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40

THE SOCIOLOGY OF GAMBLING

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The size and scope of legalized gambling—to put aside its illegal manifestations for a moment—are simply mind-boggling. In America, for instance, more money is legally spent on gambling than is spent on movie tickets, theme parks, sports events, and music events combined (Morais 2002). Of course, sociologists have spent a substantial amount of productive research time examining the vast sociocultural impacts of Hollywood's movies, and the field has developed an impressively broad literature on the sociology of leisure and sport. Furthermore, sociologists of popular culture have studied the sociological reach of a music culture that today encompasses everything from Mozart to MTV.

Meanwhile, the gambling industry now dwarfs these more familiar sociological subjects, at least in the economic sense. Gambling also constitutes a formidable political entity: As of this writing, 48 of the 50 U.S. states offer some form of legalized gambling (Utah and Hawaii stand as the lone holdouts). Just as strikingly, a somewhat similar proportion of international jurisdictions are also embracing legalized gambling (or considering doing so).

Of course, gambling activity has probably been around as long as human groups have been around (the phrase "rolling the bones" harkens back to an era when playing dice games meant exactly that). Nor are the activity's intimate linkages with government new: In the United States, for instance, lotteries were legalized in the colonies by 1750. City governments, churches, jails, public utilities, road repair, and institutions of higher education, including many Ivy League schools, were financed by these lotteries (Rosecrance 1988).

However, at no time in human history have more types of gambling been more widely available to more human beings than they are today. In light of these observations, it would seem that sociologists everywhere might devote their tools to help advance our understanding of those of us who wager money on events whose outcomes are in doubt.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GAMBLING

Some of the earliest writings on gambling were not specifically sociological, but they certainly invoked themes familiar to today's sociologists. For instance, because gambling was seen as undermining the very foundations of the Protestant ethic, it threatened those who were passionately protective of the latter in predictable ways. In 1883, Anthony Comstock warned that "the promise of getting something for nothing, of making a fortune without the slow plodding of daily toil, is one of Satan's most fascinating snares" (p. 56). For many, gambling's insidiousness offended social and moral sensibilities more than other scourges of the day such as alcohol.

In his pioneering study, Edward Devereux (1949) lamented that sociologists had neglected the study of gambling, given its ubiquity and institutionalization. Devereux viewed gambling within the context of functionalist theory,

suggesting that wagering behavior had societal implications beyond the individualistic and pathological approaches that seemed to dominate then—and indeed, continue to dominate studies of gambling behavior today. Given the sociological frameworks popular in his time, it was perhaps predictable that Devereux explored the act as a safety valve that relieved stress and strain generally emanating from the restraints and rationality of a capitalistic system. In addition, Devereux also felt that dominant values were reinforced with admonitions against gambling and other deviant behaviors (p. 946).

Of course, it was recognized that gambling can also be dysfunctional, as Bloch (1951) pointed out, creating problems for family, work, and personal life. Much of the early nonsociological work on gambling behavior focused on the dysfunctional effects that gambling has on both the gambler as well as those close to him or her. This perspective coalesced in the field of psychology into a vast literature exploring treatments for gambling pathologies. Even sociologists were not immune to this impulse: Herman's (1967) study of racetrack betting used this more or less pathological framework for his analysis, as did Zola's (1963) research on offtrack betting.

In the early days of the field, legalized gambling was rare, and illegal gambling was widespread. As such, many of the first studies of the gambling act tended to employ a more or less criminological framework to interpret these behaviors. For instance, Tec's (1964) study of football betting in Sweden found that bettors were more likely to be employed, upwardly mobile, and motivated to achieve. They did not appear to be alienated or detached—contrary to what anomie theorists would predict. Other analysts presented evidence to support opportunity theory and anomie, demonstrating that those with available avenues of advancement and lower levels of status frustration were less likely to gamble (Li and Smith 1976). Studies by Light (1977) and Newman (1968) did not find that relative deprivation motivated gambling activity, particularly within the lower class. Instead, gambling was interpreted as a communal or shared activity with important cultural meanings. Downes et al. (1976) found that gambling was not peculiar to the lower class but was found across all categories of the social structure—that is, across racial, class, and occupational divides.

Not all studies of gambling focused on the financial "losers" who constitute the majority of gamblers. One interesting sociological research piece explored the familial, social, and professional changes confronted by lottery winners—a scenario that many of us have no doubt contemplated (Kaplan 1978). This was the first systematic study of gambling's "winners"—all of whom had come away with a prize of one million dollars or more. In his work, Kaplan found that relationships transformed in significant and unforeseen ways, and that many winners found that they could not maintain their prior institutional or organizational affiliations.

Against this background, the sociologist Henry Lesieur's work emerged as a pioneering contribution to our understanding of the ways in which social networks and communities affect gamblers' lives. Lesieur (1977) sought sociological explanations for problem gambling in his groundbreaking study of the career of racetrack and sports bettors—a work that established him as a pioneer of this emerging area of sociological inquiry.

In fact, Lesieur's work was so influential that despite his background as a sociologist, he was asked to play a central role in defining the American Psychiatric Association's criteria for pathological gambling (see American Psychiatric Association 1994). Lesieur observed that many problem gamblers found themselves entangled in an effort to try to win back losses—or "chasing"—a characteristic that has since served as a central feature of the diagnostic literature (Lesieur and Custer 1984:149–50; American Psychiatric Association 1994). Later, Lesieur served as the founding editor of the first specialty journal in the field, the *Journal of Gambling Behavior,* later renamed the *Journal of Gambling Studies.* Today, he is widely recognized in mental health circles as one of the founding figures in the field of pathological gambling studies.

CURRENT SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GAMBLING

The sociologists Smith and Abt (1984) argued for a shift from concern with the problematic aspects of gambling to a focus on understanding the activity as "play." In their view, gambling reinforces capitalistic and materialistic American values of self-reliance, risk taking, decision making, and skill enhancement. Furthermore, much like other games, gambling provides an outlet for socialization and cultural learning: From marbles to baseball card flipping, games of chance prepare children for games at a higher level and for participation in American life.

As Goffman (1967) noted before Smith and Abt, character is demonstrated through rituals—including gambling rituals. Thus, gambling might be seen as functional for social order by providing an escape from everyday life while reinforcing existing cultural norms (Smith and Abt 1984; Abt, Smith, and McGurrin 1985:64.)

Today, gambling has "normalized" and may be understood via lenses currently used to study other late-emerging capitalist industries. Reith (2003) points out that

> the gambling industry itself is increasingly owned by a limited number of multinational corporations, concentrated in an oligopolistic market. It is organized in a similar way to other major industries, with market research and advertising strategies designed to identify and target niche groups . . . Modern consumers have a variety of products and experiences to choose from, and an ever-larger and more powerful industry to supply them. (Pp. 19–20)

This "new" gaming industry has attracted a growing number of professional observers, primarily in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe. Most

engage gambling as a subject of sociological inquiry. Noting that sociologists have long focused on the immorality or the sickness of those who gamble too much, Reith (2003) seeks instead to focus on the vast majority of gamblers who engage in gambling for recreation and fun.

In her work, Reith (2003) skillfully contemplates how an "age of chance" has emerged and engaged an age of reason. Long ago, of course, very little that occurred was attributed to mere chance—the gods, after all, controlled virtually every imaginable outcome. In the current context, chance has become accepted—and even commodified—by capitalist economies in the Western world. Looking to the future, Reith senses that a peculiar affection for chance will continue to develop, noting that "at the start of the twenty-first century, life *does* seem to be increasingly insecure," citing market fluctuations, transformations in work life, environmental doomsday scenarios, and the postmodern grappling with truth and certitude as evidence (pp. 182–83). Against these sociological backdrops, Reith astutely notes that gambling serves as "a conduit for chance: an arena in which (chance) appears in an intensified and, more importantly, controlled form" (p. 183). Hence, gambling provides a unique outlet for the impulses that accompany this era. From this perspective, gambling seems less a deviant act than a distilled one: It serves as a microcosm for much that is characteristic of our times.

Methodologically, the field continues to grapple with a variety of issues that are common in many relatively young areas of inquiry. Summarizing the methodological state of the field, Eadington (2003) notes that "it remains difficult to fully comprehend what the evidence is telling us" (p. 32) and later argues that "benefit/cost analysis applied to . . . gaming activities is still a relatively primitive science, primarily because of the difficulties in conceptualizing, observing, and measuring social costs" (p. 46).

Notably, it is a sociologist, Rachel Volberg, who has served as the problem gambling field's leading prevalence methodologist and researcher. Volberg (1996), whose tool of choice for determining problem gambling rates has been the telephone survey, nevertheless insists that multiple methods are preferable to any single one:

> Many of the questions now being asked about gambling and problem gambling cannot be answered by single surveys . . . As we move forward, it will be important to use a variety of methods to provide insights that no single approach can yield. Since all scientific methods contain biases, multiple research techniques (including experimental, clinical, historical, ethnographic and survey approaches) are needed to resolve puzzles and discrepancies as well as to provide a much-needed depth of perception to the field of gambling studies. (P. 126)

Today, it appears that even the medically and psychologically oriented researchers in the field of gambling studies are embracing these broader approaches to theory and method. For instance, a group of influential scholars—all of gambling behavior. Interestingly, this public health approach strikes a chord familiar to sociologists, because it advocates multiple levels of analysis, including those that focus on the individual, group, organizational, and institutional levels (Blaszczynski, Ladouceur, and Shaffer 2004).

GAMBLING AND PUBLIC POLICY

From a policy perspective, what makes gambling different from more conventional industries is the peculiar relationship between government entities and gambling businesses. As Eadington (2003) notes, "Gambling is one of the largest industries whose fundamental economic characteristics are substantially determined by political decisions" (p. 45). To this, we might add that state lotteries exist in a way that allows the government to sell products to its constituency directly and not via a generous tax break or other subsidy. Because of these relationships, government bodies may well find themselves with conflicting interests: On the one hand, they have an interest in maximizing gambling revenues (to sponsor government programs); on the other, they have an obligation to protect the public (some of whom may consume excessive amounts of lottery tickets).

In the United States, the government has been largely content to allow individual states to enforce and regulate gambling within their borders (Frey 1998). In other jurisdictions, national and provincial governments have entered into unique agreements with gaming business operators to offer gambling to native and tourist populations. In some cases, as with Canada, the government serves as a sort of "owner-operator" of casinos. As Rosecrance (1988) envisioned, gambling's widespread acceptance and its partnership with public entities has resulted in its mainstreaming and legitimization—and also its decriminalization.

Recently, gambling has enjoyed unprecedented support from a wide variety of public figures. Especially in more conservative political environments, where uttering the "t word" (taxation) is a sure way to get voted out of office, gambling is often seen as a "voluntary tax" willingly donated to state coffers by participants, who in exchange for their donation receive an entertainment benefit.

At the same time, in jurisdictions across Canada and Australia, for instance, public clamor has resulted in growing efforts among government entities to mitigate the costs associated with this "entertainment." Social movement organizations—most of which are affiliated with religious organizations in some manner—have once again emphasized the downside of gambling, and some jurisdictions have moved to address these critiques. To wit, the Canadian jurisdiction of Nova Scotia recently unveiled a test study of "responsible gaming devices" that have been attached to all gambling machines provincewide. These devices allow gamblers to check the amount of money they have won or lost over given periods of time (a sort of gam-