Introduction

Sociologies of Problem Gambling

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In June 1975, one of us chaired a session of presentations at the second annual Conference on Gambling, which was organized by Bill Eadington and held at the Sahara Hotel on the South Shore of Lake Tahoe. There were several very important “pioneers” who were part of this session—one might even call them luminaries, in retrospect. The most luminescent was Robert Custer, MD, now widely seen as the father of the field and the most important force in having problem gambling included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

In that session, Custer spoke of his work at the Brecksville VA and the treatment facility for problem gamblers he had established there. Four participants in his residential treatment program also presented. Custer shared his then widely scorned and disbelieved hypothesis that problem gambling was a parallel cousin of drug and alcohol addictions. He was quite certain that what was then referred to as “compulsive” gambling had significant physiological as well as psychological components. In response to a question from one of the yet to be converted in the audience, Custer said yes, it had been his experience that some of his patients at Brecksville underwent withdrawal from gambling, and wasn’t that, after all, the very definition of a physiological addiction?

To say that a significant majority of the audience was not convinced would be both accurate and charitable. To say that Bob Custer was in any way dissuaded or intimidated would be missing the point completely. Custer was convinced of the validity of his observations even if many others were not, which in hindsight seems to be a less than solid endorsement of the peer review process.

At that same conference, several other leaders in the then infant field of gambling studies had combined their efforts to draw conclusions (from an N of 1, as it turned out) that seemed to be received as more credible than those of Custer, if only slightly more so. One presenter reported that a patient claimed that she was addicted to blackjack and would routinely and repeatedly reach sexual climax while playing the
game. Freud was fully resurrected that day on the shores of Lake Tahoe and somewhat enthusiastically endorsed by those peers in attendance (who did not seem to be troubled by the statistical whimsy of accepting $N$-of-$1$ interpretations). Perhaps this, too, was a less than stellar endorsement of what would then have qualified as peer review.

Today, as the “peers” who review and produce the literature in this young field have grown in numbers and in quality, we again wish to argue for systematic and research-based approaches versus less systematic ones. Despite its bashers and its warts, the spirit and systematic approaches of scientific thought and method remain, in our view, the best hope for those wishing to enhance and expand our knowledge of this field.

### Adding Sociology to the Tool Chest

Every cobbler thinks leather is the only thing, and for better or worse, I am a sociologist. (C. Wright Mills, 1959, p. 19)

As Mills suggests, researchers in all fields succumb to the temptation of locating the best explanations for their subject (surprise!) in the field in which they received their training. Geneticists tend to find their explanatory framework to be the most appealing, psychologists usually deem the mind and its related functionaries the most vital indicator, and sociologists often gravitate toward groups and systems of a variety of sizes.

But of course, in life, leather is not the only thing. In this volume, we seek (simply?) to “add sociology” to the list of secrets and causes of gambling problems. We do not seek to replace other perspectives—but we would like it if these contributions help readers look at their own perspectives in new and critical ways. The authors in this volume provide sociological tools that ideally may complement those perspectives and voices that are more loudly heard in the field of problem gambling studies.

Most of the increasing number of conferences that pertain to problem gambling demonstrate the dominance of psychological, psychiatric, and medical interpretations of these behaviors. Despite the fact that sociological factors dramatically influence gambling behaviors (it seems obvious, after all, that problem gamblers in Las Vegas find themselves in a very different sociocultural place than do those in, say, Latvia or La Paz), few sociologists contribute these perspectives to the current academic debates on problem gambling. It need not be the case that those with psychological training present the sole voices of expertise in these debates, of course.

Historically, sociologists have only rarely engaged the lives of those who gamble too much. Edward Devereux (1949) was the first sociologist to examine what he
termed a “circle of despair” in a study of racetrack and numbers players. Devereux noted that gamblers provided all sorts of rationalizations for why they knew certain horses would win (even when they had not placed a bet), and these narratives were shared with a group of fellow gamblers at the racetrack.

Livingston (1974) and Lesieur (1976) were among the first sociologically oriented researchers to explicitly examine the group we now label “pathological gamblers.” Livingston observed problem gamblers at racetracks and at Gamblers Anonymous meetings, and Lesieur spent time with them at Gamblers Anonymous meetings. Both authors interpreted “compulsive” gambling from a “career” perspective: Livingston emphasized the encapsulation and commitment to gambling, whereas Lesieur’s focus was on pathways to illegal activity. Lesieur went on to found the influential Journal of Gambling Studies, the first and still most prominent journal in the field.

Livingston and Lesieur’s trail was memorably followed by Rosecrance (1985), who took readers to the social worlds of off-track betting parlors. A passionate gambler himself, Rosecrance resisted the notion that problems could emerge from the gambling act. Although recognizing that “juggling participation” meant excluding the spouse and family, he seemed to belittle the arguments and family disruption that existed outside the social world of gambling.

Soon after these pioneers arrived on the sociological scene, the gambling environment began to change in dramatic fashion. Gambling went from an activity that was best bracketed within certain “deviant” environments to a pastime that might be more properly labeled today as a national (and international) one. The gambling saloons and racetracks that once dominated the gambling scenery gave way to a more machine-ized gambling environment. Whatever might be said of this change, it is notable that the gambling environs of yesterday were, at the very least, more oriented toward group interaction than many of today’s. Of course, gambling is not unique in this regard: Most all of our recreational activities (yes, even that one) have incorporated machinery and technology into their parameters of play, and most all of our recreational activities (yes, again, even that one) are arguably more solitary in nature than they were before.

Though we cannot say that the “desocializing” of the gambling act led to the kinds of problems we now label pathological, sociological perspectives on the social can shed some light on these phenomena. Gamblers and problem gamblers, like all of us, interact with spaces, places, and people who are all affected by—and in turn affect—their social worlds. For the gambler with severe problems, these social worlds often take a turn for the chaotic and the painful, and their interactions, of course, reflect and shape these shifts.

We might now turn our attention to a few ways in which a sociological perspective may bring insight to the gambling worlds of today. In this volume, Bo Bernhard starts by establishing some of the important sociological-historical roots of problem
gambling—and finds that they are located in moral rather than medical discourses and in pulpits rather than podiums. Gerda Reith then develops an outstanding theoretical framework to reveal a series of insightful problem gambling applications for some of sociologists’ most potent and current theoretical tools. This work represents what sociologists have come to call “praxis” as it was meant to be. Matt Wray and Rachel Volberg then take that most common of sociological units of analysis—the group—and look at demographic variables to determine whether and how they might inform our thinking about this population. Fred Preston, Paul Shapiro, and Jennifer Keene examine a data set that explores the problematic gambling habits of a different group—older adults—and add gerontological perspectives to sociological ones. Garry Smith and Colin Campbell provide a highly critical perspective on the developments of gambling in Canada and the social, sociological, and policy implications of these developments. Bo Bernhard then concludes by speculating on the merits of a sociological imagination as a clinical tool—one that can perhaps, looking forward, complement the more hands-on approaches of psychology.

In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond’s (1997) Pulitzer Prize–winning research famously revealed that the reasons European natives colonized and dominated North American natives—and not the other way around—could be located in sociogeographical “head starts” rather than in cognitive capacity or other individual-level traits. These directions of domination, then, demanded larger-than-psychological explanations. These shifts were in fact profoundly influenced by social geography—factors far “bigger” than the more immediate (genetic and/or psychological) factors that were traditionally considered in Diamond’s field.

In the young field of problem gambling studies, we also tend to focus on the immediate over the distal (one wonders whether this is ironic or predictable, given that the subjects of our study often succumb to the very same tendency). As a result, we often speak of “family problems” or “work problems” without ever considering the sources of the social judgments inherent in those kinds of discord. We hear of a bio-psycho-social model that stops short of incorporating sociology to the latter end of that scale. We treat “shame” as an important unit of analysis (and no doubt it certainly is), but we do not stop to consider the ultimate causes of that socioemotional state—whether shame “comes from” communities and not only from individuals.

It is our hope, then, that this volume provides a modest contribution to the larger factors that shape the social worlds of gamblers and their problems. We would like to thank all of the contributors for their enthusiasm: Without exception, all of them wholeheartedly endorsed this project and then ran with their respective topics, and the result, we hope, is one that is as energetic as it is thought provoking. Ultimately, and as is perhaps appropriate given the field that these articles represent, this was very much a group project and one that has humbled the sociological sensibilities of its project editors.
References


