

Problem gambling—a Lacanian Real

Anita Borch

National Institute for Consumer Research (SIFO)

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 Reinerman (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 he or she 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 problem gambling is an important step towards bringing back the critical debate raised by Davies (1992/2009) and other researchers who have questioned the scientific grounds on which the addiction concept is based. For only by grounding our research in strict, scientific criteria that do not take previous “truths” for granted are we able to sort truth from myth and make scientific advances.

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

¹ 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.

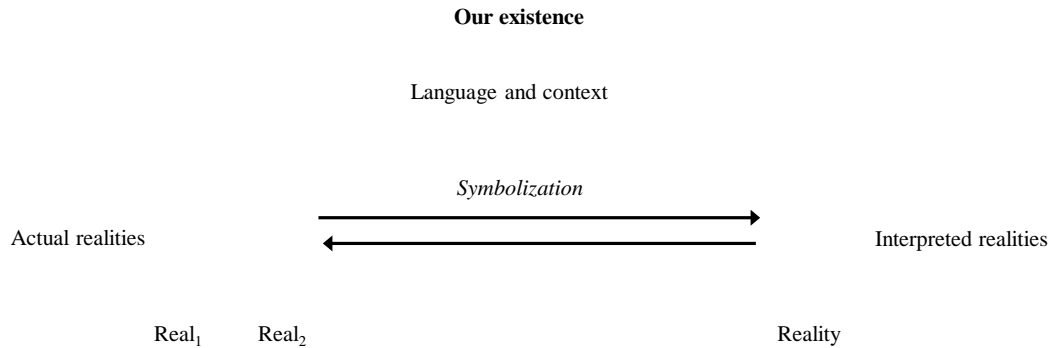
Like most excessive behaviors, problem gambling can be understood in two ways: firstly, as actual problem gambling—the problem gambling which actually occurs, and secondly, as the interpretations of this gambling. Through a process of symbolization, actual realities get their meaning and become interpreted 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, hence 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.

Figure 1
The relationship between Real and Reality



Methods

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 1

The sample

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

¹The 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.

Analysis

According to the interviews, the household members' perception of gambling changed over the course of the subject's gambling career. Most spouses knew that the person gambled, but were unaware of the extent of the gambling. When problems developed, most gamblers kept them hidden from their spouses. Common strategies included lying or utilizing the household's routines or the gambler's right to a "private room," which included a right to have individual "projects" that were not shared by other household members (Borch, 2010: 206). The spouses could sense that something was wrong and that it had something to do with money. There was not enough money to pay for the household's expenses. While some spouses invaded the gambler's privacy and searched their pockets and mobile phones for signs, most spouses neglected the signs and excused them as the result of stress, health problems and such. Like a Lacanian Real₁, the gambler's problem gambling was sensed, but not acknowledged.

When the problem gambling was discovered, parts of the household's Real became indisputable—not to be denied. At that moment, the spouses got their first glimpse into the household's Real: the other side of the gambler; the other side of the household; the other side of their lives. The discovery of the gambling marked the beginning of a long process of recovery, which, in accordance with previous gambling studies, can be divided into different stages (see, for example: Custer & Milt, 1985; Dowling et al., 2007; Franklin & Thoms, 1989). In light of the concept of the Real, the first stage of this process was "the moment of collapse," where the gambler's problems were revealed. The second stage was "the big talk," where the household members cleared the air and decided that the only solution to this problem was that the gambler stop gambling. The third stage was "the backlash," where the gambler relapsed for the first time and the spouse realised that the solution was not as simple as expected, as problem gambling seems to belong to another logic, another way of thinking and acting that cannot be understood by means of Western ideas of "reason" and "rational behavior" (Borch, 2012).

Interestingly, even though the problem gambling was now acknowledged, the gamblers did not seem to know why they gambled, or why they kept on gambling even though they knew how damaging it was.

Researcher: Why do you gamble?

Pamir: I don't know. I have been addicted so long that I no longer know why I gamble.

Researcher: Why did your gambling get out of control right then?

Alan: I don't know. It's strange, isn't it? I was about to marry. It was a happy time.

Researcher: Your gambling seems to have caused a lot of trouble. Why do you keep on gambling?

Lars: I don't know. That is what we're trying to figure out now, my therapist and I.

Nor did the spouses understand why their husbands gambled:

Liz: It is so idiotic. It is like burning your own money. Very few people can understand that. I mean, you can understand that people like gambling, but not that the gambling jeopardizes everything—kids, family. . .

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 $Real_1$. Once discovered, the problem gambling turns into a $Real_2$ 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 $Real_2$ 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), Rantala 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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