Problem gambling—a Lacanian Real

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Abstract

The concept of addiction has been criticized for being mainly based on self-reporting in therapeutic and research settings, and that it is functional for people in these settings to report that they are addicted—driven by forces beyond their capacity to control. In this paper, I take this criticism seriously into account and argue that problem gambling belongs to the Lacanian Real, in short, referring to those parts of our existence that might be sensed and even acknowledged, but that never can be wholly grasped. Based on qualitative research of households with reported gambling problems, I argue that neither problem gamblers nor their spouses seem to know why the person gambles and why he or she keeps on gambling even though s/he knows it is damaging. The unknown and incomprehensible aspects of problem gambling (the Real) tend, as part of the gambler’s process of ‘recovering,’ to be repressed and replaced with the concept of addiction. This repression mechanism is observed in other contexts as well, not least in scientific milieux studying gambling, and reflects interests and power in society. Exploring the addiction concept from a critical point of view is necessary to sort truth from myth and make scientific enhancements.

Excessive behavior is a double-edged term, in that it can refer both to excessive behavior that actually occurs and the cultural-historical understanding of this behavior. Excessive forms of behavior have always existed, but the ways in which they are understood have varied among cultures and through history; for example, some behaviors have gone from being seen as “sinful” or “evil” to being seen as forms of addiction (Borch, 2011). In recent decades, the concept of addiction has strengthened its position as the dominant understanding of excessive behavior. According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), addiction is a generic term referring to a number of excessive behaviors which are related to the abuse of stimuli (alcohol, drugs, etc.) and characterized by a particular set of diagnostic criteria. The basic assumptions are that excessive behaviors are activated by the brain’s reward system, and that the rewarding feelings that people experience when they use the stimuli are so profound that they neglect other activities. Since 1995, new types of excessive behaviors have been added to the list of addictions. In the latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V), tobacco abuse and problem gambling were added (APA, 2013). Shopping, sex, using the Internet, or playing video games may be next.

Although most researchers see excessive behaviors as the outcome of both biological and environmental factors, there has been some disagreement about the relative importance of these different factors. Whereas some categorizations, like that of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), focus on neuroscientific explanations, others, like Sulkunen (2015), put an emphasis on the environment, suggesting that culture is a strong determinant of whether or not individuals fall prey to extreme behaviors. As Reinman (2005, p. 316) so neatly puts it: “From birth, human beings are raised inside their culture, and there is no simple way to separate their lived experience from the discursive practices operating in that culture which name it and give it specific shape and valence.”

Another, and, in my opinion, much more fundamental disagreement concerns the concept of addiction and the methodologies on which it is based. One of the concept’s staunchest critics is John Booth Davies, a professor of psychology. In his book The Myth of Addiction, Davies (1992/2009) presents his “functional attribution theory,” in which he criticizes the concept of addiction for being based on people’s self-reporting in therapeutic or research settings. One of his main arguments is that “when people are asked questions about their behavior, it is functional for them to report that they are addicted, forced into theft, harassed by stressful life events, and driven by forces beyond their capacity to control” (Davies, 1992/2009: Prologue x). In recent decades, self-reporting has been supplemented with methodologies such as brain scans and laboratory rat experiments, but basic questions about these remain unanswered: Why do some people’s brains light up while others do not when exposed to the same stimuli? To what extent can the results of experiments on rats be generalized to human beings and natural social contexts? Hence, if we look at the empirical evidence on which
current knowledge of excessive behaviors is based, it is
difficult not to conclude that today’s scientific
methodologies are not able to wholly grasp what these
behaviors really are (e.g., Kalant, 2015).

Hence, even as the concept of addiction continues to
subsume new forms of excessive behavior in western
societies, the scientific community researching these
behaviors seems split. Most studies do not distinguish
between the excessive behaviors as they actually occur and
the dominant, cultural-historical understanding of these
behaviors; they treat the cultural-historical understanding—
that is, the concept of addiction—as if it truly reflects
and does not merely theorize what the excessive behaviors
really are. However, a small body of literature makes this
distinction and questions the scientific basis for the concept
of addiction. In this paper, I will give careful consideration
to the critique of Davies (1992/2009). Based on an analysis
of research data gathered from interviews with couples
where one of the partners has reported gambling problems,
I will argue that problem gambling belongs to what the
French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called “the Real.”
In short, this refers to those parts of our existence that might
be sensed and even acknowledged, but that never can be
wholly grasped. The research questions are: Do the
members of the household know why the problem gambler
engages in gambling and why she or he keeps on gambling
even though he or she knows how damaging it is? If not,
how is this lack of knowledge experienced and handled in
households? Although the hidden and incomprehensible
aspects of “addictions” have been reported in previous
studies (e.g., Heather & Segal, 2015; Rantala & Sulkunen,
2011; Room et al., 2015), they have seldom been the
subject of research. However, some explanations have been
given. For example, in a study conducted by Bjerg (2008,
2009), problem gambling is seen as part of the Real of
capitalism; in my own Ph.D. study (Borch, 2013), problem
gambling is seen as part of the household’s Real.

Emphasizing the unknown and incomprehensible aspects of
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As Lacan’s theories may be unknown to readers, the paper
starts with a brief explanation of the concept of the Real
and one of its most closely related terms, Reality1. The

The terms Real and Reality were originally coined to describe
two orders of the human psyche, but here they refer to the non-
symbolized and symbolized parts of our existence, respectively
(see the next section). In this respect, my use of the terms Real and
Reality has some commonality with Slavoj Žižek’s interpretation
of Lacan’s texts. It should be noted that the Real and Reality do
not correspond to the unconscious and the conscious. Rather, in
Lacan’s view, both the unconscious and the conscious are part of
Reality (Lacan, 2006). Psychoanalysis combined with
neuroscience—so-called “neuro-psychoanalysis”—is today an
approach within neuroscience (see, e.g., Berlin & Koch, 2009) and
in addiction studies (see, e.g., Johnson, 2003). However, to my

next sections describe the methodologies and main results of
the research on which the analysis is based. The main
results are discussed in a concluding section.

The Real and Reality

In contrast to most social scientists, Lacan not only focused
on the symbolized parts of our existence but also paid
attention to those parts that are not perceived, interpreted or
comprehended. Inspired by Heidegger’s term “ex-ist,”
which, in brief, refers to an existence outside or disparate
from “Reality” (Fink, 1995), Lacan named this part of our
existence “the Real.” The relationship between household
members’ non-symbolized Real and symbolized Reality is
illustrated in Figure 1.

Like most excessive behaviors, problem gambling can be
understood in two ways: firstly, as actual problem
gambling—the problem gambling which actually occurs,
and secondly, as the interpretations of this gambling.
Through a process of symbolization, actual realities get
their meaning and become interpreted realities. In
accordance with basic social constructivist and linguistic
ideas, our access to the actual problem gambling comes
mainly through language, which means that actual
gambling which is not formulated by words tends not to be
perceived, interpreted and given meaning. Moreover,
actual gambling that is perceived and interpreted tends to
acquire most of its meaning from context. For instance,
gambling has a different meaning around the family dinner
table than it does in a casino late on Friday night (Helle-
Valle & Slettemeås, 2008).

The Real is placed closer to actual reality than Reality,
therefore the term “Real” (i.e., authentic). The Real is divided
into two subcategories: the Real1, which in this paper refers
to problem gambling that can be sensed but not
acknowledged, and the Real2, which refers to problem
gambling which can be acknowledged, but not
comprehended (Fink, 1995; Lacan, 2006). Even when
problem gambling is part of the Real1, it impacts people’s
Reality—their everyday life and concept of self—for
example, by generating insecurity and anxiety, as
emphasized in this paper, but also by affecting their hopes
and dreams.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the relationship between Real
and Reality is seen as a continuum where actual realities
may be more or less interpreted. Actual realities are seldom
(if ever) wholly comprehended, as there will always be a
remainder that is Real. If questioned, interpreted realities
can return to being Real. Some of these lost realities may,
however, undergo a process of re-symbolization, where
new meanings are born (Borch, 2013). Tacit but shared
meanings, which, for example, are expressed in sentences
like “I know what you mean,” can be both Real and
Reality. Actual realities can be Real for one person and
Reality for another, as would be the case if gamblers kept
their gambling hidden from their spouse.

knowledge, gambling and gambling problems have not, so far,
been studied from this approach.

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two orders of the human psyche, but here they refer to the non-
symbolized and symbolized parts of our existence, respectively
(see the next section). In this respect, my use of the terms Real and
Reality has some commonality with Slavoj Žižek’s interpretation
of Lacan’s texts. It should be noted that the Real and Reality do
differ in the Freudian sense—and that is Real.—I am aware of
the unconscious and the conscious. Rather, in
Lacan’s view, both the unconscious and the conscious are part of
Reality (Lacan, 2006). Psychoanalysis combined with
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The analysis is based on a qualitative study of whether and how the Real was expressed in nine Norwegian households where one of the members, in eight cases the male, had reported gambling problems. The gamblers were recruited via the Blue Cross, a Christian organization which offers group therapy for “gambling addicts,” and PTS (Pårørende til Spilleavhengige), which is a self-help organization for relatives of “gambling addicts.” (The organization has now changed its name to Spilleavhengighet Norge [Gambling Addicts Norway]). Six of the subjects had gambling problems related to slot machines, two to sports betting, and one to horse betting. Six were married or had live-in partners. However, the three gamblers who were not married or cohabiting had all lived with a partner at some point since their problems emerged. In one group therapy session, all current partners joined the gamblers. Four partners took part in the interviews. One partner was interviewed alone. Some key information about the sample is given in Table 1.

Most of the gamblers were ethnic Norwegian, between 30 and 60 years old, and had relatively low incomes. The interviews were conducted by me, the researcher, and took place in the interviewees’ own home (4), cafés (3), or offices (2), for the most part located in Oslo and the local surroundings. The household members were asked to tell their gambling story as freely as possible. When the interviews took place, I was not familiar with Lacan’s theory on the Real. The concept of the Real was thereby not part of the conversation and did not influence the stories told. The households’ stories were first analyzed individually, then compared with each other. More detailed description of the methodologies on which these analyses are based is given in Borch (2013, 2012). The analysis in this paper will concentrate on aspects that are highly relevant for the research questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Education (gambler)</th>
<th>Income source (gambler)</th>
<th>Civil status (# of children living at home)</th>
<th>Main problem gambling activity</th>
<th>Reported gambling debt (USD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Alan &amp; Bibi</td>
<td>35–45 Low</td>
<td>Full-time job</td>
<td>Married (2)</td>
<td>Slot</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Abaan &amp; Zaina</td>
<td>35–45 Low</td>
<td>Social security</td>
<td>Married (3)</td>
<td>Slot</td>
<td>858,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Pamir &amp; Amina</td>
<td>25–35 Mid</td>
<td>Part-time job</td>
<td>Married (0)</td>
<td>Slot</td>
<td>85,800+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Per &amp; Liz</td>
<td>55–65 High</td>
<td>Social security</td>
<td>Married (0)</td>
<td>Horse</td>
<td>171,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Leo &amp; Eve</td>
<td>40–50 High</td>
<td>Full-time job</td>
<td>Married (1)</td>
<td>Slot</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Tom (&amp; Aina)</td>
<td>25–35 Mid</td>
<td>Full-time job</td>
<td>Live-in (0)</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>0–51,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Kurt</td>
<td>30–40 Mid</td>
<td>Full-time job</td>
<td>Single (2)</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>171,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Ben</td>
<td>35–45 Mid</td>
<td>Full-time job</td>
<td>Single (2)</td>
<td>Slot</td>
<td>51,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Gina</td>
<td>25–35 Low</td>
<td>Social security</td>
<td>Single (1)</td>
<td>Slot</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The gambler’s pseudonym is mentioned first. Parentheses indicate the person was not present at the interview with their partner. Note: Dashes indicate that the data were not reported; y = years, ages of respondents are estimated.
The non-knowledge of what problem gambling is seemed to cause an existential insecurity regarding the household’s situation—what it was, how it got to this point, and whether and how it could change in the future. To reduce the harm of the Real, the household members used different strategies. One strategy was to fill the black hole of non-knowledge (the Real) with the concept of addiction. The high acceptance of this concept in research and therapeutic settings as well as in the general population made it easier for the household members to agree on what problem gambling “is” and how it could be solved.

Most couples interviewed for this research project reported that they used to practice traditional (complementary) or egalitarian gender roles. When the problem gambling was discovered, and the spouse realised that the gambler could not have access to money without relapsing, the household members reorganized the household’s practices, putting the household’s finances under the responsibility of the non-gambling spouse. If the gambler needed money, the spouse gave them the exact amount in cash, a practice that is highly associated with the parental custom of giving “pocket money” to children. As the gambler’s loss of financial control and the consequent reorganization of the household practices involved some infantilization of the gambler, the gender roles and the degree of intimacy and respect between the partners changed. (“You do not have sex with your own son. How can you respect a husband who cheats on you?”). The spouse’s power increased; however, as this was a dominance that the spouses did not want, it was not experienced as power, but rather as a form of powerlessness.

At this point in the gambler’s “recovery” process, the problem gambling had the household members’ full attention. If the gambler stopped gambling, the household members intended to reorganize the household back to the way it used to be. As no one really knew whether the gambler would stop gambling, the household waited to see whether the situation would change. For spouses, this condition of waiting implied living two parallel Realities: one non-problem Reality that they shared with the husband they had once chosen as a partner, and one problem Reality that they shared with a “stranger,” the problem gambler. Finding the right balance between these realities seemed important. If they let the non-problematic Reality dominate, they might show too much trust, and the gambler
might relapse. But if they let the problematic Reality dominate, the emotional bond might be weakened, putting the household’s *raison d'être* at risk. A third strategy of the household members was therefore to balance Realities—that is, live as normally as possible, but keep the problem gambling Reality at a bearable distance.

## Concluding Discussion

As observed in previous research on “addictions” (for example, Sulkunen, 2007), this research indicates that gambling problems are often kept secret from other household members. In most cases, the problems are sensed by the spouse, but not acknowledged. In this respect they are a Real. Once discovered, the problem gambling turns into a Real, as it is sensed and acknowledged, but not wholly comprehended. In Western societies, problem gambling is hard to understand. Not only does it break with fundamental norms telling us that we should not spend more on gambling than we can afford to lose, but it also violates our expectations of how rational and responsible people act.

The Real causes an existential insecurity regarding the household’s situation—what it is, how it got to this point, and whether and how it may change in the future. To reduce the anxiety caused by the Real, the household members used different strategies. One important strategy was to “fill the Real” with the concept of addiction. The couples’ use of the addiction concept seemed, in this respect, to be “functional” (Davies, 1992/2009), in that it helped the household members to find a way out together. Although the concept of addiction may have been beneficial for the household members participating in this research, it should be noted that its dominance at the societal level has political consequences that arise from its linking current knowledge of excessive behaviors to the psychiatric and (increasingly) the neuroscientific fields from which it originates. However “natural” it may seem to researchers studying gambling, such a link is debatable and turns a diagnostic manual into a tool of power that is highly determined for the kind of knowledge that will be produced, the kind of expertise that will be developed, and the ways in which these problems will be understood and handled in society (see, for example, the discussion of “medicalization” made by Conrad and Schneider [1980] and Foucault [1961/2001]).

The main conclusion of this paper is that the interviewed household members did not seem to understand why the gamblers engaged in gambling and why they kept on gambling even though they knew it was damaging. The hidden and incomprehensible aspect of “addiction” has also been reported by others, for example by Heater and Segal (2014), Rantal and Sulkunen (2011), and Room et al. (2015); these researchers did not see it as a Lacanian Real but as a “passion without a name” (a term borrowed from the French semiotician Eric Landowski, 2004), an “akrasia” (the state of acting against one's better judgment), and a “mysterious force,” respectively.

Another key observation in this research on Norwegian households is that the black hole of non-knowledge caused by the non-symbolized part of problem gambling tended to be repressed and replaced by the concept of addiction as part of the gambler’s recovery process. This mechanism of repressing the Real is also observed in other contexts, not least in scientific milieus studying gambling. In light of Davies’ (1992/2009) attribution theory, it might be argued that the repression of the non-symbolized part of problem gambling is functional in terms of serving people’s interests in therapeutic or research settings. Inspired by the discourse theories of Michel Foucault we might, however, take this functional view a step further, and argue that the repression of the non-symbolized part not only serves the interests of problem gamblers but also of other “social entrepreneurs,” including the gamblers’ immediate families, therapists, researchers, politicians and the press, thereby creating and strengthening the concept of addiction. On the one hand, we might ask what would have happened if addiction had not become the dominant concept it is today. Would problem gamblers have been more morally condemned than they are currently? Would their immediate families be less supportive? Would therapists not treat problem gambling? Would researchers have more difficulty getting research funds? Would politicians lose a chance to demonstrate political vigor? Would the press have lost an opportunity to realize their *raison d'être*, that is, to give vulnerable groups a voice and hence, in the name of democracy, fight for their rights against repressive political and economic forces (Borch, 2006)? On the other hand, just as importantly, we might ask whether stronger theories would have provided the basis for new and more efficient methods of treatment if the non-symbolized part of the problem gambling had come to expression more frequently. Most likely, a replacement of the concept of addiction would have changed the existing structures of interests and power in society. The question is: for better or worse?

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## References


Concluding Discussion

Acknowlegements


