

Gendering the Problem Gambler

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About 50,000 people are daily gamblers in Sweden (Spelinspektionen 2021), and while the turnover of gambling companies amounted to 26 billion SEK in 2021, the average Swede loses almost 3,000 SEK/year gambling (Folkhälso-myndigheten 2022). Nowadays, gambling is seldom discussed as sinful. Instead, it is seen as a commodity like any other on the one hand and as potentially addictive and as a medical problem on the other, a dynamic described by Borch (2012; see also Reith 2007) as an interplay between market and medical discourses. Discursive perspectives are uncommon in gambling research, and discourse analyses of how gamblers make sense of their gambling are even scarcer.

A little-observed aspect of the dynamic between market and medical understandings of gambling is that they are gendered. The market discourse produces the gambler as a controlled and rational consumer, characteristics intimately connected to masculine positions (Lloyd 1993). Meanwhile, the medical one produces the gambler as irrational, dependent, and as potentially out of control (Reith 2007). In this article, I use interviews with Swedish gamblers to point to a fundamental instability in discourses around gambling and to discuss the genderedness of this dynamic.

Background

Gambling research has a history of gender-blindness (Mark and Lesieur 1992). Nowadays gender is increasingly included as a variable in quantitative research, which has demonstrated that men prefer games of skill, gamble more, and spend more money gambling than women (Svensson 2013). Qualitative research of gambling and gender is scarce, but Cassidy (2014) and Wolkomir (2012) show that masculine positions are produced interactionally in gambling through the foregrounding of mathematics, logics, control, knowledge, risk, and aggressiveness. This connects to western conceptions of masculinity (Lloyd 1993); white men have been seen as the only ones capable of rational thought, while women, people of colour, the disabled, and the working classes

have been connected to irrationality, emotion, and the body (de Boise and Hearn 2017). How this dynamic plays out in gambling needs more scholarly attention, especially in the Swedish context, where this has hardly been discussed (although see Goedecke 2022).

Gambling has often been studied within medical, psychological, or public health context, but a growing body of research examines lived experiences and ideologies of gambling (e.g. Walker 1996; Borch 2012; Cassidy 2014). Historical shifts in how gambling is viewed, from vice or sin to commercial entertainment, demonstrate gambling's socially constructed nature (MacMillen 1996) and point to the relevance of discursive perspectives when studying it. Several researchers have noted that gambling is viewed as risky, problematic, and potentially addictive on the one hand and as a harmless commodity on the other (Reith 2007; Borch 2012). Differently put, medical and market discourses compete for hegemony in the discursive field of gambling (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), struggling over what gambling is, what its problems are, and how they should best be solved. Such a tension can be expected to influence meaning-makings around gambling, that is, talk where gambling is described or explained (e.g. Wetherell and Edley 1999). This field of tension and how it takes shape in contemporary Sweden is explored in this article.

The market and medical discourses are entangled with capitalism. Reith argues that subjects are required to “consume, to give in and abandon themselves to the pleasures of self-fulfilment” *and* “to exercise self-control and restraint” (2007, 40), a contradiction that produces an idea of a sovereign consumer, able to indulge in gambling but also to control it. This understanding of the consumer renders excessive gambling incomprehensible, which paves the way for a medicalised view of the problem gambler as uncontrolled, irrational, dependent, and risk-taking (Reith 2007). While the genderedness of this dynamic has so far been overlooked in research, the parallels between the sovereign consumer and rational, controlled masculine positions are noticeable.

Method and Material

The article draws on in-depth interviews with 14 gambling men, conducted in the spring of 2021. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, 13 of 14 interviews were conducted online. The interviews, 35–90 minutes long, were transcribed verbatim by the author. The study was approved by the Swedish ethical review authority (no. 2020-05017).

The interviewees were recruited through advertisements posted online and in local betting shops, grocery stores, universities, and libraries, and through my networks and the snowball method. The advertisement asked

for men (>18) who gambled or had gambled but who, importantly, were not problem gamblers.

The interviewees, aged 24–78, were engaged in different forms of gambling and they gambled to varying extents. They lived in small or larger cities across Sweden, and they ranged from working class to upper-middle class. 12 had experience of some tertiary education, all were heterosexuals, and most, but not all, were white and had grown up in Sweden. While their locations, class identifications, and experiences of gambling varied, they were racially and sexually homogenous. A larger sample would undoubtedly have given different insights, but due to the ongoing pandemic recruitment was painstakingly slow.

Discourse analysis was used to interpret the material. Phenomena and subjects are given meaning through discourse in processes that occur also during interviews (Wetherell and Edley 1999). When meanings around, for instance, gambling are articulated, discourses are drawn upon to render these meanings and the speaker intelligible. In this process, certain interpretations of reality are excluded while others are made to seem intelligible, plausible, or even inevitable, which connects meaning-making to power (Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

Analysis

The interviews covered themes such as gambling practices and experiences, feelings about gambling, and how gambling was discussed and represented in the media. Gambling problems were not the focus of the study, but despite this, risks and gambling problems often came up during the interviews.

Problem Gambling as Unavoidable: Entangled Discourses

Several interviewees seemed to understand the topic of the interviews as being really about problem gambling. For instance, after a long discussion with Olof (41), a poker player, about poker hands that he had played, and the psychological and strategic aspects of the game, he commented “that’s probably not what you’re interested in, you are probably looking at consequences of gambling”, the subtext being that these consequences had to do with social and medical problems. Similarly, the whole interview with Dennis (44) was characterised by a reluctance to talk about his poker playing, horse betting, and visits to the casino; instead, he insisted on talking about bridge and chess, and repeatedly stated that “the game doesn’t get any better by betting money”. To Dennis, betting money was diffusely associated with shame and problems, and despite volunteering to take part in the research, he refused to view himself as a gambler.

Olof, and in a more implicit manner, Dennis, assumed that problem gambling was the true topic of my research, much like Lalander's interviewees, who similarly did not accept that the topic of his research project was *not* problem gambling: "accepting to participate in an interview roughly equals saying that one has gambling problems, that is, one feels stigmatised by being asked to participate however much [the researcher] explains that the topic is not problem gambling" (2004, 31, my translation). Olof's comment, Dennis's reluctance to talk about his gambling, and the comments I got whenever I presented the project – that it was actually about "gambling addiction" (*spelberoende*) – can be understood in a similar light. The difficulty of finding interviewees for the project was possibly related to this as well. The topic of gambling – for pleasure or as consumption – was evidently interpreted as so closely related to problem gambling that the two were impossible to keep apart.

Supporting this, several interviewees brought up the topic of problem gambling at random moments during the interviews. For instance, in the middle of a story about how he had been introduced to gambling by his father and their joint visits to the local betting shop, Henrik (35), a poker player and sports bettor, said: "there [in the betting shop] were really these... big gamblers who perhaps didn't have the healthiest relationship to it". Similarly, Gunnar (78), a horse bettor, was describing his betting routine, centred on the Wednesday and Saturday races and daily calls from a relative who shared his interest in horse betting, when the topic of gambling problems came up:

Gunnar: he, however, is, I guess, a gambling addict, because he gambles on everything (KG: right) he starts in the morning, he gambles on [horse races in] Australia and everything and... and he gambles, well... to late at night, on everything there is (KG: wow, aha) he probably gambles for a couple of thousand SEK per day.

After this, we had a lengthy discussion about what Gunnar considered to be a healthy interest in gambling. "[Y]ou need to stay within certain limits", Gunnar said, and emphasised the importance of having other interests beside horse betting.

These stories, and especially the spontaneous way they came up, interrupting narratives about gambling memories and practices, illustrate the discursive closeness between gambling and problem gambling to the interviewees. Notably, the people brought up by Henrik and Gunnar were not discussed as financially reckless; it was not their losses but the "health[iness]" of their relationship to gambling that was the problem. Medical discourses were used in parallel to understandings of gambling as pleasure or consumption.

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They also coexisted in some interviewees' accounts of themselves. Edvin (60), a poker player, told me that he always documented his gambling: "I always note what I do, excel sheets... I want to have control of what I do... I know there is a risk of abuse in the background". Vide (35), a former professional poker player, used medical discourses when discussing the process of quitting playing poker. This process was of a back and forth nature: Vide had repeatedly stopped playing due to the difficulty of winning, not played for a few months, and then begun again, or as he phrased it, had a "relapse":

KG: you are even using the word "relapse". Does it feel like a relapse, or...?

Vide: (laughs) well, I've seen, when I stop playing poker, in that phase, I have felt that poker is not good for my life, due to... well, it's not worth it. And I use the word relapse because I know that it's not really worth it (KG: mm) but I do it anyway... Well, then it's a bit, what definition of addiction do they use... Isn't it something like "it has negative consequences for your everyday life"?

To Vide and Edvin, abuse, "addiction", and loss of control were concepts they used to make sense of their own behaviour, that is, they to some extent understood themselves through the medical discourse of gambling and saw it as applicable to their own lives.

Others used the medical discourse in other ways. Frank (31), a sports bettor, said: "I am not addicted, I stick to my limits, and as long as I think it's fun, with those little sums of money, and as long as I'm open about it, I don't think that there's any danger." Frank had set limits for his gambling but had never even been close to reaching them. Torsten (45), a horse bettor, viewed himself as so relaxed that he had no need for limits:

Torsten: The financial limits are so... that I have defined, or defined, I haven't defined them, I haven't decided any limits, instead... No, I would never risk a lot of money (KG: mm) which is the one thing, and also, I don't spend so much time on it, which also feels like big drawback of gambling (KG: mm), if it takes over your life, a big part, and it definitely doesn't [for me].

Henrik described his own attitude to gambling as ideal:

Henrik: my perspective on gambling is [...] the perspective that many hope that people should have to alcohol for instance (KG: right, exactly) I drink, not to become drunk but to enhance a social experience or for recreation... or to tobacco (KG: mm), or to other stuff, like food (KG: right) moderation kind of, and that you don't [gamble] for the sake of it.

These interviewees used imagined characteristics of the problem gambler to demonstrate that their own gambling was problem-free. The distancing from problem gambling is in itself not surprising. The project was not aimed at

problem gamblers; moreover, problem gambling is a stigmatised, not easily adopted category, and demonstrating awareness of and distance to the problem gambler positioned the interviewees as rational, healthy, and risk-aware – theirs was not a naïve or uncontrolled approach to gambling (see also Wetherell and Edley 1999).

However, the presence of medical discourses illustrates the lack of fixity in the discursive field of gambling (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). While discourses of gambling as pleasure or consumption are influential, medical discourses about gambling as problematic were too dominant to be passed by in the interviewees' stories. According to Reith (2007), the articulation of the gambler as a sovereign consumer produces a distinction vis-à-vis the position of the problem gambler, a distinction that can be seen as an attempt to stabilise these positions. However, my material shows that the discursive field around gambling is unstable; no discourse managed to exclude competing meanings to achieve a self-evident, hegemonic position.

One reason for this instability, I suggest, is the uncertain nature of what gambling is – what do you buy when spending money on it and what are you “addicted” to as a problem gambler? Gambling is organised around the production of desire in itself rather than a desire for a particular commodity, which renders it a “post-commodity” (Young 2010, 258f). Perhaps it can also be called a *post-substance*, described as addictive although it is unclear precisely in what way (Walker 1996), while desire in itself is arguably what is being discussed (Goedecke, Spångberg, and Svensson forthcoming). I suggest that this uncertainty prevents closure in the discursive struggle about what gambling is, which explains the closeness between gambling and problem gambling in the interviewees' narratives.

Vulnerability and Control: Gendered Negotiations

While problem gambling was an integral part of the interviewees' stories about gambling, problem gambling was always associated with other people (even Vide argued that he had successfully quit playing poker, i.e. that he was in control).

Gambling problems and lack of control in relation to gambling were often mentioned in connection with online gambling and chance games:

Frank: You could sit in the car and do it, you could... while you're having lunch... and that what's different with online [gambling], and I realise that for those who are all addicted, they can never get away from it (KG: mm) because it's accessible everywhere.

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Edvin had similar views: “Now we have moved the [betting shop] into our computers, you can sit at home”. Edvin also discussed the time when *Svenska spel* started offering online poker: “It was one of the few places where bettor geezers [*tipsgubbar*] also got access to poker through the same app”. It was easy to win money off these inexperienced players, Edvin said, “but I got a bad conscience, because it felt like there were social catastrophes hidden behind it”. Torsten was critical of electronic gambling machines (EGMs), and even found it questionable that they were allowed at all:

Torsten: At dodgy pizzerias, [in my line of work] I end up in weird small towns sometimes, and pretty often there’s a kind of... And people come in and sit at these... EGMs you know (KG: mm) and just sit and sit you know [...] well, it feels incredibly tragic.

Online gamblers, EGM gamblers, and “bettor geezers” were described as particularly vulnerable by these interviewees. These “tragic” gamblers allegedly lacked control, could not handle the accessibility of online gambling, or did not gamble actively or for the right reasons (“just sit and sit [by the machine]”). Rural people and working-class men (*tipsgubbar* evokes the image of older working-class men with a lifelong habit of betting on football) were mentioned as examples.

The discussions of vulnerability and problem gambling were connected to a critique of the gambling industry, especially gambling advertising. Torsten saw gambling advertising as “deeply immoral”, and Edvin emphatically critiqued it: “above all this stupid-ifying bloody bingo, and these, these casino games that come up, they are... I think they are... *disgusting* as a societal phenomenon”. Frank saw it as “deplorable”, just like other commercial strategies:

Frank: The problem is just that those who become addicted [...] [I heard about someone in the UK] who bet a lot of money and failed, lost a lot of money, then the betting companies invite you to a cup final and say “hey, Ladbrokes will invite you to Wembley to watch these games”, to build some kind of report, well it is really terrible how these things are done! (KG: right) People who really, who think that... Well [they] take these people in so that they’ll gamble, bet even more money and then lose. It’s not good.

For similar reasons, Tommy (40), a poker player and software developer, regularly turned down offers to work on gambling apps:

Tommy: commercial gambling systems can be damaging to the lives of people who play it (KG: mm) and I don’t think I want to support a system that... feeds on potentially addictive behaviours and... damages people’s relationships.

Several interviewees evidently saw gambling as a political issue, and viewed the gambling industry as socially irresponsible. Importantly, understandings of gambling as exploitation were articulated *using the medical discourse*, the exploited being imagined as vulnerable due to potentially becoming “addicted”.

Notably, no one claimed to be vulnerable to gambling advertising themselves. Instead, their views were related to “the third person effect” noted in marketing research, where “people perceive media messages as having a greater impact on others than on themselves” (Youn, Faber, and Shah 2000, 635). This effect is more pronounced when people perceive themselves as experts and when being persuaded by the message would be regarded as unintelligent. The critiques quoted above were expressed in compassionate, not superior terms, but they still positioned the interviewees as able to see through advertising and exercise control which (rural and working-class) others supposedly could not.

In line with this, the discussions of vulnerability can be understood as part of a (middle-class and urban) masculine positioning process as intelligent and in control, and as connected to the “sovereign consumer” (Reith 2007), who can indulge in consumption while retaining control. Denoting the consumer as masculine may startle those familiar with the historical links between consumption and femininity (and production and masculinity) (Kacen 2000). However, developments within capitalism have weakened the link between men and production; nowadays, consumption and consumer culture are for everyone. Additionally, ideas of control, rationality, and the ability to resist temptation masculinise the sovereign gambling consumer.

As a contrast, the vulnerable or “addicted” gambler constituted a looming, ever-present threat to the controlled masculine gambler. In the context of alcohol research, where gender issues have been more thoroughly explored, normative masculine positions have been connected to controlled drinking (Thurnell-Read 2020), while men who become “blatantly intoxicated or addicted” are belittled and feminised (Lemle and Mishkind 1989, 215). Controlled gambling was similarly gendered and contrasted to “addiction” or loss of control (see also Cassidy 2014). To continue the parallel, losing control by “passing out” from drinking involves a loss of self and a dissolving of boundaries (Griffin et al. 2009). While intoxication works differently in gambling, problem gambling was associated with a similar annihilation of the masculine, bounded self, and the take-over of embodied and irrational drives.

Concluding Comments

In this article I have used interviews with Swedish gamblers to demonstrate the instability in the discursive field of gambling in Sweden, expressed through the entanglement of medical and market discourses. I have also initiated a discussion about the sovereign consumer and the problem gambler as gendered figures, a genderedness that I suggest is central to the dynamic between medical and market discourses around gambling.

Highlighting the gendered dynamic between the sovereign consumer and the problem gambler helps us to understand yet another way in which masculine positions become normative and produce differences between the normal/abnormal, healthy/sick, and moral/immoral. Importantly, the connection between the sovereign gambling consumer and masculinity should not be taken to mean that women gamblers could unproblematically embrace the position of the problem gambler, especially as men remain the majority of those with gambling problems all over the world (Svensson 2013). Instead, the point is to regard *the very categories* used in this negotiation as gendered. Most importantly, it shows that masculinity contributes to how we understand gambling, helps to uphold distinctions between consumption and disease, and legitimates and normalises the sovereign consumer, a figure produced by contemporary capitalism. Additionally, the instability between medical and market discourses renders not only problem gambling but also gambling an imminent threat to the bounded, controlled, masculine subject.

On a more general level, the strong presence of the medical and market discourses obscures other analyses of gambling, including those that emphasise the gambling industry's profitability, exploitation of gamblers, and the mutually profitable alliances between gambling industry and states.

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