

Journal Information

Journal ID (publisher-id): jgi

ISSN: 1910-7595

Publisher: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Article Information

© 1999-2004 The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Received Day: 03 Month: 10 Year: 2003

Publication date: July 2004

Publisher Id: jgi.2004.11.9

DOI: 10.4309/jgi.2004.11.9

***Owning Mahowny* (2003): A gambler without emotion**

Jeffrey I. Kassinove

Affiliation: Monmouth University, West Long Branch, New Jersey, U.S.A.

E-mail: jkassino@monmouth.edu

[This article prints out to about 4 pages.]

Submitted: October 3, 2003. This movie review was not peer reviewed.

For correspondence: Jeffrey I. Kassinove, PhD, Department Of Psychology, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, New Jersey, U.S.A., 07726, telephone: (732)-571-4446, e-mail: jkassino@monmouth.edu.

Competing interests: None declared.

Jeffrey Kassinove, PhD, has studied gambling and other addictive habits (e.g., alcohol use and day trading) in the United States and abroad since 1996. At Monmouth University's Gambling and Addictions Research Laboratory, he has focused on understanding the factors that lead to gambling persistence. Specifically, he has studied both the cognitive and behavioral elements that increase slot machine play. He has developed cognitive scales for understanding attitudes toward gambling as well as tools to assess such mediating factors as illusions of control. He has lectured in Russia, India, and Poland on the problems associated with gambling and is a consultant with St. Petersburg University in Russia. Dr. Kassinove also has a small practice where he treats people who have problems with gambling or drug and alcohol use.

When I was asked to write a review of *Owning Mahowny* directed by Richard Kwietniowski, I did not realize how much luck would play a role my ability to view the film. Following a quick Internet movie search, I learned that not one theatre along the eastern seaboard was showing it—not even New York City where I reside. Yet luck was on my side. In August 2003, I was at a convention in Toronto and a colleague informed me that it was playing at a local theatre. Without haste, I dragged a colleague with me and we caught the matinee.

In many ways *Owning Mahowny* reflects the persistence of a pathological gambler who, like someone addicted to drugs, is motivated by the internal anxiety and

irrational cognitions related to missing a thrilling opportunity. In the present review, I will provide a brief synopsis of the film, insight into the psychological aspects of the film, and my perceptions.

Synopsis. *Owning Mahowny* was inspired by Gary Stephen [Ross's 1987](#) best seller *Stung: The Incredible Obsession of Brian Molony*. It provides an account of a Toronto assistant bank manager, who in the early 1980s embezzled CDN \$10.2 million from the bank where he worked to fund his gambling habit. When the film begins, Dan Mahowny, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, is already heavily involved with a loan shark and betting wildly on various sporting events. In one scene, Dan bets on all of the home baseball teams just so he can have some action. As the film progresses, Dan pilfers increasing amounts of money from the bank to wager large sums of money in Atlantic City and Las Vegas. He becomes a “whale” to casino management and is treated as such, being offered grand suites, prostitutes, and gourmet meals. However, Mahowny has no interest in the amenities afforded to him by his high-rolling behavior. His only desire is to gamble above all other activities such as sleep, spending time with his girlfriend, or sex. In this way, he flawlessly represents an individual who is hooked on an intermittent schedule of reinforcement.

Psychological aspects. Interestingly, when he gambles, he shows little variability in his affect when compared to his work and personal life. He expresses his life with flat emotions, rarely presenting a facial expression of happiness, elation or despair. He always looks bored, an expression commonly witnessed among social gamblers in casinos. He is also persistent, focused solely on the next generating event, and shows little overt change when he wins or loses. Like other pathological gamblers, his disinterest in the money is exemplified when he goes on a “hot” streak and wins millions from the casino. The casino's foot soldier, who follows Dan to fulfill his every whim, advises him to stop while he is ahead. Dan's response is, “I just got here,” which is certainly perplexing to any rational person. Dan completes the characteristics of a pathological gambler by denying his gambling addiction when confronted by his girlfriend, played by Minnie Driver.

Personality disorders abound. In addition to showing flattened affect, Dan Mahowny is portrayed as being emotionally cold and secretive, appearing indifferent to praise or criticism and, often, choosing solitary activities. For example, when he gambles he doesn't like to communicate with people. This cluster is more akin to someone who has a schizoid personality ([American Psychiatric Association, 1994](#)), and is not often associated with pathological gamblers. Yet, he also exhibits behaviors in line with antisocial personality disorder, such as deceitfulness, failure to maintain consistent work habits, impulsivity, and lack of remorse, which are often comorbid with pathological gambling.

Perceptions. In many ways the film accurately depicts a pathological gambler. His

lack of emotion is common for both social and pathological gamblers. However, many pathological gamblers tend to gamble because when they win, they feel increased self-esteem. This character does not overtly reflect this. Instead, I believe that the film overstates the flat affect. When gamblers win large sums of money, they tend to spend it and feel a sense of power, unlike Mahowny.

The end of film depicts the difficulty clinicians have when working with pathological gamblers. After Mahowny is apprehended, he is mandated to receive psychological treatment. During one scene, he is asked to rate, from 1 to 100, the thrill that gambling provides him. He responds “100.” In contrast, he is asked to rate the most exciting event he has ever experienced outside of gambling. He responds “20.” The question remains whether or not he can learn to live without experiencing thrills higher than 20.

Summary. It is unlikely that the film was intended to reflect a pure pathological gambler, for in treatment we often see secondary and tertiary problems. Regardless of the film's lack of complete authenticity in representing a pathological gambler, it was personally moving. Every time Mahowny bet or stole money I felt a huge pit in my stomach. I wanted to jump into the screen and make him stop, suggesting the power of this film.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, D.C.: Author.
- Ross, G.S.. (1987) *Stung: The incredible obsession of Brian Molony*. Toronto: Stoddart.