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# Luck Be A Lady: An Exploration of the Bloomington Bingo Community Through Visual Ethnographic Methods

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**MONICA SIMONIN**

**LUCK BE A *Lady*. AN EXPLORATION OF THE BLOOMINGTON BINGO COMMUNITY THROUGH VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS**

**Introduction**

For most people living in Bloomington, Illinois, Thursday is an ordinary day, just like any other. Some people may look forward to the American Idol Results Show, but other than that, Thursday brings no real excitement. That is, unless of course, you are a regular at the Thursday night Bingo game at the Moose Lodge. To these men and women, Thursday is a special night. It is a night filled with friends, laughs and the chance to win big. As one die-hard Bingo player

told me, “Our family knows...Don’t die on a Thursday!” (Gordon)

The Moose Lodge is located on IAA Drive in Bloomington. The building serves many functions which include hosting the Thursday night Bingo game. The Moose Lodge Bingo games support a number of local organizations. It also has a program for young children as well as elderly people.

Usually, six volunteers run the game while several people work behind the scenes



**FAR TOP: THE DOORS ARE OPEN. TOP: MOOSEHEART SUPPORTS LOCAL CHILDREN. AND MOOSEHAVEN, LOCAL ADULTS.**

preparing food and drinks. While the capacity of the hall could hold well over 200 hundred players, the usual number

of players is between 40 and 60.

In this essay, we will take a look at the history and evolution of Bingo. Then I will provide insight into the lives of two avid Bloomington Bingo players, Mary Gordon and Sharon Lush, finding out how they started playing and what keeps them coming back. And finally we will look at the Moose Lodge Bingo Community as a whole to find out who the average Bingo player is and where Mary and Sharon fit into the Bingo spectrum.

### Early Assumptions

For as far back as I can remember, my mother spent every Sunday afternoon playing Bingo. She left every Sunday afternoon by 11:30AM to go get her usual spot at the Bingo hall, next to her favorite lady friends and did not return home until 4:00PM. This became a natural part of the week. Over the years, I began to understand that Sunday afternoons were “Mom Time.” It was something she did (and still does) for herself. And if for some reason

my father was too busy to watch my sisters and I, Mom would bring us along.

So when I was presented with the task of selecting a group to study for an ethnographic photo essay, I thought back to my trips to the Bingo hall. I thought about my mother’s obsession with getting to the hall early enough, I thought about her need to play every Sunday. I also thought about those funny little troll dolls I used to see on the Bingo tables. Something is bringing these people together week after week and I wanted to find out what that is.



**THE GAME BEGINS AS THE FIRST BALL IS EXTRACTED FROM THE HOPPER.**

My initial hypothesis, based on my

childhood perceptions, was that people play Bingo because they are looking for an escape. I thought players wanted to get away from the house or away from work or anything else that might have made them stressed.

When I began my research on Bingo, I quickly discovered the lack of scholarly work done on the subject. One book, Gambling Times Guide to Bingo (1986) by Roger Snowden seemed very promising. It is the only source of the history of Bingo I could find. All other websites that gave a history, had gotten their information from this book. The only downside is that it was written in 1986. I feel it is appropriate to use it for a brief insight into the game’s past, but nothing else.

One very useful resource I found was a documentary titled, “Bingo!” by John Jeffcoat. Made in 2004, this short film highlights both workers and players. He also shares the viewpoint of a man opposed to Bingo, calling it a waste of time and money. This piece reinforced the information I was seeing

and hearing at the Moose Lodge. This helped reconfirm my idea that all Bingo players have much the same enthusiasm and passion for the game. Jeffcoat also provides a view into a typical Bingo hall, something many people have not seen.

A journal article I found in the *Journal of Gambling Studies* that was published in 2006, "Who Plays Bingo Later in Life?: The Sedentary Lifestyles of 'Little Old Ladies'" explores the stereotypes of Bingo players. The author, Sandra O'Brien Cousins, used a telephone survey to collect data on 400 adults. She delved into stereotypes that Bingo players are heavy drinkers and smokers, eat poorly and hardly exercise. She found that Bingo players were significantly less likely to consume alcohol than non-players and Bingo players exercise much less frequently than non-players.

From my childhood memories, I remember my mother and her fellow Bingo players smoking inside the hall in which she used to play. Knowing there is now a smoking ban in the state of Illinois in any public building, I was curious to

know if this had affected attendance. An article titled, "After the Smoke Cleared, Where Did All the Bingo Players Go?" written by Stephanie Strom for the *New York Times*, found that in the states of Minnesota and Washington, smoking bans did decrease attendance. However, no information was available for Illinois. When speaking with my informants, however, I found that there was not a decrease in attendance due to the smoking ban. Rather, the slow economy kept players who could not afford to play, from coming.

them. Even though there is not many scholarly sources on the subject of Bingo, reading these sources was very helpful. They helped me see things I might not have been able to without previous background knowledge. The lack of scholarly work also allows me the chance to produce current and pioneering work on an important subject in the adult community.

### Methodology

When considering my methodology for this research, the choice was clear; participant-observation was the best



Each one of these sources helped me know what to look for in my informants' responses. They also helped me pick out certain answers and build questions off of

**MARY EXPLAINS  
THE RULES OF THE  
"PIK -7" GAME TO  
ME.**

way to go. I identified one of the few Bingo halls left in Bloomington as the Moose Lodge. I



arrived at the first game not knowing anyone and not having a pre-selected informant. When I asked one of the volunteers if she could point me in the direction of someone who would help me in my research, I was pointed immediately to Mary and Sharon.

When I introduced myself and my research they were happy to talk to me. They sat me right in front of their table and they started telling me everything I could have ever wanted to know about Bingo. It was not long before both Mary and Sharon were sharing some of their own personal Bingo stories with me. The bulk of my information came from these two women. However, I also held informal interviews with several other players and most of the volunteers.

To make up for my inability to effectively talk with most of the 45-55 players each week, I created a survey to help gather more data. Marcus, one of the volunteers with whom I had previously spoken, introduced me and my research survey over the intercom at one of the games and asked for volunteers to fill out the surveys. Twenty-seven people took a

survey and I received 24 back.

### **History of Bingo**

Most everyone is familiar with the game, whether having heard a grandmother talk about it, or maybe having played the game themselves—either at an actual Bingo hall or in grade school. However, most people do not know the historic background of Bingo and its evolution into American culture. Bingo actually has quite an interesting history, stretching back to 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy (Snowden).

Bingo, as it is known today, is a variation of a lotto game played in Italy. The original game was known as *Lo Giuoco del Lotto d'Italia*. It was created in 1530 (Snowden). These original lotto cards had nine horizontal and three vertical rows. Each vertical row was filled with numbers between 1 and 90. One through ten were in the first row, 11 through 20 were in the second, etc. Players would cover numbers called with wooden chips. The winner was the first person to fill an entire horizontal row.

Over the years, various versions of lotto spread throughout Europe

and into America. In the mid-nineteenth century, Germany popularized using lotto as a way to teach children numbers and their multiplication tables (Snowden). This educational lotto is still very popular to this day.

An American, traveling in Germany, discovered Lotto and thought it would make a good carnival game. He brought the idea back to America, changed the numbers of rows and columns, and called it “Beano” because players used beans to cover the called numbers (Snowden).

Beano was being played at a carnival in Jacksonville, Georgia when New York toy salesman, Edwin S. Lowe, arrived. Lowe was impressed with the game and brought the idea back with him to New York. He made up some cards on some cardboard and invited some friends over to play. The players were so entranced by the game that when one woman won, she stuttered and said, “B-b-b-bingo!” (Snowden). Bingo became the permanent name.

Lowe decided to hire a mathematician to come up with 6,000 different cards. The game

was a hit and grew rapidly all over America. In 1934, there was an estimated 10,000 Bingo games every week (Snowden). The final card layout became five horizontal and five vertical rows with a “Free” space in the center spot.

### Mary and Sharon

When I showed up at the Moose Lodge, I knew no one but soon came to know just about everyone. One large contributing factor to my success in meeting people was my friendship with Sharon and Mary.

I am not sure if there is a person in that Bingo hall that does not know Mary Gordon. After all, it is hard not to. A woman in her mid-sixties, she is anything but timid. She knows and loves Bingo. She went to her first Bingo game when she was 18 with a friend and her mother. Mary won three games that night and has been playing ever since. Because of her experience, she can tell you anything you need to know about the game. Furthermore, Mary has an objective: win. And she does so more than anyone else I have seen so far.

But if she is not winning, you will hear about it.

Her relationship with the volunteers who work the game is one of teasing and jest. She hollers at Marcus, Kevin and David and they holler right back. She scolds Stella, the caller, for not calling the “right” numbers. One thing no one can deny about Mary is that she has passion for the game.

Not only does Mary have passion but some would say she has luck, too. One reason so many people know of Mary is because she wins often. But Mary will tell you it is not luck she has. “I just believe I’ll win, and I do” (Gordon). She purposefully thinks positively to ensure her winnings.



**MARY PROVES THAT HER POSITIVE THINKING PAYS OFF.**

Her win-lose ratio may be affected by luck or positive thinking, but more than anything, it is directly related to how much she spends. Mary spends approximately \$90 on one night of Bingo. She plays 18 paper cards, one electronic Bingo machine (more commonly referred to as a “Ted”) for the whole game, buys a second Ted at half time for half price, plays the Bonanza, Speed Ball, Pick 7, Double Action and the extra Jackpot cards. It is no wonder her Bingo tab adds up so quickly. That is not even counting soda and snacks.

Despite winning several times in one night, Mary does not always win back her money right away. Over time, however, the amount she wins usually evens out with what she spends. But it is not the money that keeps her coming back every Thursday night; it is the excitement of the game and the fun of a night out.

The last Thursday I attended Bingo for this research, there were only 40 people by the starting time at 6:30. Usually 50 players are needed to play, otherwise, the game is not played that particular evening. On

this Thursday, however, when it did not look like there were enough people to play, Mary was very unhappy. She had taped together her cards, set up her Ted and pre-marked her special game cards. Mary was ready to play. She kept telling me, “We better play tonight! It’s my night out!” (Gordon).



A night out is exactly what Bingo is to Mary. The doors at the Moose Lodge open for Bingo at 4:30. I typically arrived at 5:30 and Mary was always already there, gabbing away and setting up. After more than 20 games, the final game ends between 9:15 and 9:30. From start to finish, Bingo takes up a whole evening.

Not only is Bingo a night out in terms of time, but it is a social night out, too. Mary and Sharon met at work years

ago. They have been going to Bingo together for almost just as long. Now that Mary has retired, Bingo is a way for them to catch up. And after years of playing with some of the same regulars, the Moose Lodge Bingo hall has become a family. Bingo gives them a chance to

**PLAYERS AT THE MOOSE LODGE ARE HAPPY TO PLAY, DESPITE SMALLER WINNINGS.**

catch up with each other as well.

By being directed to Mary, I was subsequently directed to Sharon Lush, Mary’s Bingo partner. Much like Mary, Sharon wants to win. Sharon, although not quite as outspoken as Mary, gets as worked up over the “wrong” numbers as Mary does.

Sharon’s Bingo experience reaches back 40 years. She started playing with her mother and still does today.

Sharon also finds Thursday night Bingo as an evening out. If she were not at Bingo, Sharon said she would be watching television (Lush). Bingo helps break the monotony of the work week. For instance, after work on Thursdays, instead of going home then back out to Bingo, Sharon and Mary often meet up for dinner. They then head over to Bingo together. Going out to dinner and then to Bingo makes Thursdays even more special.

Sharon too enjoys seeing her Bingo family every week. The smaller size of the Moose Lodge games provide for closer relationships between the players (Lush, 2010). The other Bingo hall in Bloomington, has a much larger crowds and larger pay outs. The downside is that players do not know each other as well.

### **The average Moose Lodge Player**

There are several stereotypes about Bingo players. In general, Bingo players are thought of as grumpy little old ladies, smoking and wasting

away all of their money. This is certainly not the case at the Bloomington Moose Lodge.

It is true, however, that most Bingo players are women. At the Moose Lodge, only 8% of players are men. Although I did not delve into why more women play than men, some scholars

hypothesize that the larger number of widows than widowers may be responsible for the gender disparity (O'Brien Cousins). The only male players are between the ages of 61 and 81.

While the “ladies” part of the stereotype may be true, the “little” part is not. Again, only 8% of players (male and female) are over the age of 82. The most common age bracket for Bloomington Bingo players is between 61-81 years old (44%). Both the 18-29 and the 46-60 year old age brackets contain 20% of the group each. This leaves the 30-29 age bracket as 8%.

The night this survey was taken, there was an unusually high number of college students in attendance,

probably because of their approaching spring break. A more accurate guess of the percentage of 18-29 year olds is closer to 10%.



**THE COST OF MARY'S CARDS, ADD-ONS AND TED ADD UP QUICKLY.**

The average number of times these people play Bingo is 1.6 times a week. There is no correlation between the age of the older players and the number of times a week they play. There is a correlation to the 18-29 year old bracket and how many times a week they play. The 18-29 year old players are all female and usually only play once a week.

The amount players spend on one night of Bingo ranges from as little as \$6 to \$90. The younger players spend less money on one game and the people who spend the most are in the 46 to 81 age range. The

average of all players is \$46 per night.

### *A typical night*

On a regular night out at Bingo at the Moose Lodge, the average player will arrive around 5:30. She will head over to her usual spot, greeting friends along the way. She begins to set up her things, preparing for the evening. She carries a Bingo bag, filled with the essentials: several Bingo daubers, Scotch tape to hold the cards together, and her good luck charms. These charms, different for each player may include paper weights, Beanie Babies, Troll Dolls and anything else that may have previously brought her luck or has significance to the player.

When the volunteers are ready, Bingo players head up to the front to purchase their games for the evening. She may purchase two sets of 9 cards and a add-ons or perhaps one set of 9 cards, a Ted and a few add-ons. If she is feeling lucky, she may even put a dollar into the Pickle Jar. Before each half of the game, the caller draws out a ball from the hopper. This number becomes the Pickle Jar number for that half of



the game. If a player, who paid the extra dollar, wins Bingo on this number, he or she wins the regular game money as well as however much is in the Pickle Jar.

After collecting all her cards and add-ons, she will go back to her seat and begin preparing her cards. She tapes add-ons together. She sets up her Trolls and other trinkets. She pre-marks her cards for the games such as “Crazy L” and “Figure 8” as she catches up with friends. At some point, she will make her way over to the snack stand and get a soda and maybe a bag of popcorn or a hotdog. At 6:30, she is ready to play.

During the games, she does not talk much; rather she is focusing on her cards. She mumbles to herself which number she needs and perhaps curses to herself if she does not win. During the 10 minute intermission, she may go outside to have a cigarette, but more likely she heads to the restroom. Shortly after, the game resumes and if she has not already won, she is anxious to do so. By the end of the evening, she may have won once. Maybe twice if she was really lucky or perhaps not at all. Either

way, she enjoyed her night out with her friends and already starts looking forward to next week.

*Where do Mary and Sharon fit in?*

Despite the generalization of Bingo players, there is actually a wide spectrum of players. The spectrum ranges from college students paying \$6 for 6 cards one night a week to 80-somethings paying \$60 for 60 or 70 cards three or four times a week.

Although I do not know how the Blooming ton Moose Lodge falls in the national spectrum of Bingo halls, I do know where Mary and Sharon fall into the Moose Lodge spectrum.

Mary and Sharon are both in the median age bracket for these players and are part of the majority gender. They each typically only play one night a week, but Mary spends about \$90 per night and Sharon spends about \$50. The average player spends

\$46, so Sharon spends about the average amount, whereas Mary spends the most from my survey sample. In this respect, Mary is not average.

The amount of money each of them spends also relates to how much each of them wins. Mary wins more than anyone else because she spends more. Sharon wins as often as everyone else because she spends about as much as everyone else.



**ONE BINGO PLAYER ENJOYS PLAYING WITH HER TROLLS' HAIR WHEN SHE LOSES.**

Sharon and Mary have similar set up routines as other players. They each have their own good luck charms and superstitions. One of the first things Mary said to me is, “Don’t put your purse on the ground!”

(Gordon). Whether it is to put your money on your Ted so it will “grow,” (Lush) or to put your dauber cap upside down do it can catch money, everyone has their own superstitions.

Mary and Sharon come to the Moose Lodge for Bingo for the same reasons as the rest of the group. The top two reasons why Moose Lodge Bingo players like Bingo is because they get to see their friends (38%) and they get out of the house (38%). They also feel it is a source of entertainment (25%) and they enjoy the chances of winning (21%). Both Sharon and Mary have expressed to me each of these reasons for why they come to Bingo.

### **Conclusion**

Bingo is a deep subject matter that has hardly been touched by scholars. Despite this lack of research on the field, Bingo provides an important social setting for many people in the Bloomington community. The players at the Moose Lodge Bingo Hall are very dedicated and passionate players. Each of them has strong reasons for their dedication, whether it is

the thrill of winning, the pleasure of seeing friends of for the pure love of the game. Whatever their reasons may be, Bloomington Bingo players unify over their favorite Bingo Hall, the Moose Lodge, and their immense love of the game.

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