

## The Good, the Bad and the Unhappy: The Cultural Meanings of Newspaper Reporting on Jackpot Winners

PER BINDE

*Center for Public Sector Research, Göteborg University, Sweden*

**ABSTRACT** *Accounts of jackpot winners and big gambling wins are common in Swedish newspapers. Analysis of over 2000 such newspaper articles reveals that their content is structured according to specific themes and cultural topics. Four such topics are identified: wealth as a test of morals and character, the social impact of wealth, the just and good world, and luck and the occult. Culturally structured narratives like these—which elaborate on mythological and moralistic schemes of good and evil, rewards and punishments, and which concern questions of human nature and social values—have a long history in folk tradition and in Christian moral teachings. Jackpot wins provide a discursive realm for moral and existential questions that, to some extent, fills a void left by the decline of traditional folklore and formal religion. Apparently, this discourse stimulates interest in games and constitutes one of the cultural roots of contemporary gambling.*

### Introduction

This study is part of the endeavour of the present author to develop an anthropological perspective on gambling as a social and cultural phenomenon (Binde, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). While conducting field studies in Swedish gambling environments, using participant observation, the author noted that stories about jackpot winners was quite a common topic of conversation. Although referring to actual individuals—known personally, by hearsay, or through the press—the stories had a striking myth-like character. There were, for instance, tales of well-deserved rewards, tests of character suddenly imposed on to individuals, and of the mysteries of luck and destiny.

Some of these stories originated, as said, from the press. Every week in Swedish mass media there are notices and articles about jackpot winners and big gambling wins. Some of these texts are simply short notices and provide little information, while others are more elaborate and give details of the winner and events connected with the win. Most of the coverage concerns Swedish winners, but sensational or thought-provoking articles about gambling wins in other parts of the world are also published. Evidently, people like to talk and read about gambling winners and how winning changed their lives.

Out of the author's curiosity and fascination for the subject, a collection of press cuttings started to form and the idea of devoting a specific study to the subject emerged. In 2002, the study was initiated by making a search of two on-line, full-text databases covering approximately 60 Swedish newspapers and magazines, some of which are available from the mid 1990s and others only the most recent

years. The search used keywords and category searching to find coverage of gambling winners and winnings. Over 1500 relevant texts were found, and those that had fairly substantial content were printed out and filed in an archive. Most of the texts not included in the archive were short formulaic notices that informed the reader only of basic facts, such as the sum won, the type of game played, and the home town of the winner. When articles in different newspapers are identical or similar, since they all originate from Sweden's major news agency (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå), only one version has been included in the archive.

In early 2005, the collection of texts was updated by a new search of the databases. Up to 2006, new articles were added to the collection as they were noticed by the author in his daily reading of one morning paper and the internet editions of another morning paper and two evening tabloids. In all, over 2000 newspaper notices and articles on gambling winnings and winners have been examined, and nearly 400 of these have been filed in the archive. Since this study is exploratory and qualitative, no data regarding the frequencies of various themes will be presented, although it will roughly be indicated how common a given theme is.

Most of the articles in the collection concern winners on games of chance or on 'quick pick' betting. Newspaper reporting on persons who win large sums on games regarded to involve skill is less common and different in content. When writing about the gaming feats of expert punters and professional poker players, newspapers focus on their skill, career, and lifestyle.

In advertising and through various forms of media related sponsorships, gambling companies relate information on, and stories about, jackpot winners. The content of such marketing—appearing on TV, in newspaper advertising, on websites, and in direct mail advertising—has been preliminary explored by the present author elsewhere and will not be discussed here (Binde, 2005c, 2005d). Apart from TV-shows sponsored by gambling companies, there is very little on Swedish television about jackpot winners.

There is no intention here to explore the actual circumstances to which the newspaper articles refer. The changes in a person's life that a jackpot win is likely to cause have been the subject of surveys (Abrahamson, 1980; Arvey *et al.*, 2004; Brickman *et al.*, 1978; Fleischer Eckblad and von der Lippe, 1994; Gardner and Oswald, 2001; Imbens *et al.*, 2001; Kaplan, 1978, 1985, 1987, 1988; MORI, 1999), a qualitative investigation (Falk and Mäenpää, 1999) and documentary books (Davies, 1997; Gudgeon and Stewart, 2001).

There seems to be only one earlier study of newspaper coverage of jackpot winners, and its results were published in a Swedish folklore journal (Berglund, 2000). The study interpreted the stories as reflecting 'anachronistic ideals' and expressing a critique of modern-day society, in particular individualism. The conclusion of the present paper is quite different, that such stories comment on and provide food for thought regarding a range of social and moral topics.

The approach taken here is anthropological, viewing newspaper articles on jackpot winners as conveying cultural meanings by using stock elements and symbolic codes. In that respect, such news items are similar to myth, legend and folktale. The myth-like nature of mass media news in general has been noted by semioticians (Barthes, 1972), historians of religion (Eliade, 1963), and media scholars (Bird & Dardenne, 1988; Carey, 1975; Lule, 2001). James Carey (1975) makes a distinction between a 'transmission view' of mass communication and a 'ritual view'. According to the transmission view, news transmit information and

knowledge from senders (reporters, newspapers) to an audience (readers, TV viewers). Questions may be asked about the intentions of the senders, the objectivity of the information transmitted and the interpretation of information. In the ritual view, however, reading a newspaper appears:

... less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed. ... Under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it. (Carey, 1975, p. 8)

Like myths, news thus tells the same basic stories again and again. Like myths, news highlights features and dilemmas of the cultural and social world and makes use of stock examples and Figures (Lule, 2001). The narrative structure of news and myth are certainly different, since news is not meant to be memorized and carried on by oral tradition but to be printed one time only. However, there are semantic structures in news that remind us of the binary structures of myth, legend and folktale. As it will be shown, most of the stories about jackpot winners relate to a few cultural topics in which most attention is paid to extreme cases following a bipolar pattern.

A basic assumption of the analysis presented here is that events gain significance in a particular social and moral universe. Among the millions of events that take place every day in a country like Sweden, only a few hundred are covered in the newspapers. One important criterion for selecting an event as newsworthy is that it tells something about or raises questions about our culture, society and human nature. A stingy politician who evades taxes and misuses political funds raises questions about the sincerity of his party's policies, and tells a story about greed and lack of morals. A drunk driver killing a child and its mother raises questions about the use of alcohol in our society, about crime and punishment, and highlights how fragile life is and how suddenly it may change. Similarly, stories about lottery winners and jackpot wins tell things about our culture and society.

It is thus how meaning-laden an event is in relation to general social and cultural matters that makes it fit for newspaper publication. However, mass media as an institution also has an impact on what events that will become news (Tuchman, 1978; Ginneken, 1998). The content of a particular newspaper is determined by its editor, who may be expected by the owners and interest groups to give it a certain political colour. The content is also chosen according to the tastes and interests of the target readership, with the intention of increasing the number of copies sold. Therefore, the extent of coverage of jackpot wins differs somewhat between newspapers. The Swedish tabloid press clearly publishes much more about gambling winnings and winners than the morning papers do. As to the content of the stories, however, there are no striking differences.

Nine distinct themes in the newspaper coverage of jackpot wins emerge quite clearly from a simple classification of the texts (see below). The themes refer to the overt content of the articles. Articles on the same theme are very similar, almost as if they were based on a ready-made template. Essentially, they tell the same story, although with different persons involved and in different settings. These themes emerged early in the investigation, as an *ad hoc* archiving structure for the growing collection of newspaper articles.

At a higher level of abstraction, it will be argued that these themes relate to four cultural topics, thereby acquiring cultural meaning. These topics emerged late in the investigation, resulting from an analysis of the material. Thus, while ‘theme’ refers to the kind of story that is told in an article, ‘topic’ refers to a wider frame of cultural meaning making the story interesting for readers. The relationships between the topics and themes are as follows:

- *Topic 1: Wealth as a Test of Morals and Character*—Themes: (A) the wise winner, (B) the squanderer, and (C) the cautious winner.
- *Topic 2: The Social Impact of Wealth*—Themes: (D) freedom and happiness, (E) greed and discord, and (F) envy and ill will.
- *Topic 3: The Just and Good World*—Themes: (G) the deserving and (H) the undeserving winner.
- *Topic 4: Luck and the Occult*—Theme: (I) luck and the occult (several sub-themes).

The four topics will be explored in the following four sections of the paper. In the final part of the paper, the cultural meanings of this genre of media reporting will be discussed more generally, and the impact that newspaper coverage may have on peoples’ participation in lotteries and other forms of gambling speculated on. (A note on currency: SEK 1 million is roughly equivalent to €110,000 or US\$145,000.)

### Topic 1: Wealth as a Test

#### *Theme A: The Wise Winner*

*Example: ‘Celebrated his big win with a biscuit’ (Borås Tidning, 1 February 2005)*

This brief story tells about a man in a small town who a few days previously had won over SEK 2 million by playing the BingoLotto game. He tells the newspaper that he is very pleased and happy. There was no big celebration: during the interview he took a plain biscuit with his coffee as usual. He says he will continue to work as a teacher, renovate the family’s house and probably go on a holiday trip. He will soon visit the bank to get advice on how to invest the millions.

*Example: ‘Sven became the district’s multimillionaire’ (Expressen, 23 February 2002)*

This article provides quite a detailed account of how winning changed Sven’s life. It was published four years after Sven’s record-breaking SEK 49 million lottery win. Sven lives in the tiny village of Kangos in the deep woodlands of northern Sweden. He kept a level head when he won and at first did not tell anyone about it. The newspaper writes that he gave some of the jackpot money to his grown-up children, bought an exclusive Mercedes car for himself, paid for a new roof for the village’s elementary school, renovated his home, went on several vacations abroad, bought land and forest and made some sound investments. He continues to work at his small company, lives with his family and describes himself as happy. A fellow villager interviewed by the newspaper exclaims: ‘It was the right person who won’.

As mentioned, most of the notices and articles on winners in Swedish newspapers are quite brief, like the first example. They typically inform the reader that the winner at first was stunned and euphoric, but then quickly gained self-control. The winner is happy and has sensible and rational plans for the future. These plans commonly include taking a holiday trip abroad, paying off debts, buying a new car, setting money aside for the future needs of children in the family and depositing most of the win in a bank account. The winner is described to be in full control of the situation, as acting rationally and not being carried away by the sudden windfall of money. The second example is typical of a more substantial genre of 'What happened then?' reporting on jackpot winners.

*Theme B: The squanderer*

*Example: 'Three years ago she won 9.3 millions on the pools, now Milka is broke' (Expressen, 27 November 1996)*

An immigrant woman, working as a cleaner, hit a SEK 9.3 million football pools jackpot. She immediately began spending the money rapidly. She bought luxury goods, gave expensive gifts to friends and acquaintances, supported charity organizations, and was generous with tips (e.g. SEK 20,000 at a petrol station). She spent all the money in less than three years. A former boyfriend sued her for half of the win, claiming that they had played together. A district court judged in his favour and she now owes him SEK 3.5 million. The woman says to the newspaper: 'All money is gone. My big win only brought me trouble. It would have been better if I had not won.' (She later appealed the court decision and was reconciled with the former boyfriend, who was content with SEK 20,000 and a car.)

Much less common than stories about happy winners, but often more elaborate, are stories about people who have hit a jackpot and rapidly squandered the millions. Huge debts are commonly incurred, since these people could not stop the spending spree when they were broke. The money is wasted in various ways: spent on luxury goods, wild parties, big-ticket items (such as cars) given away as generous gifts and invested in fraudulent business ventures proposed by swindlers. Astounding examples of wastefulness are typically given. The winner is described as having lost his or her head and unable to resist impulses to spend. Sometimes the person also loses control of alcohol consumption, which becomes extreme, thereby accelerating the uncontrolled spending. Occasionally, the winner starts to gamble excessively, thereby rapidly losing money. When all the money has been spent, the person is described as unhappy and typically thinking that it would have been better never to have won the money in the first place. In sum, such newspaper articles focus on loss of control: had the person behaved more sensibly, he or she would have been rich and happy rather than broke and distressed.

*Theme C: The Cautious Winner*

*Example: '22.9 million changes nothing' (Expressen, 22 July 2002)*

This newspaper article tells about a man who had won SEK 22.9 million at Lotto three months previously. He continues to work as a glazier, a job he has had for 36 years. He says to the newspaper that 'things are going on just as usual, we live as we did before'. He has bought a car for his wife, but for himself he is content with a new bicycle. Apart from that and some new garden furniture, he has not spent any of the money. His brother, who works as a private investment adviser, takes care of investing the millions. This winner has not experienced any jealousy. People in the tiny town where he lives congratulate him and 'appear to think that the win went to the right person'. The reporter asks if he 'does not ever feel like going to the Bahamas'. The man answers 'Never', and says that he and his wife have never been fond of travelling. Presumably pressed by the reporter, he finally says that, if he and his wife in the remote future 'are still healthy and able to stand on their feet', they might perhaps go to Australia.

Quite a few newspaper articles marvel at winners who maintain that winning will not change anything. These winners say that they will continue to live as usual and not spend any of the money, or only a little of it. Some articles tell about winners who won huge sums some years earlier and who indeed did not change their lives in any significant way. Often these people have won when playing BingoLotto, a hybrid of bingo and lottery in which the drawing of winning numbers forms the backbone of a weekly two-hour TV show. This lottery has been very popular in Sweden, being a favourite entertainment of many senior citizens and of people in rural areas (Bolin and Forsman, 2002). Evidently, some of the winners have played the game just for entertainment and have no actual wish to win a lot of money. By winning, they are put in a troublesome situation that they solve by putting the money in the bank and continuing with life as usual.

#### *Standing or Failing the Test of the Jackpot*

These three themes—the wise winner, the squanderer and the cautious winner—all derive meaning from the notion that winning the jackpot constitutes a test. The typical gambler dreamt about hitting the jackpot, he or she wished for money in abundance; this has now become reality and the question is whether the winner can handle the situation.

The wise winner is described as having kept his or her head and stood the test (cf. Falk and Mäenpää, 1999). He or she quickly adapts to being rich and enjoys life more than before, now that there are few economic worries. The squanderer, however, loses his or her head and quickly spends all the money with little satisfaction. The squanderer ends up in misery and has no one else to blame but him- or herself. The dream of a happy life in abundance was an illusion, as the winner was unable to handle the situation and the jackpot only brought misery.

These newspaper stories are modern versions of morality and cautionary tales known in European history since at least the Middle Ages. The subject of such tales is that one who covets wealth, and tries to appropriate it, is subject to various tests. The one who stands the test is richly rewarded, while the one who fails ends up in misery. In Swedish folk legends, this pattern is characteristic of tales of enchanted golden treasures (Lindow, 1982; Norlind, 1918; Schön, 2002). To 'disenchant' such a treasure and bring it safely home involves tricky tests

and grave dangers, and only those who keep their heads can succeed. Most who try fail, either ignominiously or catastrophically. Such treasure tales are known from many cultures (Thomson, 1955–58, classes N500–N599) and often connect with actual practices of treasure hunting, which occasionally has taken on a millenaristic character (Taylor, 1986). The cultural meaning of treasure tales varies between cultures. In peasant societies they often express the dark side of wealth and money, associating it with the devil, death, destruction and evilness (e.g. Taussig, 1980).

The cautious winner is not as happy as the wise winner, being too cautious to enjoy the jackpot win fully. The challenge imposed by the sudden win is not accepted and the person changes almost nothing in his or her life. Newspaper articles on such winners often have a tone of frustration and dissatisfaction: a reporter has been sent out to interview a multimillion jackpot winner and finds that there is little to report. The winner has done nothing unusual and will do nothing unusual. The reporter's solution to the dilemma is to take this as the angle to the story. In the example of Theme C, this is evident from the headline, '22.9 million changes nothing'. A lottery jackpot is expected to have a big impact on a person's life. When this is not the case, it is construed as exceptional and remarkable. These newspaper stories thus speak, in an inverted way, of the power of the jackpot win.

## **Topic 2. The Social Impact of Wealth**

### *Theme D: Freedom and Happiness*

The above examples of the 'wise winner' theme illustrate the theme of happiness as well. Being wise and in control is a prerequisite for being a happy winner. On scrutinizing how newspapers describe the happy winner, it becomes clear that his or her happiness is seen as based on freedom. The jackpot winner has become free from former economic worries, free to spend time on activities and hobbies that formerly had to be sacrificed because of work, and free to choose among many more things to buy and do. Very often, the newspapers tell that the jackpot winners will take a holiday trip abroad. This trip away from work and everyday life emerges as the epitome of newly won freedom.

Essentially, the winner is free to act more individualistically. The person's 'true self' can emerge more clearly, now that economic and social obligations are easier to meet. It is not, however, an egoistic self-fulfilment that is portrayed in the newspapers. On the contrary, the winner often says that he or she will give money or cars to relatives and spend more time with the family. Thus, the winner is allowed to shape his or her social life more freely, which typically implies intensified involvement with family and voluntary associations. The winner is described as fulfilling the ideals of generosity, friendliness and kindness. In sum, a bright view of the Swedes emerges: they are good people at heart and this becomes increasingly evident the more freedom they have in shaping their lives.

Occasionally, we learn from the newspapers that some jackpot winners fulfil dreams that could perhaps appear as egocentric. For instance, one person quit his work and wrote a book on frogs (*Göteborgs-Posten*, 3 June 2006). While this may be eccentric, it is by the newspaper not described as egocentric. We learn from the newspaper that the person for a long time had been interested in frogs and when being able to devote his time to write about them, he is described as having become a more harmonious person. At the end of the article—which covers

an entire spread and includes photos of the winner by a marsh, where there are plenty of frogs—the man is quoted philosophizing about his life after having hit the jackpot. He says that essentially, it has been about developing, growing and ‘taking new forms’, just as the tadpoles he is shown in a close-up photo to hold in his cupped hands: ‘To develop. To experience. Rather than becoming stuck in the treadmill of ownership and consumption.’ Thus, this article gives voice to a radically non-materialistic view on the benefits of becoming a lotto millionaire, emphasizing spiritual growth, personal transformation and transcendence of the materialistic world.

#### *Theme E: Greed and Discord*

*Example: ‘Quarrel about jackpot win—bankruptcy petition filed against fellow gambler’ (Expressen, 22 January 1999, and earlier articles)*

This appears to be the final article in a series on this dispute. Two old ladies used to play together while watching TV bingo shows. Three years ago, they bought bingo cards and, as many times before, together watched a bingo show on TV. This time, one of the bingo cards was a winner of nearly SEK 900,000. The woman who held that card in her hand and marked the numbers as they were called out, later cashed in the win and kept all the money for herself. The other woman thought that this was very unfair and claimed half of the money. According to her, they had bought the bingo cards together and played together, and therefore should share the win. The case was brought to a local court that judged that the women had played separately and that the claim to share the win was unjustified. This decision was appealed and a higher court decided that the win should be shared. The woman who had cashed in the win claimed that she had spent all the money; the other woman therefore filed a bankruptcy petition against her.

About twenty legal disputes concerning jackpot wins have been reported in Swedish newspapers in the past decade. As might be recalled, the above example of the ‘squanderer’ theme also exemplifies such a dispute. Newspaper coverage of some of these cases have been extensive, consisting of series of articles that report on the dispute as appeals are filed and new proceedings take place in higher courts.

In a typical legal dispute, a person has won a huge sum in a lottery and part of the winnings is claimed by another person. Sometimes the winner is portrayed as a miser, refusing to share the millions with others who, according to common-sense fairness and possibly legal rights, are entitled to shares. Other times it is the person who has not received any money who is suggested as being greedy, by refusing to accept not being entitled to a share of the winnings. It may also be that both parties are portrayed as being equally obstinate and unwilling to accept a reasonable settlement of the dispute.

In these stories, the jackpot win is described as bringing out the worst in a person. Greed and stinginess destroys marriages and friendships, and makes it impossible for all those involved to enjoy the millions won to the fullest extent. Morality seems to mean nothing to the greedy person, who is blinded by an intense craving for money. The stories about legal disputes concerning jackpot wins are connected with the ‘jackpot-as-test’ theme, since one may suspect that



one or more of the people involved has not stood the test implied by the jackpot. A person's morals and feelings of love and friendship have not been strong enough to withstand the temptation posed by the jackpot millions.

*Theme F: Envy and Ill Will*

*Example: 'Lotto millionaire robbed three times' (Expressen, 21 April 2005)*

The article tells that 'everybody' in the small town of Sala knows who some years ago got all the seven Lotto numbers right and won SEK 2 million. The 77-year-old winner was robbed three times in less than half a year, losing SEK 100,000 in all. During the last robbery, he was brutally beaten. The article is illustrated by a photo of the badly beaten lottery winner, his face covered with blood and one of his eyes swollen shut. The old man told the reporter that nowadays he goes outdoors only in daylight.

The theme of the big gambling win creating envy and ill will is uncommon, and very few articles take such an angle. Some articles mention in passing that winners are bothered by people speaking ill of them, or have been troubled by beggars and swindlers. Stories about people who have rapidly squandered their big wins often tell how they have given in to demands and propositions from such people. More commonly, however, past prize winners respond to reporters by saying that they have not been the subject of envy.

*Money, Wealth, and Social Relations*

The three themes described above connect with a matter that has been debated since antiquity: the impact of money and wealth on social relations (c.f. Bloch and Parry, 1989). Aristotle (1998, ca 343 BC, book 1, parts 8–10) distinguished between two types of economies: the domestic production of necessities and profit-oriented commerce. The first type of economy is natural and non-monetary, while the second is unnatural and based on money. In the non-monetary economy, social relations are harmonious; in contrast, money and the profit motive creates bad social relations in the context of the profit-oriented economy. In its ideological message, the Christian Church adopted this negative view of money: the love of money was seen as the 'root of all evil', and avarice one of the seven deadly sins. In the age of Romanticism, Arcadian self-sufficiency was set in sharp contrast to the materialistic and rational way of life driven by money hunger. Although Marx termed money the 'commodity of commodities' and quoted Shakespeare's neat definition of money as the 'equation of the incompatible'—thereby acknowledging its economic usefulness—his critique of the capitalist mode of production echoes earlier negative views. Money is associated with alienation and oppression, while the non-monetary economies of past primitive cultures and future communist societies are viewed as humane.

These negative views on money acknowledge that most individuals would greatly appreciate receiving a substantial amount of money; it is precisely this individual craving for money that has negative social consequences. In Europe, an uncomplicated positive view of money as something highly desirable has long since been expressed in proverbs, folktales and in the spirit of ambitious

entrepreneurship (Weber, 1992). However, it was not until the advent of industrialism and the rise of liberal ideology that an articulate view of money as a positive social force emerged. As a generalized and impersonal measure of value, money, according to this ideology, helps break down old-fashioned social institutions and allows the creation of new and appropriate social and economical functions. The individual is liberated from the shackles of servitude and other old social systems, and given freedom to choose where to sell his or her time and energy on the labour market. Again, money is attributed an intrinsic power to erode traditional social relations; in liberal ideology, however, this is not unwanted but is instead welcome. As Weber (1992) points out in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the protestant ethic makes a virtue out of enterprise and making a profit. It is a sacred duty for the individual to increase his capital; having much money thereby becomes a sign of piety.

These philosophical and ideological standpoints have long since been expressed at a popular level as well. The question, 'Does money bring happiness or trouble?', has been explored in everyday discourse, legends, folktales, countless literary works, and also in many movies, such as *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, the film that inspired to the title of this paper.

Newspaper stories that tell of the freedom and happiness following on a jackpot win perfectly illustrate the liberal view of money as a liberator from imposed social structures and strictures: money is freedom and freedom makes people happy. The themes of greed and discord, and the winner as subject to envy and ill will, illustrate the view that money and wealth harm social relations. Stories exemplifying these themes are interesting for readers, since they describe actual cases depicting the destructive power of money. The readers can judge for themselves, and discuss with others, whether these cases are exceptional or simply comprise more proof of the inherent badness of money (Carey, 1975). The newspaper articles allow readers to vicariously participate: how would they themselves act if they hit a jackpot? Would they stand or fail the test and would the millions bring happiness or trouble? Vicarious participation is suggested by newspapers especially when they publish brief 'man on the street' interviews in connection with reports of extraordinary huge jackpot wins. People are asked if they wish to win millions and if so, what they would do with the money.

Readers can also ponder and discuss whether the 'Jante Law' has become eroded in industrial and post-industrial society, which is a general understanding in Sweden of today. The Jante Law, formulated by the Scandinavian author Axel Sandemose (1936) in his novel *A Fugitive Crosses his Tracks*, is a well-known concept in Sweden. In a commandment-like list of prohibitions, the Jante Law suggestively expresses the dark side of peasant egalitarianism that narrow-mindedly forbids anyone from standing out from the crowd.

### Topic 3: The Just and Good World

Theme G: *The Deserving Winner*

Example: 'Poor family of ten won 39 million' (*Expressen*, 29 June 1999)

This article tells of the second-largest Lotto win in Sweden (at the time): SEK 39 million. The winners are a poor refugee family of ten, all the adult members of which are unemployed or retired. A member of the

family tells the reporter that 'the win comes into the right hands', and that one million SEK would be given to refugees in war-torn Kosovo. The family prefers to be anonymous. Two days after the win they have not yet celebrated in any other way than by sharing a bottle of wine.

If a winner is poor, unemployed, or has a big family to provide for, then this is emphasized in the newspaper reporting. Quite often, the economic need of the winner becomes the main theme of the story, and it may be said that the 'right person' won.

The expression that the 'right person' won is also found when the winner is described as 'good'. Friends, neighbours, or local people may tell newspaper reporters that the winner is honest, modest, generous and diligent; the jackpot is sometimes said to have been 'well deserved'.

This theme thus has two variants: the winner may either be poor or good. Often, however, the two variants blend into each other and are hard to distinguish: the winner may be poor and in need, and at the same time honest and good. In both cases, the winner is the 'right person' to have won. The theme is found in many newspaper articles. Some illustrative headlines are the following: 'The right couple won!' (*Expressen*, 21 November, 1993), 'The right lady won' (*Dagens Nyheter*, 17 November 1997), 'Now Mary can afford something other than porridge' (*Västerbottens-Kuriren*, 7 November 1998), 'From poor student to multi-millionaire' (*Expressen*, 17 July 1999), "'Hurray, now I can pay my husband's dental bills!'" (*Expressen*, 7 September 2003), and 'Unemployed Anders won 23.5 millions' (*Expressen*, 31 January 2005).

#### Theme H: The Undeserving Winner

*Example: 'Hated man hits the jackpot' (Göteborgs-Posten, 3 September 1995)*

This is one of several newspaper articles that report on the indignation in the UK when Mark Gardiner, together with a colleague, in 1995 won the first big jackpot win in the National Lottery: £22 million. In the British press, Gardiner was described as a wife-beater, a drunkard, a 'mean bastard' and the 'scum of the earth'. His adoptive mother exclaimed that he 'did not deserve one penny of the win', an opinion that formed the backbone of most media coverage of Gardiner's win. He became known in the British press as the 'Lottery Rat'.

Stories about undeserving winners are uncommon in Swedish newspapers. About 20 articles have been found concerning three British cases, those of Mark Gardiner, Michael Carroll and Iorworth Hoare. These articles are derived from the UK tabloid press. Mark Gardiner is briefly described in the example above. Michael Carroll was a juvenile delinquent, working as a garbage collector, when in 2002 he won almost £10 million in the National Lottery. The theme in the British tabloids, reproduced in Swedish newspapers, was that he did not deserve to win. In 2004 and 2006 he was again the subject of articles in the Swedish press, that told how he had spent £20,000 a week on drugs, had been serving time in jail, had run amok at a Christian youth disco and other less flattering things. Iorworth Hoare was serving a sentence for the cruel attempted rape of a 60-year-old woman when in 2004 he won more than £7 million in the National Lottery. He had bought the

winning ticket when on short leave from prison. Hoare had earlier been convicted of several sexual offences and rape. Swedish newspaper coverage described the outrage in the British tabloid press, where Hoare was called the 'Lotto Monster' and the 'Lotto Rapist'. His former wife was cited as saying that Hoare was evil and that him winning the jackpot was so 'unfair' that she felt like throwing up. Hoare was released from prison in 2005 and again Swedish newspapers covered his case, reporting, for example, that he was spending his fortune on pornographic art.

Besides coverage of these three British cases, only a few other Swedish newspaper items exemplify the undeserving winner theme. All these items refer to foreign winners: not a single Swedish case seems to exist and even vague hints of Swedish winners being undeserving are rare. A few such hints are evident in the negative impressions of some winners conveyed by articles covering legal disputes concerning gambling wins. However, the theme is not explored in depth, and the badness of the winner is not described as inherent, as in the British cases, but rather as arising from the personal turmoil caused by hitting the jackpot.

#### *Belief in a Just World and the Imagery of Blessings*

From a purely statistical point of view, ideas of someone being the 'right' person to win, or being 'deserving' or 'undeserving' of a lottery win, are nonsensical. Winners are randomly selected from among those who enter lotteries. Most people realize this. They do not believe that the balls with lotto numbers, used in drawing the winning numbers, are guided in their bouncing and rolling by anything other than physical forces, and that the outcome of the draw is anything other than purely random.

However, a specific jackpot win is rich in cultural and symbolic associations. For example, photographs in newspapers typically depict winners as select and cherished. The happy winner may be smiling at the camera while receiving an oversized cheque from a representative of the gambling company. Cultural notions are activated concerning the reasons why someone was selected to receive something so very desirable. As indicated, two main lines of intuitive thought are expressed in the newspapers, lines of thought that readers may follow or chose to disregard in favour of a more rational view on lottery winnings.

The jackpot winner might be regarded as a good person who deserves a reward. This idea is an expression of what psychologists call the 'just world' belief. According to this belief, it is natural that 'good things happen to people who do good things, and bad things happen to people who do bad things' (Langer, 1975, p. 312). Newspapers are ready to take this angle on a story when there are sufficient grounds for it, namely, the winner is regarded by others as a 'deserving' winner who is the 'right person to win'. The moral that, in the end, goodness is rewarded and badness punished, is the recurrent theme in many myths and legends, presumably reflecting the pervasiveness over time and across cultures of the 'just world' belief.

The other line of intuitive thought, according to which jackpot wins are conceptualized, is that they are a kind of blessing. While the 'just world' belief rests on a notion of reciprocity—good deeds are rewarded while bad deeds are punished—the idea of blessings and divine grace has at its core non-reciprocity. Essentially, divine blessings and grace are offered freely by divine powers. The recipient need not give anything in return and cannot act in any way that is certain to elicit such blessings. The ways of the divine are inscrutable: someone

who ought to be blessed continues to suffer, while someone else receives all that a human being could wish for, both materially and spiritually. Fundamentally, however, the divine powers are good, righteous and extend help to those in need. Also this line of thought is encountered in numerous traditional myths and legends, especially those within Western religious tradition. Thus, a poor person, such as an unemployed mother of four, winning a jackpot is suggestive of being blessed: she is the 'right person' to win because she is in need.

Given the 'just world' belief and the notion of benevolent powers blessing those in need, a clearly undeserving and bad jackpot winner elicits confusion and anger. Really bad things ought to happen to a really bad person, so why on earth should such a person be rewarded with a multimillion jackpot? This was the theme of the British tabloid coverage of the 'Lottery Rat', the 'Lotto Monster', and some other 'undeserving' jackpot winners. Swedish newspapers reprint the British stories, but do not report on domestic cases. Why?

No doubt there are such cases: about 100 Swedes become millionaires each year by entering the Lotto, and there are plenty of million-SEK wins on other games as well. Some of these winners ought to be bad and 'undeserving' people. The present author's experience, gained during one year of anthropological field studies in Swedish gambling environments and through regular gambling for five more years, is that Swedes do indeed talk about undeserving jackpot winners. When they do, they express the belief that such people should not win and that something is very wrong when they do. The question is thus why Swedish 'undeserving' winners are not exposed in the press.

Generally, Swedish newspapers do not seek to scandalize people to the same extent that British tabloids do. Indignantly to emphasize a jackpot winner's badness would thus depart from good newspaper practice in Sweden. If an article instead insinuated a winner's badness, then it would have an unpleasant grudging and grumbling tone. It would create the impression that the newspaper begrudges people their jackpot winnings. Such reporting would not be appreciated by readers, many of whom hope for a jackpot win themselves—this might be a reason for the absence of such coverage from Swedish newspapers. It should be noted that stories of the cautious winner implicitly suggest that it would have been better if someone else had won the jackpot, someone in need of and who would enjoy the millions. However, this implication is never overtly expressed. Presumably, any article stating this would have a grudging tone. Thus, Swedish gambling wins are represented as purely good, blessing those in need and rewarding those who deserve, while the abhorrent image of the undeserving person who wins a lottery jackpot is projected onto a winner in a foreign country. Perhaps this reflects a nationalistic and self glorifying ideology: in Sweden there is goodness, fairness and order, while in other countries there is evil, unfairness and confusion.

#### **Topic 4: Luck and the Occult**

Remarkable and thought-provoking coincidences and events, described as depending on luck, are a common theme in the newspaper notices and articles. This theme derives meaning from the more general cultural topic of luck and the occult. Within this theme, the ninth and final to be identified, there are several sub-themes.

*Theme I-1: Amazing Coincidences*

*Example: 'Mr. Lotto won at Lotto!' (Approximate title, Göteborgs-Posten, 1980)*

When lotto was about to be introduced in Sweden, several newspapers latched onto the novelty and arranged their own lotto games. Amazingly enough, the winner of the game arranged by the major morning newspaper in Göteborg, who thereby became the first ever lotto winner in Sweden, was a person by the name of Horst Lotto.

Many fascinating coincidences connected with lottery wins have been reported in the press. Like this example, some of the coincidences have no apparent meaning, they are plainly amazing. The managers of the state-owned lottery company's newly formed Lotto Division, however, could not refrain from thinking that Horst Lotto's win was an omen that the Lotto would be a success (Björklund, 1994).

*Theme I-2: Lucky Stores, Streets and Towns*

*Example: 'Aftonbladet tests the lucky store—wins!' (Aftonbladet, 13 August 1996)*

In 1996, a shop in the tiny town of Vetlanda had a nation-wide reputation of being a lucky store. A team from the newspaper *Aftonbladet* was out reporting on the shop and decided to test its capacity to bring luck. The reporters bought four instant lottery tickets and won SEK 10,000.

In Sweden, some stores, where players of lotteries and sports betting games have repeatedly won huge sums of money, have acquired reputations for being lucky. Gamblers are attracted to such stores and their turnover for gambling services increases significantly. Some people hope, more or less seriously, that these stores will bring them luck. Others patronize them out of curiosity or to discuss the large wins, or more generally to experience the merry and lucky atmosphere of the places. Newspapers, especially local ones, often write about these lucky shops.

When several big wins occur in a single minor town, this may also become the subject of newspaper reporting: the town is deemed 'lucky'. There have also been reports of a 'lucky street' (*Aftonbladet*, 6 March 1998), which informed readers that in a space of 10 months, no fewer than three multi-million lottery jackpots went to people living on the same street in the small town of Örnsköldsvik.

*Theme I-3: Lucky People*

*Example: 'Bought his first instant lottery ticket—became a millionaire' (Expressen, 3 August 2002)*

This article tells about a man who had never before bought an instant lottery ticket, but was urged to do so by a friend. The friend insisted on this, because he thought that the man 'always is so lucky'. The lucky man won SEK 10 million on the first instant lottery ticket he had ever bought.

Quite a few newspaper stories tell about lucky people, couples, siblings and families who have won multiple big jackpots or who, as in the above example, have won on their first attempt.

*Theme I-4: A Stroke of Luck*

*Example: 'Writing error led to a record win in Vetlanda' (Dagens Nyheter, 13 August 1996)*

A woman made a writing error when she filled out a Lotto coupon, threw it away and filled out another one. She subsequently won SEK 43.6 million in the auxiliary Joker game, the numbers of which are pre-printed on the Lotto coupons.

Some articles tell about people who have had incredible luck without being regarded as especially lucky themselves or as patronizing a lucky shop. Luck just strikes out of the blue. As in the above example, a writing error when filling out a coupon may result in a win, or an absent-minded person may enter the same lotto or keno numbers twice, thereby winning two huge sums of money rather than just one.

*Theme I-5: Instability of Luck; Fate*

*Example: 'First robbed—then he won a car!' (Expressen, 5 February 1997)*

This newspaper story tells how the owner of a kiosk was robbed by a masked man armed with a knife. Later that evening, in an attempt to 'forget about the misery of everyday life', the kiosk owner watched the BingoLotto TV show. He won a new car worth SEK 180,000.

*Example: 'Million winner had a guardian angel at road accident' (Göteborgs-Posten, 15 January 2000)*

A man was driving to the trotting track to collect a win of more than one million SEK. His car slid, crashed into a truck, turned over several times and was totally wrecked. The winner, however, escaped without serious injuries.

*Example: 'Won 350 millions—then Cynthia's life became a nightmare' (Expressen, 7 August 2001)*

In Las Vegas, a waitress won the world's biggest win ever on a slot machine, almost US\$35 million. Six weeks later she was hit by a drunken driver and became paralysed from the arms down to the toes.

Occasionally, the lottery win is preceded or succeeded by dramatic events. Most often, as in the two first of the examples above, things turn out well. Other stories of this kind tell, for example, about a lost lottery ticket that the winner manages to rescue from the trashcan just before it is emptied into a garbage truck or from a dog that is about to eat it. Luck appears to be fickle, or perhaps the notion of fate is suggested. A mystical balance of fate—or some supernatural agency—put things right when someone suffers badly (the first example), or fate is correcting the course of a life that, for a brief moment, deviated from its predestined path

(the second and third examples). Articles telling sad and tragic stories, such as the third example, are few, and those found in this study all concern lottery winners in foreign countries, winners who by a cruel freak of fate are badly hurt or die shortly after hitting the jackpot.

*Theme I-6: Luck, Destiny, and the Occult*

*Example: 'The fortune-teller's tip: this is how you become a millionaire' (Expressen, 18 November 1999)*

An instant lottery ticket win qualified a woman to participate in a TV show. There, she had to choose between lottery tickets in a box, some of which would give her a big prize and others a *very* big prize. Before the draw, she consulted Heikki Vesa, a Swedish fortune teller of some renown, regarding how to pick a top prize ticket. He advised her to look for irregularities in the row of tickets in the box. His advice turned out to be good, and the woman won a top prize of SEK 3 million. Heikki Vesa was interviewed, and he disclosed that he tells fortunes using cards. He claimed to have helped several other people win jackpots. Unfortunately, he cannot get rich on the lotteries himself, since his own desires block the occult capacity to look into the future. The reporter asks for winning Lotto and football pool numbers for the readers, which Vesa supplies. (These numbers did not, however, win.)

Now and then articles are published that tell about jackpots that people believe they won because of magic and occult influences. The win may have been foretold a long time previously, as being part of a person's destiny, or the winning numbers may have been selected by magical means or revealed in dreams.

*'Could this be Mere Chance ... ?'*

There are virtually no studies on the Swedes' beliefs in luck and the occult, but it appears that there are different views among the population. Some people do not believe at all in such things, while others have firm beliefs. Presumably, the majority have 'half-beliefs' (Campbell, 1996): in other words, when asked, they say that they do not really believe in phenomena like luck, fate and the occult, but nevertheless such ideas enter their minds in certain contexts. For example, a person may choose 'lucky numbers' when playing Lotto, while at the same time acknowledging that chance alone will determine who hits the jackpot. This may seem paradoxical, but is what can be expected: human thought processes are not uniform, but operate on various levels of rationality and intuition and are dependent on context and motivation.

Beliefs and half-beliefs in luck and the occult are thus held by many Swedes and the newspaper reporting described above provides food for thought in these matters. People can read about amazing coincidences, lucky stores, lucky people and incredibly lucky events in connection with jackpot wins. They can also read about misfortune turned into good fortune, or conversely, good fortune turned into misfortune, stories that raise questions about destiny and an eventual higher meaning of dramatic and life-changing events. Two hundred years ago, Swedes listened to and retold proverbs and folktales on such topics. Today, they can read



about jackpot winners and ask themselves: could all this be mere chance or are other forces at work in this world than simply those that science acknowledges?

## **Conclusions**

This paper has described and analysed newspaper coverage of jackpot wins and winners. People like to read and discuss such stories. Stories similar to those described here are told and retold in Sweden in every betting shop, at every trotting track and in every other place where people gather to gamble.

People like to read and talk about jackpot wins and winners because stories of persons who have had their lives changed in an instant are exciting and thought-provoking. Such stories are about extraordinary occurrences that could well happen to oneself. At the same time, these stories provide food for thought in relation to a number of fundamental human and social questions.

'The wealth as a test' topic concerns the challenge that sudden wealth brings to a person. Would it perhaps be best for some people to remain poor? What does it take to successfully transform oneself from being poor to being rich, and what are the challenges involved? This topic has for long fascinated people, as is evidenced by its presence in folktales of enchanted treasures. Also fascinating are reports of people who do not spend their jackpot millions: are they perhaps doing the right thing, not altering a life that they already perceive as good?

The second topic—the social impact of money and wealth—has been debated since antiquity. A jackpot win may bring freedom and happiness, but it may also cause greed and discord. The stories about jackpot winners vividly illustrate diverse impacts of money and wealth on social relations.

The belief in a 'just world' is an intuitive idea based on a sense of fairness: good people will be rewarded and bad people punished. Jackpot winners are easily used to illustrate this belief, since many of them are, like people in general, quite honest, diligent and friendly. Not only does the jackpot win constitute a reward for goodness, it emerges also as a blessing for those in needs: if some poor family hits a jackpot, this angle is invariably emphasized in the story.

These notions of the deserving winner come close, through association with the concept of blessing, to ideas of a religious nature. The fourth cultural topic—luck and the occult—include magico-religious notions. Is there only chance in lotteries, or is there luck: a quality of people, places and moments that has a mystic and favourable impact? Do people have a predestined fate? Can the future be foretold? In modern societies, gambling seems to fill part of the void left by the decline of formal religion and traditional folklore (Binde, 2007). Gambling stimulates magical thinking and offers hope of happiness through a material, rather than spiritual, blessing.

Myth and folktale in their traditional forms are largely gone. Today, it is in popular culture and in news that we find the archetypal stories, telling of love, fate, reward and punishment, the struggle between good and evil, and of all the other things in life that human beings are inclined to think about and discuss (Lule, 2001). News about jackpot winners appear especially rich in such archetypal imagery, presumably because gambling in itself relates to magico-religious notions and because hitting a multi-million jackpot raises existential questions about what makes life good.

This has been a preliminary exploration of the cultural meanings of Swedish newspaper reporting on jackpot winners. Several of the subjects discussed could

be illuminated by further research. Comparative studies of mass media reporting in different countries would reveal contrasts and similarities in how the social and moral consequences of winning huge sums of money are represented and in views on luck and destiny. Studies based on interviews and focus groups could tell more about the everyday discourse on jackpots wins, and thereby uncover motivations for gambling relating to its social and cultural significances.

As suggested in this paper, newspaper reporting on jackpot winners can be seen as structured by symbolic and cultural meanings, and in that respect comparable to traditional myth and legend. This suggestion could be developed analytically in several directions. In particular, an analytic comparison between stories about jackpot winners and treasure tales would be interesting. In Southern Europe, tales of buried treasures seem to be part of a more comprehensive myth system, including also legends about the origins of the relics, statues and paintings of local patron saints. These venerable objects are the focus of local religion, identified with the saint in person, and typically regarded as the most valuable treasure of the local church. The objects are often said to have been found buried in the countryside, being discovered in miraculous circumstances by innocent and altruistic persons who bring them to the community, where their saintly blessings benefit the people (Binde, 1999, ch. 8). There are thus two kinds of buried treasures, with inverted meanings. There is the enchanted and cursed treasure, associated with the devil, greed, materialism, individualism, death and destruction, and there is the sacred treasure, associated with God, altruism, spirituality, the community, life and blessings. In the dualistic worldview of popular Roman Catholicism, the imagery of wealth is thus split into two opposing forms. To situate modern discourse on jackpot winners within such comprehensive cosmological structures would not only tell about views on gambling and wealth, but also more generally about ideologies and religious notions.

What, then, is the effect of the hundreds of newspaper articles on jackpot wins and winners that are published every year in Sweden, and of frequent discussions of such matters? It is very likely that this attention increases the willingness to participate in gambling, that it makes gambling more attractive. Gambling is made a topic of conversation, which makes it a shared interest; from shared interest to shared activity is a short step. Gambling emerges as fascinating and thought provoking, and gambling activities, some of which are quite trivial in themselves, acquire shared and multifaceted cultural meanings. Some of these meanings imbue gambling with a transcendent quality: when one is gambling, events may occur that can be interpreted as transcending the ordinary by being mysterious or involving luck or fate. This transcendent quality also allows some people, who have hit the jackpot, to transcend their former ordinary lives and start at 'new' life. In short, gambling becomes rooted in social relations and culture.

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