotto).<sup>73</sup> Without exception, players insist that fahfee is considerably fairer, and place little stock in the sophisticated yet for them opaque compliance requirements that govern the state lottery. In the lottery, numbers are selected on televised game shows, under constant scrutiny of an internationally recognised auditing firm. Despite this, players trust the Chinese operator more than the state lottery. Players know and for the most part trust the runners. Notwithstanding the vast social distance, players trust the Chinese operator as well. They see him arrive to announce winning numbers and collect wallets, and believe that everyone stands an equal chance of winning. As SO observed, 'The China draws a number before

72. Interview, middle-aged female domestic worker, Ikageng, Potchefstroom, 8 March 2015.

73. For an excellent study of township lottery consumption, see Ilana Van Wyk, 'Tata ma chance': On contingency and the lottery in post-apartheid South Africa', *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute* 82, 1 (2012), pp. 41–68.

he looks at our wallets [to see] who has won, hence you see the runner goes to him and all those who placed bets will wait for the signal which comes out immediately after handing over the bag to the Chinaman, so it is very fair.’<sup>74</sup> DN expressed her preference candidly: ‘the Lotto is a robbing game that doesn’t guarantee winning.’<sup>75</sup>

The idea that any form of gambling can ‘guarantee winning’ is of course incredulous, and points to a serious misunderstanding of chance and gamblers’ odds. But this cannot be dismissed simply as mathematical illiteracy. In the case of fahfee, this is not just a ‘misunderstanding’, and is clearly an important component of the game’s enduring popularity. Frequent fahfee players do win, reasonably often, even if their aggregate monetary losses vastly exceed their aggregate monetary gains over time. Because of the comparatively favourable odds in a single number lottery, fahfee players win far more regularly than they would on the six- or seven-number state lottery, although, as argued above, the low return on a win means that the game is massively biased in the operators’ favour. Despite the fact that the state lottery produces far bigger winners, it does so considerably less frequently, and the impact of enormous ‘jackpots’ is therefore more abstract and somehow less real for players. Even the smallest prize on the state lottery requires the correct selection of three correct numbers, with odds of 1 in 61 and an average pay out of only R28.<sup>76</sup>

This difference was not lost on JM, who pointed out that ‘on the Lotto, payouts were very small.... [with] fahfee I could win R54 when I play with R2... and R20 would give me R540.’<sup>77</sup> LM was even blunter: ‘yoh I hate Lotto, that thing robs people of their money. I mean over a million people play it but most of them don’t win.’<sup>78</sup>

### *Understanding gains and losses*

In assessing potential gains, fahfee players battle to distinguish individual wins from aggregate losses, in part because they normally do not understand the underlying mathematical probability of winning. Like all gamblers, fahfee players have a tendency to remember their wins and downplay their losses—despite the fact that there are almost always more losses—and derive great pleasure (utility) from these memories. Simplistic assessments about the likelihood of winning are, however, at best overstated and, as

74. Interview, 30 year old male shebeen owner and part-time runner, Emdeni, Soweto, 15 March 2016.

75. Interview, 45 year old female part-time shop assistant, Ikageng, Potchefstroom, 25 February 2015.

76. ‘Lotto results and numbers’, <<http://www.lotteryresults.co.za/lotto>> (23 January 2017).

77. Interview, middle aged unemployed female, occasional runner, Emdeni, Soweto, 14 March 2015.

78. Interview, 55-year old domestic worker, Orange Farm, Johannesburg, 8 March 2015.

noted above, often clearly wrong. This is consistent with other findings in the gambling studies literature, which emphasise the significance of cognitive distortions, particularly an exaggerated belief in gambler skill and selective memory.<sup>79</sup> This ‘predictive bias’ is widely encountered amongst fahfee players, alongside a tendency to discount even relatively prolonged losing streaks, in so doing turning games of ‘objectively negative expected value’ into a subjectively positive experience.<sup>80</sup>

Echoing this bias, BK, a retired domestic worker now living with her two unemployed children, insisted that, through careful study of the *madodai*, and ‘betting according to my dreams,’ ‘it is possible to win, hence [with fahfee] we always come back for more.’

The reason I [continue to] play ... is because I have my own money and I don’t have to depend on my children for everything. This year on the 14th of January I turned 84, and I used the money from fahfee and my pension grant and threw myself a party. It also gives me an opportunity to stretch my legs, you know at my age I have to try and keep busy so my body won’t give in. I’m also able to talk to my neighbours.<sup>81</sup>

How much of this is true, and how much of her relative economic independence is due to her pension grant, and how much is due to support from her children, is unclear. What is worth stressing is the significance BK accords to these small wins, which provide her with sporadic windfalls that allow her to indulge in occasional luxuries, including to help fund her 84th birthday party. She accepts that she is likely to lose regularly, but can absorb these regular losses more easily than she is able to afford the things that she purchases with her occasional fahfee wins. Added to this, it is necessary to stress the significance she attaches to the social nature of participation: the chance to meet her neighbours, presumably to discuss dreams and strategy and to share stories of luck and chances lost.

Other fahfee players told similar stories about indulgences funded by occasional wins, purchases they could not otherwise make or justify. As such, I think Krige overstates his case when he depicts fahfee as a form of ‘speculative accumulation’ in an age of financial risk and casino capitalism, a risk based livelihood strategy ‘for those who remain outside the margins of formal economic employment’.<sup>82</sup> More likely, to adapt, slightly, Thorstein Veblen’s well-known argument, for BK, and indeed most players, fahfee is largely a form of conspicuous decadency, a small but measured act of defiance against the requirements of pecuniary

79. Tony Toneatto, ‘Cognitive psychopathology of problem gambling’, *Substance Use and Misuse* 34, 11 (1999), pp. 1593–1604.

80. Howard Rachlin, ‘Why do people gamble and keep gambling despite heavy losses?’, *Psychological Science* 1, 5 (1990), pp. 294–297.

81. Interview, retired 84 year old female domestic worker, fahfee player, Emdeni, Soweto. 6 February 2015.

82. Krige, ‘We are running for a living’, p. 18.

responsibility.<sup>83</sup> Fahfee is played for money, but it is about far more than the pursuit of wealth.

### *Conclusion*

This article began by examining the ways in which fahfee is played and run, and explored the world of runners, players, and operators, in some depth. Despite the fact that fahfee routes are owned and operated by community outsiders, which results in considerable monetary leakages from the community—something that, ordinarily, would be resisted fiercely in highly politicised South African townships—fahfee has been played in more-or-less the same way for at least a century, and remains popular today. Whilst other forms of informal gambling, particularly dice and cards, are generally divisive, fahfee is widely tolerated, if not accepted, and helps cultivate a strong sense of moral community amongst players. CC in Ikageng, Potchefstroom, acknowledged just this when she insisted proudly: ‘Your morality is not mine and does not have to infringe into mine ... It is believed in most communities that gambling is a problem, but it is a problem only seen by outsiders who do not understand the joy it [fahfee] brings to a gambler’s heart.’<sup>84</sup>

Second, the article considered the subjective moral universe of fahfee, and explored a simple question: Why do players devote so much time and money to fahfee? Here the argument is more complex. Clearly most players are mistaken if they believe that their aggregate monetary gains will ever exceed their aggregate monetary losses in a game with a house edge of 22.22 percent and a large commission on winnings. But this misses the point. Fahfee players are not motivated primarily by the promise of large wins, and do not see fahfee as a means to *escape* poverty or economic hardship. Fahfee players generally understand that they will lose regularly over time, even if they do not fully comprehend the extent of their aggregate losses, but enjoy playing and weight the prospect of occasional windfalls more heavily than a series of regular losses. This is a significant distinction.

If we consider player’s actions in light of the ‘reference points’—marginalization, social and economic deprivation—that frame decision-making for the (mostly) black, elderly, working class women that play fahfee, then such preferences for relatively lumpy rather than steady consumption streams become a lot easier to understand. This is a type of delayed consumption strategy, a rational choice for an irregular income stream rather than a simple squandering of scarce resources.

83. Charles Camic and Geoffrey M. Hodgson (eds), *The essential writings of Thorstein Veblen* (Routledge, London, 2010), esp. pp. 259–260.

84. Interview, middle aged female domestic worker, fahfee player, Ikageng, Potchefstroom, 18 August 2014.

It is in this sense that fahfee, and informal gambling in Africa more generally, constitutes an important part of everyday life, in all its banality. The everyday, or more specifically, gambling in everyday life, is 'simultaneously an alienated and potentially liberated state',<sup>85</sup> a medium through which individuals enter into relationships with each other, form communities, share hopes and dreams, have fun, and develop autonomous competing conceptions of the good life.

85. Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of everyday life* (Routledge, London, 2000), p.17.