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Published in *Western Journal of Communication* 78:1 (January-February 2014), pp. 39–57; doi: 10.1080/10570314.2013.807435

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Reimagining the Self-Made Man: Myth, Risk, and the Pokerization of America

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Abstract

This article takes a rhetorical approach to the rise of gambling in America, and in particular the growth of the game of poker, as a means to explore larger changes to America's collective consciousness that have resulted in an increased acceptance of gambling. I contend that the rise of the risk society has resulted in significant alterations to the mythology that binds Americans together. I establish this claim through the exploration of ESPN's coverage of the 2003 World Series of Poker and its use of the myth of the self-made man. I conclude that gambling works both to critique and reinterpret the myth of the self-made man by putting emphasis on the importance of luck and risk management and deemphasizing the importance of the Protestant ethic, as understood through social and individual virtue. Professional poker players can thus be viewed as entrepreneurial role models for a new, risk-based, society.

Keywords: gambling, myth, poker, self-made man

In *The Color of Money*, Paul Newman's character Fast Eddie Felson proclaimed, "Money won is twice as sweet as money earned" (De Fina & Scorsese, 1986, 58:42–55:46). This iconic character seems to summarize the feelings of millions of Americans who risk their hard-earned money every year in hopes of winning more.

Gambling has existed in America since the country's inception, but today gambling is more popular than ever (Schwartz, 2006). The American Gaming Association reported that in 2011 gross gaming revenue (the amount wagered less winnings paid) was estimated to be \$35.64 billion (American Gaming Association, n.d.). The annual revenue generated from legalized gambling in America exceeds the amount generated from movie tickets, recorded

music, cruise ships, spectator sports, and theme parks combined (Volberg, Gerstain, Christiansen, & Baldrige 2001).

While all forms of gambling have increased in the United States in the last 20 years, no form of gambling has grown as quickly or explosively as poker. Since the start of the new millennium, poker has experienced a renaissance all across America (McManus, 2009). Casinos, which just a few years ago had phased out poker in favor of higher revenue-generating slot machines and table games, are now opening large and lavish poker rooms (Wise, 2006). McManus (2009) claimed that while baseball has been said to be America's pastime, poker has replaced it as the game Americans truly care about. Poker has long been associated with smoky backrooms, old Western saloons, and individuals of questionable moral character. Today, for the first time, the game and its professionals have acquired social respectability (Holden, 2008).

One significant reason for poker's rise in popularity and increase in legitimacy has been the advent of new technology that allows poker tournaments to be broadcast more effectively on television. The most popular of these broadcasts is the World Series of Poker (WSOP), aired on ESPN. For years Binion's Horseshoe Casino paid television companies to tape and broadcast the final table of the WSOP. These broadcasts had low production values and were usually shown only late at night (Holden, 2008). For the first time, in 2003, ESPN willingly paid for the tournament's broadcast rights. ESPN devoted significant coverage to the World Series of Poker by airing episodes in prime time. A young amateur by the name of Chris MoneyMaker won the tournament. Soon after, other television networks began airing poker programming. NBC, ABC, ESPN, The Travel Channel, Fox Sports News, and the Game Show Network all began to broadcast poker shows as part of their regular schedule. Observers of the poker community believe that the combination of ESPN devoting significant coverage to the WSOP for the first time in 2003 and the victory of a likeable amateur aptly named "MoneyMaker" helped to create the current poker boom in America (Holden, 2008; Wise, 2006).

While having a powerful sports media outlet and an unusual but likable rising star helped the WSOP gain attention, the broadcasts would not have been successful without an audience that could relate to the game being played. The conflict in poker centers on each player's ability to tolerate risk and manage uncertainty (McManus, 2003). Thus, poker is a microcosm of social life, since the management of uncertainty and the taking of risk have become recognizable features of contemporary society (Beck, 1992; Cottle, 1998; Giddens, 1999; Heir, 2008). This essay tracks the evolution of a key pillar in the American cultural imaginary, the myth of the self-made man. In this essay I contend that America's changing view toward gambling in general, and poker specifically, are the result of attempts to resolve the contradictions between the nation's traditional cultural myths and its new risk-based society.

Specifically, I argue that the myth of the self-made man has been altered to account for cultural changes due to the rise of this risk-based society. Wyllie (1957) explained that no figure is more central to our understanding of the American Dream than the self-made man. A recurring character in American history, literature, and popular culture, the self-made man has seemingly always been a part of American culture (Weiss, 1988). The new version of this story differs from previous versions of the myth in substantive ways. This

story stresses skill and luck over hard work, greed and success over virtue, and winning above all else. However, this newest version of the myth also works to critique the inequalities inherent in America's capitalist system and the limitations the system places on many individuals.

The Risk Society and Cultural Myth

Modern scholars have noted that we are living in a society increasingly driven by and obsessed with risk and gambling. Although uncertainty and risk have always been a part of human existence, "a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety)," as Anthony Giddens (1999) noted, "generates the notion of risk" (p. 3). Ulrich Beck (1992) went so far as to claim that we are living in a "risk society" and that risk has come to dominate our thinking and behavior. Beck (1999) believed that radical modernization made risk central to contemporary society: the Industrial Revolution and technological advances of the 20th century managed some persistent risks but introduced new, sometimes more dramatic risks like climate disruption, global economic meltdowns, and transnational terrorist threats (Beck, 2002).

Since news media construct stories around risk, and audiences interpret stories using the same lens, risk has become the dominant frame for understanding the social world (Cottle, 1998; McCurdy, 2011). Danisch's (2010) connection between Beck's work and the shift in the television news media's coverage of risk showed how our collective preoccupation with risk has resulted in political rhetoric becoming increasingly focused around the concepts of uncertainty and contingency. Beck ventured that a societal shift from tradition-oriented to future-oriented bolstered the role of risk. As Beck explained, we live "[in] an age in which faith in God, class, nation and the government is disappearing . . . in which the apparent and irrevocable constants of the political world suddenly melt and become malleable" (2002, p. 1). The new risks introduced by technological advances could not be satisfactorily addressed by the institutions people traditionally looked to for guidance. The risk society, by contrast, creates an obsession with the future: what crisis will happen next? This focus on the future is problematic because the future is both socially constructed and unknowable (Beck, 2006).

Poker is either a microcosm or metaphor for the risk society, emphasizing as it does both the *individual* nature of success and failure and the importance of the concept of *reflexivity*. First, our need to predict the future and the failure of traditional institutions to provide us with guidance creates what Beck (2006) called "tragic individualism" (p. 336). No longer capable of trusting in the social institutions, which used to explain and protect them, individuals are now left to "cope with the uncertainty of the global world by him- or herself" (p. 336). Hall (2002) concluded, "An enhanced awareness or consciousness of risk, therefore, forms an essential part of the background or context in which we move through our everyday lives" (p. 176). It is this context, I will argue, that allowed the game of poker to grow and flourish. Poker is an individually based game in which competitors attempt to control risk and bet on unknowable future outcomes. Poker succeeds in this environment because it has an audience that understands the importance and value of managing risk

and which must deal with risk in their daily lives. Professional poker players' ability to manage and embrace risk makes them entrepreneurial role models for the risk society.

Secondly, Beck (1992) has identified the concept of reflexivity as vital to the risk society. As a society examines itself, the very act of examination produces change within it. In poker, too, players are constantly reflecting on the game and adjusting to the changing play of other players, while their opponents do the same. This constant state of reflexivity accounts for the dynamic nature of the game. However, as Beck (2006) explained, not everyone in society benefits from the reflexivity of risk. He contended that only those with the power to define their own risk have true reflexivity. Furthermore, he claimed that exposure and control of risk is replacing class as the chief inequality of modern society: "In risk society relations of definition are to be conceived analogous to Marx's relations of production. The inequalities of definition enable powerful actors to maximize risks for 'others' and minimize risks for 'themselves'" (p. 333). Similarly, in poker, the goal of strong players is to minimize their own risk by betting when they have the best hand and maximize their opponents' risk by maneuvering them to bet with the worst hand.

Beck (1999) noted that to understand the risk society better attention needed to be paid to the construction, manipulation, and distribution of symbols. Indeed, how we understand risk, how we deliberate about risk, and how we draw upon tradition and speculate about the future are all essentially communicative activities. However, despite recognizing the importance of communication to the risk society, Beck has yet to investigate formally the communication practices of the risk society or connect his work to the discipline of communication (Cottle, 1998; Danisch, 2010; Heir, 2008). This omission is unfortunate, for, as Danisch (2010) has observed, the rhetorical tradition has the ability to answer many of the questions Beck's work raises about the rise and future of the risk society, suggesting that "rhetoricians can profitably mine Beck's work for useful resources" (p. 190).

This essay uses the rhetorical tradition to register the importance of understanding how changing cultural myths undergird the movement from a tradition-oriented society to future-oriented risk society. In taking this path, I follow Alexander and Smith's (1996) critique of Beck's failure to acknowledge how cultural variables influence the perceptions of risk by ordinary members of the populace. They argued that Beck does not have a proper understanding of the role of culture, and in particular the power of myth, in shaping social understanding of risk. Alexander and Smith examined how sacred myths were shaping our understanding of technology and its place in the risk society. Since cultural myths are often conveyed in popular culture, attending to the kinds of myths that prevail in ESPN's coverage of the 2003 WSOP can show how the pokerization of America took root.

In this essay, I extend Beck's (1992, 1999, 2002, 2006) claims by arguing that the creation of the risk society has led to changes in our public mythology that have worked to change the way we view gambling. I argue that MoneyMaker was packaged by ESPN as a contemporary version of the self-made man, and the success of the 2003 WSOP is reflective of the evolution of this particular myth.

Mythic Criticism

Before we can understand the consequence of this newest version of the self-made man myth, we must first understand the purpose and function of myth. While all myths are narratives, not all narratives reach the status of myth. Only those stories that have reached the status of public dreams and provide meaning to life take on the status of a myth (Fisher, 1985). Myths have a multitude of functions and influence society in a variety of ways, but my analysis focuses on the creation and evolution of myths, particularly in how myths change and thus alter self-conceptions of the people who believe them.

First, it is important to recognize that myths work to build group identity and create their own audiences. When examining myths, we need to be conscious of their audiences and their roles in the creation and promulgation of them. For too long, audiences have been treated by rhetoricians merely as a plural abstraction of the person or individual (McGee, 1975). In his analysis of Nazi Germany, McGee argued that the Nazi Party did not form itself first and then create myths to justify its existence. Instead, myths that proved instrumental to the foundation of the Nazi Party came first, such as the myth of Aryan superiority, and people became Nazis by virtue of their acceptance of and belief in those myths. Myths thus constitute the collective. They are the building blocks for the formation of group identity and creators of their own audiences. But, individuals can (re)create myths from their objective reality and use them for political ends. Such was the case for both Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy, who reconstituted myths about American progress to form the New Deal and New Frontier. Myths may be factually erroneous or used to bad ends, but they are nonetheless essential tools of social cohesion. While a carpenter may use the tool of a hammer and a mechanic may use a wrench, myth is the tool that binds the carpenter and mechanic together to work toward a common end (Burke, 1935). While others may think of myths as mere tales or illusions, Burke sees them “as real as food, tools, and shelter are” (p. 267), performing the real and important function of helping us to organize and understand reality.

In addition to binding people together, myths also provide resources to address problems facing their audiences. Myths are important because they provide symbolic solutions to problems and psychological crises facing society (Rowland, 1990). It is important to note that a myth does not actually need to solve a problem, so long as it provides a symbolic solution that allows the audience to feel as though a crisis or tension is resolved. Myths are particularly adept at solving problems of cultural contradiction or incongruities. This knack also explains why myths must evolve and change over time, so that they may continue to function as sense-making devices. The presence of new problems or the evolution of old ones provides the impetus for the creation and/or adaptation of myths. For myths to hold power, they must also be believed as “real” and “true” for individuals who tell them and are told them.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the power of myths extend beyond simply making sense of the past; they also provide their audience with a particular view of the current world and work to prescribe future action. The ability of myths to shape our understanding of the culture is especially relevant to our understanding of the risk society, since such

a society is preoccupied with the future. Myths support ideologies, which create conformity of thought through the creation and maintenance of social structures (Burke, 1947; Flood, 1996). Ideologies are important because they are concerned with the unequal distribution of resources in our society such as wealth, status, and power. These ideologies work to make sense of past events but also to justify future actions. Myths thus work both to empower and subjugate different groups of people.

In addition to drawing upon the work of Flood (1996) and Burke (1935, 1947), this study draws upon the methodology of Rushing and Frenztz (2000), who analyzed popular discourse for its mythic qualities. Following their method, I have identified a text of social significance and connected it to an important cultural myth. I then examined the myth of the self-made man and described how the myth has been adapted to new circumstances. Next, I analyzed the text to see how it supported, subverted, or in other ways altered the myth. Finally, I drew implications concerning the impact of the text on the myth of the self-made man and American society.

Myth of the Self-Made Man

The myth of the self-made man is at the core of the American Dream. The term American Dream was first coined by Adams (1931) as a way to encapsulate the desires of the average American for opportunity and advancement. Evidence of this dream can be found throughout American history. The dream was first defined in the Declaration of Independence. Borman (1985) observed that Jefferson defined the American Dream by writing that everyone has the right to “the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (p. 193). DeSantis (1998) noted that the American dream is a myth, which tells people that with hard work, optimism, and cooperation it is possible to become economically successful. Fisher (1973) identified the American Dream as myth because it is widely believed by the American populace and because it explains our national existence and makes social systems and relationships possible. Fisher argued that the American Dream is important because it is a source of cultural meaning and identity that provides a rationale for and in support of the existing social order.

The self-made man is the central figure of the mythic story of the American Dream (Weiss, 1988). Weiss wrote, “Tradition has it that every child receives, as part of his birth-right, the freedom to mold his own life” (p. 1). The myth of the self-made man has roots in America’s Puritan heritage, democratic ideals, and a capitalist system of wealth. Kasen (1980) argued, “Changes in the myth of the self-made man reflect historical and current challenges, both successful and unsuccessful, to its efficacy as a legitimator for class in the United States” (p. 131). Thus, changes to myths have important real-world consequences for the function of America’s class-based economic system.

The myth of the self-made man is complex and multifaceted. John Cawelti (1965) identified three interrelated strains of the myth which, when woven together, create the myth of the self-made man in American society: (1) the conservative Protestant ethic; (2) the values of individual and social virtue; and (3) the self-made entrepreneur who is often closely associated with the work of Horatio Alger.

The Protestant Ethic

The American Dream grew out of a strong Protestant ethic, a sense of thrift, and knowing the value of a hard-earned dollar. Weiss (1988) noted, "Success literature bears much resemblance to the prescriptive writings of the divines of 17th-century New England. These Puritan guides gave advice on the achievement of material success, but always in the context of a larger framework of values" (p. 4). Perhaps the most influential work on the subject is Max Weber's (1958) *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber argued that Protestantism provided the context and rationale for a national cultural emphasis on work. He wrote, "It attempted to subject man to the supremacy of a purposeful will, to bring his actions under constant self-control. . . . This active self-control which formed the end . . . of the rational monastic virtues everywhere, was also the most important practical ideal of Puritanism" (pp. 118–119).

Individual and Social Virtue

America's founding fathers are closely associated with the formation of the myth of the self-made man and particularly this virtue strand of the myth. Catano (1990) believed that individual and social virtue is intimately tied to democracy and the citizenry's ability to pursue personal and social growth. Catano stated, "In short, the myth argues, you are limited more by internal desire than by the fact of birth and class" (p. 423). Cawelti (1965) maintained that Benjamin Franklin was the first individual to personify this strand of the myth. In his autobiography, Franklin told the story of being born the son of a poor candlestick maker and becoming a successful businessman, inventor, and prominent citizen (Franklin, 2003). Franklin's tale of the man rising up from meager origins to better both himself and his society is at the heart of this myth and is foundational to the nation's democratic values.

Horatio Alger and the Self-Made Entrepreneur

The third strain of the myth is the self-made entrepreneur, closely associated with the work of Horatio Alger Jr., whose novels narrated this cultural tale. Brucker (1984) explained that despite the fact that Alger's stories were not popular with modern audiences, his work has influenced a myriad of modern stories. Alger's stories always focused on the rise of an individual from meager status to great success and wealth. The main characters in all of Alger's stories possessed the same essential qualities of honesty, thrift, self-reliance, and optimism. These characters were also exceptionally kind and forgiving. Weiss (1988) explained,

Alger's preachments were largely in the classic mold. He urged his readers not to smoke or drink, not to stay up late, not to attend theaters or other places of entertainment. He reiterated the established litany of hard work, frugality, and prudence. (p. 53)

A common theme in Alger's work, in addition to the main character being hardworking and virtuous, is that he is also lucky. For example, sometimes his characters are given lands

deemed to be worthless, only to see them dramatically increase in value. In other instances, the hero saves the life of a child who turns out to have an affluent parent. Whatever the case, luck was always a key component of the character's success.

Luck was a key component in Chris Moneymaker's WSOP victory, too. Moneymaker was lucky to have qualified for the WSOP, and he got lucky throughout the tournament as he advanced. However, the story of Moneymaker's victory at the 2003 WSOP is more than just a story of an amateur player who got lucky and won the WSOP. His story is rooted in the larger story of the self-made man and is imbued with mythic elements that allowed his victory to resonate with the larger culture outside of poker.

Chris Moneymaker and the World Series of Poker

In 2003, amateur Chris Moneymaker shocked the poker world by winning the main event at the WSOP (Wise, 2006). Moneymaker won his way into the World Series of Poker through a 40-dollar online satellite tournament. He then battled for 5 days against the best players in the world and emerged victorious (Moneymaker, 2005). The top prize at the World Series of Poker in 2003 was \$2.5 million. In 2003, just over 800 people entered the WSOP main event; however, thanks in larger part to ESPN and Moneymaker, more than 7,000 entered the tournament by 2010, resulting in a first-place prize of \$9 million. Moneymaker's surprising win generated a tremendous amount of media coverage for the event. His victory was replayed multiple times on ESPN's main cable channel and its other affiliated networks. The series was so successful that ESPN packaged the episodes and sold them as a DVD set. I repeatedly viewed and transcribed these DVDs as part of my analysis of the 2003 WSOP.

The 2003 WSOP took place over 5 days of play during the month of May in 2003. Each day of the tournament was broken up into an individual episode, with extra time devoted toward the final day of the tournament. The audience followed Moneymaker through each episode as he chased his dream of becoming a world champion of poker. Each episode on ESPN began with a wide visual shot of the city of Las Vegas and the Vegas Strip. Despite the visuals shown in the opening, the WSOP actually took place far away from the famed Las Vegas strip. Located on Fremont Street, Binion's Horseshoe dominates the downtown section of casinos known as Glitter Gulch (McManus, 2003). Established in 1951 as one of the first downtown casinos, today it is small by the standards of modern casinos, and its 1970s Western motif seems outdated. Binion's represented old-school Las Vegas and the true gambling spirit.

The ESPN broadcast was shaped by the narration of the announcers, Lon McCarron and Norman Chad, who played a critical role in the framing of the WSOP. McCarron, a veteran sportscaster, covered the play-by-play action while Chad, an amateur poker player and sports columnist, provided the color commentary. Chad's commentary was critical to the establishment of Moneymaker as a heroic figure. His commentary framed Moneymaker as a mythic figure who overcame adversity to achieve greatness. McCarron's narration of the action was important because he treated poker like a traditional sport. He narrated the actions as it unfolded in the same manner used by football and baseball announcers to call the action of their sports. Both commentators framed the action of the WSOP in mythic

terms and tapped into the three tenets that compose the myth of the self-made man. Their depictions of Moneymaker, his opponents, and the WSOP conveyed to the audience that what was taking place was more than just a game of cards.

The broadcast was also framed by the constant discussion and depiction of the prize money. In most other major contests or sporting events, the prize money remained unseen, unmentioned, or in some cases, simply unknown to the audience. During the Masters Golf Tournament, commentators focus on the prestige of winning a green jacket and not on the amount of the winner's check. In fact, one of the ways the commentators attempted to legitimize the WSOP was by comparing the prize money to other events. The audience was told early on that the players were competing for a first prize of \$2.5 million and that this prize represented more money than first place at the Masters, Wimbledon, or the Kentucky Derby. Not only was money discussed frequently during the broadcast, but it was also shown. Every broadcast began with a shot of the announcers standing in front of a table covered with prize money.

At the time of the 2003 WSOP, Chris Moneymaker was a 28-year-old man who resided in Nashville, Tennessee. At the time of his victory, he was working as an accountant for a Nashville restaurant (Moneymaker, 2005). Despite initial disbelief about his last name, numerous news outlets have confirmed that he is in fact named Chris Moneymaker (McManus, 2009; Wise, 2006). At the time of his victory, Moneymaker was earning approximately \$40,000 annually. One of the things that made him an interesting character was his true amateur status. At first, commentator Norman Chad referred to him as "a kid" and "dead money" numerous times throughout the broadcast. The phrase "dead money" refers to players who have paid the \$10,000 entrance fee but have little chance of actually winning. Yet, in later episodes, Chad revised his estimation of the man, saying, "I don't know if he is still dead money" (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 4) and "Boy, he has played this more like a seasoned pro than an online amateur" (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 3, 31:48-31:52). His appearance was part of his everyman appeal. Moneymaker sported dirty blond hair, a goatee, and a slightly pudgy build. During filming, he wore a pair of khaki pants, a plain black polo and a khaki baseball hat, both adorned with the PokerStars.net logo. Perhaps the most important piece of apparel he donned was a pair of mirrored Oakley wraparound sunglasses. While wearing sunglasses indoors might seem odd, in Moneymaker's case, it was a strategic decision. By hiding his eyes, Moneymaker made it more difficult for the professional poker players to tell if he was bluffing.

As the episodes evolved, the broadcast focused more heavily on Moneymaker and his interactions with former world champion Johnny Chan. In contrast to Moneymaker, who was depicted as an amateur, Johnny Chan was described as a seasoned professional. Chan was a former two-time WSOP champion and was immortalized in the poker movie *Rounders* (Cohen & Dahl, 1998). In the film, Chan was the idol of a young poker player, portrayed by Matt Damon, and was referred to as the "perfect player." The ESPN announcers also used the moniker when discussing Chan and his play. These references made Moneymaker's eventual defeat of Chan all the more improbable.

In a key hand, both men made flushes but Moneymaker's ace high flush beat Chan's king high flush. McCarron described the hand as taking place between "the perfect player

and the amateur of amateurs, *mano a mano* in this hollowed out poker ring." In this confrontation, Moneymaker was dealt the better cards and eliminated Chan. His play prompted color commentator Norman Chad to remark, "This is like Buster Douglas knocking out Mike Tyson" (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 3, 44:54–44:58). McCarron added, "Chris Moneymaker learned his lesson well yesterday against Johnny Chan and used it today to defeat his idol" (Episode 3, 45:08–45:14). Chad's and McCarron's commentary demonstrated how Moneymaker's trials and tribulations resulted in his transformation into a hero of mythic proportions.

As the broadcast continued, the number of players in the tournament fell and the final table loomed ever closer. With only two tables left, Moneymaker was propelled into the chip lead by winning important hands based on both skill and luck. In one such hand, Moneymaker called the bluff of "wonder kid" Dutch Boyd holding only a pair of threes and won the hand. McCarron praised his call, stating, "That is feel, it's instinct, it's not poker strategy anyone would write up." McCarron concluded by saying, "What a call," and labeling it "a gutsy call." The win gave Moneymaker the lead in the tournament (Episode 5, 18:55–19:56).

At the final table, Moneymaker dominated both the play and the coverage. The mythology around Moneymaker continued to build when ESPN showed another profile of him. We were now shown a resolute Moneymaker with his sights set on winning. He stated,

When I sat down in this tournament, I didn't know a soul. Pretty much every pro I played against in this tournament, they tried to come in and say, "Listen, I'm here, I'm the pro, I'm going to run this table." (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 6, 12:34–12:46)

However, Moneymaker explained that he learned not to let them bully the table but rather to stand up to the professionals. Rather than being at a disadvantage to the more experienced players, he came to believe he had advantages over them. He stated, "They [professionals] like to read people's emotions and get a read on somebody. Someone new comes in; it's hard to do that" (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 6, 12:50–12:56). The profile ends with Moneymaker vowing to keep the other players on their toes.

Players were eliminated quickly at the final table and most lost their chips to Moneymaker. Soon the tournament came down to the final two players: the amateur, Chris Moneymaker, and the seasoned professional, Sammy Farha. Farha played the perfect counter to Moneymaker's everyman persona. The Lebanese professional, with his distinct accent, dark-tanned skin, and slicked-back jet-black hair, resembled a villain out of a James Bond film. In the words of announcer Lon McCarron, Farha "just looks like a poker player" (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 5, 12:07–12:09). Farha's words enhanced his image. During a pretaped interview he stated, "My style is very dangerous for one reason. I like to play with their heads" (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 7, 28:36–28:44). Before play begins, the ESPN commentators predicted who the favorite should be. Not surprisingly, they suggested that the final pairing favored the professional, Sammy Farha. Color commentator Norman Chad appeared confident in Farha, stating, "My money is on Farha. This isn't exactly David versus Goliath but it's maybe David versus Hulk Hogan. Sammy's been around the

block, he's seen the sling shot, he's been in so many more situations than Chris Money-maker" (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 7, 35:50–36:03). Although Chad seemingly dismissed Moneymaker's chances of winning the tournament, his comparison of Moneymaker to David was important as it connected him to mythic figures of the past. One final time, the audience was given the message that Moneymaker was an underdog and that he had little chance of winning.

As play began, Moneymaker quickly demonstrated that he was unafraid of Farha when he pushed all his chips into the pot holding only king high. Color commentator Norman Chad calls this move a "stunning play." Farha contemplated calling the bet for some time, but eventually folded his hand. An ecstatic Chad shouted, "Considering this situation, I know we are early in the century, but that is the bluff of the century. What a play from Chris Moneymaker" (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 7, 41:15–41:23). Chad's description of Moneymaker's play in such historic terms helped to further cement the depiction of Moneymaker as a hero who had justly earned his reward. Shortly after Moneymaker's big bluff, the tournament concluded when Moneymaker drew a full house. As the cards played out, Chad proclaimed, "This is beyond fairy tale, it's inconceivable." The final episode concluded with McCarron telling the audience, "With a dramatic string of knockouts, Moneymaker puts his name amongst the greatest players in the game. . . . And he proved that anyone, truly anyone, can be the next world champion of poker" (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 7, 46:30–46:36).

WSOP and the Self-Made Man

The relationship between poker and the self-made man is evident in the broadcasts of the WSOP. Poker and the WSOP affirmed part of the myth of the self-made man, but at the same time, reinterpreted and subverted it in numerous ways. The results produced a new version of the myth. To better understand this shift, I examine the way poker and the WSOP broadcast of Chris Moneymaker's victory interacts with the three strains of the myth.

Moneymaker and the Protestant Ethic

The WSOP is a clear affront to the Protestant ethic. The Protestant ethic is about hard work and the achievement of material success. While material success is important, the wealth sought is not excessive and it is achieved within the context of religious values and virtues. The frequent comparisons to sports and athletes attempt to paint poker as a game of hard work and skill. Though the WSOP attempted to portray poker as hard work, the fact that poker is a game is inescapable. Furthermore, Moneymaker enjoyed such a continuous string of fortunate events that the announcers proclaimed he "sleeps with angels" (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 6, 9:43–9:46). In this new version of the myth, hard work was replaced by luck and good fortune that appeared to be beyond the control of the individual. New York Times columnist A. J. Jacobs (2005) observed that Moneymaker's story stands in dire opposition to the traditional values promoted by the protestant work ethic. He argued that Moneymaker's story was seductive because it allowed for individuals to achieve fame and fortune without having to put forth hard work and effort.

Additionally, the wealth celebrated in the WSOP is clearly excessive. The amount of \$2.5 million that goes to the winner is well beyond the middle-class desires traditionally reflected in stories of the Protestant ethic. The greed and materialism presented in the broadcast was so excessive that the money literally became a character in the story. Finally, MoneyMaker and the other players went about acquiring their wealth through tactics and means that fly in the face of traditional Protestant values. MoneyMaker repeatedly used deception and lying to gain an advantage while the announcers lauded him for doing so. The context of a poker game creates a scene that allows the self-made man to discard the Protestant ethic and fight dirty. Protestant morals are replaced by a mantra of "by any means necessary."

However, this revised morality did not stop ESPN from attempting to portray the WSOP as being aligned with a Protestant ethic, by focusing on the democratic nature of the game of poker, where everyone in the tournament starts with the same number of chips and opportunity. The audience was told repeatedly throughout the series that the unofficial theme of the WSOP is "Anyone can win." Of course, the biggest proof of this mantra came in the form of MoneyMaker's victory. After MoneyMaker won, McCarron stated, "He proved that anyone, truly anyone can be the next world champion of poker" (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 7, 46:30–46:36). The belief that anyone can achieve the highest level of success plays upon the democratic ideals present in the traditional telling of the myth of the self-made man. Just as young children are told that anyone can become president, young poker players are told that anyone can win the WSOP.

Individual and Social Virtue at the WSOP

Individuals like Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln exemplified the tale of the man who pulled himself up by "his own bootstraps" to achieve great things for himself and society. The WSOP played upon this thread of the myth of the self-made man, but also subverted it in unique and interesting ways. While MoneyMaker was depicted as an average man of the people, his origins were not truly humble. MoneyMaker was college-educated and at the time of his victory was working as an accountant for a restaurant. However, in the world of poker, MoneyMaker lacked status and prestige. He was the amateur at the table, perceived to be "dead money" and have no chance at winning the tournament (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 3, 22:08–22:11). Although initially embarrassed and afraid at the poker table, he gained confidence over time and increasingly demonstrated skill.

There is an obvious difference in the rise of Ben Franklin and Chris MoneyMaker. MoneyMaker's rise in status was not due to individual or social virtue. Through his public service, Franklin helped make society a better place. In contrast, MoneyMaker rose in the tournament by defeating others and in essence harming the financial well-being of his opponents. Poker players in general take from others to achieve their reward and give nothing back to society. The fact that the announcers were uncritical of this practice and in fact went out of their way to praise it is especially interesting.

One way the WSOP attempted to portray poker as a virtuous activity was by framing it as a sport. Everything from the language of the announcers to the context given for the series utilized the rhetoric of an athletic event. In the opening montage that began every

episode, the WSOP was compared to the Masters, Wimbledon, and the Kentucky Derby. When introducing new players to the audience, sports terminology was used. For example, Phil “The Poker Brat” Hellmuth was referred to as the John McEnroe of poker. Two-time WSOP runner-up T. J. Cloutier was compared to golfer Phil Mickelson because of his inability to win the big one. This framing appears to have worked because it was adopted by members of the outside media. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* compared Moneymaker’s victory to those of professional golfer Annika Sorenstam and Kentucky Derby champion Funny Cide (Simpson, 2003).

When Moneymaker battled his idol Johnny Chan, the announcers described the contest as being *mano a mano* and taking place in a “poker ring” (Hotowitz, 2003, episode 3, 44:02–44:08). Moneymaker’s defeat of Chan was compared to James Buster Douglas’s defeat of former boxing champion Mike Tyson. Finally, the tournament was referred to as the World Series of Poker. By calling the event the World Series, ESPN and Binion’s Horseshoe Casino compared it to baseball’s World Series, one of the most iconic sporting events in the country.

ESPN, which until recently stood for the Entertainment Sports Programming Network, produces and broadcasts the WSOP. ESPN bills itself as the worldwide leader in sports, and its association with the WSOP helps to frame the audience’s interpretation of the broadcast. In being broadcast on a sports network, the WSOP took on the feel of a sporting event. Rather than being seen as an arbitrary contest of luck or merely a collection of gamblers throwing around money, the WSOP is given the same classification as Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), and National Football League (NFL). Sports are typically thought of as games of skill, where luck may play some role, but where skill is the dominant factor in determining the outcome. Such comparisons to athletic events can only further legitimize poker as a genuine sport, rather than a random game. Such an association is important because sports are seen in American society as being virtuous activities that build character and teach valuable lessons. Furthermore, sports are linked directly to American culture and ideology (Rader, 2008). We believe that baseball is our national pastime and the biggest events in our lives are compared to the Super Bowl. Sports are woven into the fabric of American life, and by portraying poker as sport, the WSOP attempts to borrow sports’ ethos.

Moneymaker and Horatio Alger

Moneymaker comes closest to embodying Horatio Alger’s myth of the self-made man. The WSOP and ESPN cast him as the modern version of a hero from Alger’s stories. Moneymaker’s victory had a storybook quality to it. He was deemed by the announcers to be “David taking on Goliath,” and his success was described as being “beyond fairytale” (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 7, 35:50–35:55, 45:12–45:15). The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* continued the fairytale comparisons by calling Moneymaker a modern day Cinderella (Simpson, 2003). A similar tone was reflected in the Associated Press’s reporting of the story, which characterized Moneymaker as an underdog average Joe who battled to defeat the favored professionals and claim his historic prize (Luo, 2003). As discussed above, one of the recurring themes of Alger’s stories is that his heroes get lucky and this luck is critical to their eventual success. Moneymaker repeatedly got lucky throughout the tournament, getting

good cards and fortuitously winning hands. Moneymaker did not earn his fortune in a traditional manner; luck was critical to his ultimate success. Of course, in Alger's stories, the characters are not only lucky, but they are also virtuous. The virtuous nature of the character allows him/her to appear worthy of the luck he/she receives. Moneymaker did not act in a virtuous manner and thus cannot be said to have earned his luck in the traditional Alger sense.

The setting helped to frame the narrative of Moneymaker's victory and the role luck played in it. While Alger's stories were set in cities and factories, Moneymaker's story took place in Las Vegas. Moneymaker relied on luck for a great deal of his success, but this reliance fit with the scene of his story. Las Vegas is a gambling town where fortunes can be won and lost on a roll of the dice or turn of the card. Furthermore, as previously noted the WSOP was not located among the vast hotels of the strip where entertainment is as much a part of the experience as gambling, but at Binion's Horseshoe in downtown Las Vegas. Binion's had no fancy fountains or bubbling volcanoes. People come there to do one thing, gamble. This scene was appropriate for the emergence of a new version of the American Dream myth which emphasized the need to be lucky and the belief that life is a gamble.

Poker and the Rise of the Risk Society

Beck (1992, 1999, 2002) and Giddens (1999) argued that we are living in a risk society, one increasingly focused on the future and one dominated by uncertainty. This thesis holds that an understanding and analysis of risk is central to American society. I contend that poker is a useful lens through which to view the risk society. Contemporary gambling is emblematic of modernity and postmodernity. If we exist in a risk-based society, then what better way is there to understand it than through the game of poker? After all, poker is a game where success depends upon an understanding and balancing of risk. The modern condition is not just about the creation of risk, but also the tolerance and management of it.

Professional poker players can be seen as entrepreneurial role models for this emerging risk-based society. "Like future traders, national security analysts, or stem cell research teams," McManus (2009) wrote, "poker players make educated guesses under radically uncertain conditions" (p. 120). The ability of professional poker players to understand, tolerate, and manage risk makes them role models for entrepreneurs in a system where these skills are vital to economic successes and survival. Poker is, after all, the most capitalistic of card games. Furthermore, McManus reminded us that using the metaphor of gambling to explain the modern economic environment is increasingly common. McManus (2003) asked, "And what better metaphor for a democratic free-market risk taking society than poker?" (p. 120).

This metaphor seems especially apt given Beck's (2006) contention that "risk definition, essentially, is a power game" (p. 333). Poker is also often described as a power game, and the term "power poker" was coined by two-time WSOP champion Doyle Brunson (1979, p. 1) to explain the most successful way to play the game and the strategy needed to win the WSOP. Power poker dictates that players play aggressively by betting and raising their

opponents in hopes of controlling the action of the game and making their opponents afraid to play against them. This strategy was employed by MoneyMaker to win the WSOP. MoneyMaker explained that the professional poker players he played against attempted to control the action and dictate the terms of the game (Hotowitz, 2003, Episode 6). It was only after he changed his mind-set and stood up against Chan, Farha, and others that he began to encounter success. While luck played a role in his victory, his ability to control the action was just as important, if not more so. In a key hand at the final table, MoneyMaker considered the preceding events before making a daring bluff with only king high. His opponent, Sammy Farha, correctly believed that MoneyMaker was bluffing but was unwilling to risk his chips to make the call. MoneyMaker won the hand because of his willingness to embrace risk and his strategic management of it. His execution of power poker allowed him to take the weaker hand and turn it into the winning hand.

Poker, Gambling, and the New World of Work

Professional poker players can be seen as entrepreneurial role models for the risk society because the very nature of work is changing. Basic capitalist theory holds that individuals work to produce a product or service that is then sold to other individuals, and in return, they receive an economic benefit of some kind. Economist Adam Smith (1902) wrote in his landmark book *The Wealth of Nations* that economies are predicated on the exchange of goods and services. Originally published in 1776, Smith's book advanced his claim that a country's wealth was not the sum of its material assets, but the flow of goods and services that it produces. In contrast, poker players provide no tangible goods or services. Thus, a nation of poker players might have high material assets, but they would still be considered poor by Smith's calculation. Instead of creating products and services, poker players learn and exercise a skill that allows them to profit while producing no product or service.

Poker games thus remove the standard framework of producers and consumers. Although people watching the WSOP on television might be said to be consumers of poker, in most untelevised games there are no consumers. Rather, there are only competing producers hoping to gain the upper hand. MoneyMaker's gain is his opponent's loss. This system allows successful poker players like Chris MoneyMaker, Johnny Chan, and Sammy Farha to opt out of the traditional economic market. They not only have no bosses, they also have no clients or customers. The only cooperation professional poker players need is the willingness of other players to sit and play against them at the poker table. Their attempts at maximizing profits through the management of risk without the creation of a discernible product is not unlike that of the day trader or a hedge fund manager. The only goal of these new risk-based professions is the creation of wealth. As playwright Jerry Sterner (1985) wrote in his award winning play *Other People's Money*, "[We are quickly becoming a nation] that makes nothing but hamburgers, creates nothing but lawyers, and sells nothing but tax shelters" (p. 85).

Conclusion

The traditional story of the self-made man ties our religious, political, and economic systems together. However, Beck (2002) asserted that the reality of the risk society "radically

contradict(s) the institutionalized language and promises of the authorities" (p. 4). As such, traditional myths must evolve and adapt to the context of the risk society. By analyzing Chris Moneymaker's 2003 WSOP victory, we are able to gain insight into how the myth of the self-made man has evolved. Poker offers a story of the self-made man that is remarkably different from the traditional myth. Poker's version of the myth is both a satire and a counter-narrative offering commentary and redefinition of the self-made man. The myth is transformed from one where success is achieved through a Protestant ethic, a sense of virtue, and an entrepreneurial spirit to one that promotes luck, easy money, gambling, and greed.

This new version of the self-made man nevertheless incorporates some of the traditional aspects of the myth. For example, the view of poker as sport and meritocracy reinforces the belief that regardless of circumstances, the cream really does rise to the top. The theme of democracy also continues to stress the value of equal opportunity. However, the means for achievement of the success have been altered. Social virtue and the Protestant work ethic have been replaced by a warlike mentality that values skill, deception, and a fervent belief that the ends justify the means. The endorsement of the warlike mentality is especially important when you consider that the United States was involved in wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq at the time of the 2003 WSOP's broadcast. If success is seen as a life-and-death struggle without rules, then tactics such as deception, aggression, and manipulation are justifiable. This new version of the myth provides justification for the practices of the risk society that previously would have been viewed as immoral.

While luck was a factor in the previous version of the myth, it was not the driving force that it becomes in this one. Moneymaker does display skill in his victory, but there is no doubt that luck was a factor in the victory. Here we see one explanation for the ever-increasing appeal of America's lottery system. Skill and merit still offer a chance at success, but in the end, it may all come down to luck. In an age when a lifetime of savings can disappear overnight in the stock market, when corporate layoffs can undermine years of hard work, and where billion-dollar Ponzi schemes rob even the smartest of investors of their net worth, this view seems increasingly justified. Beck (2006) claimed that "risk exposure is replacing class as the principal inequality of modern society" (p. 333). If we accept this argument, then it is easy to understand the increasing appeal of gambling in modern society. People with limited financial wherewithal have a decreasing ability to determine the level of risk to which they are exposed and must therefore rely more on luck to succeed. It is not surprising then they that would embrace activities grounded in luck, such as gambling.

At the same time, it would be wrong to adopt an overly pessimistic view of these changes to the myth of the self-made man. If Malcolm Gladwell (2008) and others are correct that the traditional myth rationalizes systematic inequalities and that luck does in fact play an important role in success, then these changes could be viewed in a positive light. Gladwell argued that when we abandon the view that success is the result only of hard work and virtue, we will create a more just society that views its downtrodden not as immoral or nonvirtuous but rather as unlucky. The traditional myth of the self-made man stands in the way of the society that Gladwell wished to create because it provides a rationale for these inequalities.

Additionally, poker is unlike other profiteering practices of the modern economic landscape in other respects. The rules of poker are transparent and deception is considered fair. While the game of poker is far from perfect, it is more honest than many other economic activities that often lack the transparency of a poker game. Deceit, manipulation, aggression, and bullying have become increasingly legitimized practices in American business. McManus (2003) neatly linked poker and capitalism when he wrote, "Much like financial markets the game is a scary arena in which money management, pluck, and intelligence combine to determine who will get hacked limb from limb" (p. 120). However, unlike these other economic practices, the game of poker is honest about the fact that dishonesty is part of the game. One reason we enjoy poker may be because we yearn for the straightforward presentation of the less pleasant virtues of our society that poker presents. After all, at the WSOP Chris MoneyMaker has a chance to defeat the most successful professionals in the game, something he would have little chance of doing on Wall Street.

Future research might investigate other cultural forms of gambling, sport, and entertainment as representative of risk society dynamics. In addition to traditional forms of gambling, research should examine the exploding area of online gambling. Poker, sports gambling, lotteries, and traditional casino games are now all available online. Inquiry into how the digitization of gambling alters cultural mythology and its relationship to the risk society is needed. Another area for possible investigation is the expanding popularity of "extreme" sports. Extreme sports have become so common that they even spawned their own version of the Olympics, called the X Games. While all sports carry some risk of injury to participants, extreme sports appear significantly more risky than traditional sports. Examination of the increasing popularity of extreme sports could provide valuable insight into how the rise of the risk society is changing our cultural view of sports and collective psyche.

Acknowledgments – Aaron Duncan (PhD, University of Nebraska–Lincoln) is the Director of Speech and Debate for the Department of Communication, University of Nebraska–Lincoln. The author is especially grateful to Ronald Lee and Damien Pfister for their assistance with earlier drafts of the article.

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