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Gambling as activity: Subcultural life-worlds, personal intrigues and persistent involvements ¹

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A symbolic interactionist and ethnographer, Robert Prus, PhD (Dept. of Sociology, University of Waterloo; prus@uwaterloo.ca) intends to connect social theory with the study of human action in a very direct, experientially-engaged (community life-world) sense. He has authored or co-authored several books that focus on the ways that people make sense of and engage the situations in which they find themselves. These include Road Hustler (with C.R.D. Sharper); Hookers, Rounders, and Desk Clerks (with Stylianoss Irini); Making Sales; Pursuing Customers; Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research; Subcultural Mosaics and Intersubjective Realities; Beyond the Power Mystique and The Deviant Mystique (with Scott Grills).

At present, Dr. Prus is tracing the developmental flows of pragmatist thought from the classical Greek era (ca. 700-300 BCE) to the present time and is attending to the study of human knowing and acting in a number of areas of western social thought — including rhetoric, poetics, religious studies, ethnohistory, education, politics and philosophy.

Abstract

Although gambling is often envisioned as a disreputable if not also a personally and socially destructive realm of endeavor, this paper approaches gambling as a realm of activity in a more generic, pluralist sense. Employing Henry Lesieur's (1977) portrayal of gambling in *The Chase* as an ethnographic focal point, this

paper not only attempts to “permeate the deviant mystique” that surrounds gambling, but also endeavors to provide a set of conceptual, methodological and textual resources that could inform the study of gambling or other involvements of a parallel sort. Thus, while appreciating the relevance of Henry Lesieur's *The Chase* for the study of gambling more specifically, this statement also draws attention to the contributions (envisioning Henry Lesieur's text as a prototype) that more sustained and detailed ethnographic studies of gambling as activity can make to the broader social science enterprise. In a related way, whereas more intense gambling often is explained as an individual quality (or affliction), this statement examines gambling more centrally as a subcultural process. Thus, gambling is approached as situated, career, fascinated, and persistent instances of activity that can be adequately understood only within a socially constituted life-world.

Introduction

In contrast to those who suppose or claim that gambling is one thing or is characterized by a particular kind of motivation, this paper considers gambling as but another realm of human endeavor that is best understood as *activity*. Thus, while not ignoring or dispensing with the mystique that is associated with gambling or other realms of activity (e.g. drinking, drug use or smoking) in which people's behaviors often are described in compulsive or addictive terms, this statement provides a conceptual scheme that is attentive to the ways that people become involved and develop more intensive involvements and habituations in particular fields of activity as instances of community life in the making.

Those interested in gambling more specifically may find this paper instructive because it brings a larger set of conceptual, methodological and textual resources into the study of this phenomenon. However, it also should be appreciated that the careful, detailed study of gambling as activity can contribute notably to the broader social science venture. Thus, while indicating how the study of gambling may be informed by a more generic analysis of activity, this paper also shows how the study of gambling (especially when approached in the ethnographic style of Henry Lesieur) can contribute substantially to the study of human group life more generally.

In developing this statement, I will be building on Prus and Grills' (2003) *The Deviant Mystique*, ² but will concentrate on Henry Lesieur's (1977) *The Chase* as an ethnographic focal point. While the Prus and Grills text provides the primary conceptual frame within which the present statement is developed, Lesieur's study of racetrack gamblers represents an especially instructive examination of one realm of gambling activity. ³ Still, it is not my intent to review either text in a more

comprehensive sense.

Since all theory makes certain assumptions about the subject matter at hand, I will briefly outline the conceptual and methodological framework that informs the present statement. In a related way, although I am examining gambling as a social scientist, the approach taken here is notably different from the many studies in the social sciences in which analysts ask “why does,” “what makes,” or “what causes” someone to do something. Thus, instead of searching for sets of factors or variables that might correlate with gambling or other problematic matters such as drinking, smoking or delinquency, the present emphasis is on the ways in which people actually engage in the particular activities under consideration. This means attending to when and how people do things, as agents, both on their own and in conjunction with others. The idea is to study the things that people actually do in great detail and to see exactly how they accomplish these activities.

Although Henry Lesieur's (1977) *The Chase* is only one of a much larger corpus of ethnographic studies that focus on the actualities of human lived experience, the conceptual materials outlined here were developed (see [Prus, 1996](#), [1997](#)) mindfully of Lesieur's study of the life-world of race-track gamblers. Notably, whereas Henry Lesieur's *The Chase* may be best known as a study of gambling, Lesieur's contributions to the broader study of human group life (i.e. the study of human knowing and acting) are no less consequential.

Indeed, when situated in more generic terms, as part of a broader analytic consideration of “anyone doing anything,” Lesieur's study assumes a value well beyond its more specific focus on gambling. By developing comparisons (attending to similarities and differences) among studies of people's involvements on various realms of activity such as gambling, drinking, shopping, religion, street or biker gangs or computer-related subcultures, it is possible to use particular studies such as *The Chase* to develop, inform, test and reformulate concepts that have a transsituational or a transcontextual relevance. One also may use these studies as a basis for assessing the adequacy of instances of research conducted in other settings as well as suggesting instructive points of inquiry in newly emergent or ongoing inquiries.

Thus, rather than minimize the relevance of Lesieur's study for those interested in understanding people's involvements in gambling, the present statement extends Henry Lesieur's materials in conceptual terms and helps illustrate the importance of developing ethnographic studies of the sort he has given us in yet other areas of community life.

Establishing the premises

Readers looking for “quick fixes” or simplistic explanations (and solutions) of gambling or other problematic behaviors might prefer to dispense with a consideration of the premises or assumptions that inform the present analysis of gambling or other activities. However, more adequate scholarship requires that we establish a shared frame of reference. The approach taken here is *symbolic interaction* ([Mead, 1934](#); [Blumer, 1969](#); [Prus, 1996](#); [Prus & Grills, 2003](#)), a sociological (and ethnographic) extension of American pragmatist philosophy. In contrast to those who argue that reality is (either) an objective or subjective phenomenon, the interactionists take the viewpoint that humanly known realities are enacted, intersubjective essences. From this viewpoint, things become known (and meaningful) only within the context of ongoing activity and linguistic interchange.

Expressed in other words, things do not have inherent meanings but are identified and given meanings as “objects” as people attend to, name, define and otherwise act toward those objects. Further, although people may envision and act toward particular things in many different ways, it is only in adopting the perspectives of one or more of the groups with whom they associate that people as (purposive) agents may begin to develop lines of action toward particular things that are deemed meaningful within the human community.

It also is in the process of taking on the viewpoint of the (community-based) other and in defining and acting toward things in terms that are considered meaningful to the group that people may begin to see themselves as objects. It is in adopting the viewpoint(s) of their associates that people, as individuals, achieve notions of awareness, reflectivity, agency and self. Likewise, it is in adopting the perspective(s) of the group that people learn that they are both connected with, and yet also somewhat distinct from, others. Thus, it is only as people participate in the language of the other that they become able to act, speak and think independently.

Whereas human activity is characterized by notions of meaning, intention and purpose, along with people's related senses of self and agency, there also is the matter of people coming to terms with the resistances and limitations that they encounter in the physical environment. This includes the presence and activities of other people as well as the physiological and emotional sensations that become defined as meaningful qualities within the group settings at hand. Further, while others may intervene in one's activities in various ways, thereby establishing an ongoing series of collectively articulated contexts, all of the activities in which people engage take place in process terms and are characterized by developmental flows.

Methodologically, the interactionists rely primarily on ethnographic research as the means of achieving “intimate familiarity” with their human subject matter ([Blumer,](#)

1969). Utilizing observation, participant observation and extended, open-ended interviewing, and focusing on the humanly experienced life-worlds in which people do things, the interactionists insist on the importance of examining people's activities in thorough, sustained detail. The emphasis, thus, is on the ways that the people involved make sense of and engage their situations in minded, adjustive, processual, enacted terms.

Although theoretical understandings and methodologies of the preceding sorts are apt to seem reasonable, if not fundamental, to most readers, it might be observed that most research in the social sciences has disregarded these notions in the quest to find factors that correlate with certain outcomes. Thus, in emphasizing such things such as social class, educational levels, religiosity, attitudes, needs and personality types, most researchers and analysts have overlooked the things that people actually do (i.e. the what and how of human group life).

The “hands on” approaches that most social workers, counsellors and others adopting rehabilitative stances to problematic behaviors adopt generally tend to be quite different from those of the structuralist (quantitative) social scientists just referenced. However, case workers and other “agents of control” also have contributed little to the study of human lived experience. Not only are most of their “theories” apt to reflect eclectic mixes of psychology, sociology, moralisms, protectionisms and optimisms, but these agents of control also seldom examine the activities and life-worlds of those with whom they work in careful, open and sustained manners. Counsellors, social workers, and others assuming rehabilitation orientations may be well intentioned and may claim more direct contact with deviance and morality. However, those invoking interventionist stances generally lack the necessary conceptual and methodological resources for studying human behavior in more extended naturalistic and analytic terms and seldom deal with their subject matter in more open, distinctively scholarly (vs. moralistic or remedial emphases) terms.

To learn about gambling or any other realm of human endeavor, researchers require a theory and a methodology that would allow them to study these and related aspects of group life “in the making” in extended detail; to examine the ways that people engage (and experience) the situations in which they find themselves in the “here and now” of ongoing group life. It is here that symbolic interaction, with its ethnographic emphasis on observation, participant observation and extended, open-ended interviewing, has so much to offer.

Still, rather than just pile up a series of isolated studies, one needs something more to make ethnographic research projects more valuable — one requires concepts that are attentive to the enacted features of the situation and yet have a transcontextual or generic quality. Taking this approach enables scholars to locate particular ethnographic studies in comparative, analytic terms. This represents a

clear advantage to interactionist scholarship, with its emphasis on developing more generic understandings of all of the enacted features of human group life. Thus, while focusing on gambling in more immediate terms, the interactionist paradigm allows scholars to develop a more generic, research-informed approach to the study of people's involvements in the life-worlds characterized by these risk-taking ventures.

Although the material following is necessarily cryptic, I will address gambling as *activity*. More specifically, this means focusing on gambling as (a) a community-enabled, (b) situated, (c) career, (d) fascinated, and (e) emotionally-engaged activity. In the process, I will try to be particularly mindful of the subcultures in which gambling activities are more central as well as people's hopes, successes and failures.

While focusing on activity and examining the things people do in detailed, developmental terms, it also is essential that scholars examining activities that have been defined as disreputable or otherwise deemed troublesome or problematic come to terms with “the deviant mystique”:

Given the fears, indignations, intrigues and other dramatizations associated with deviance in the community, it is often difficult for social scientists to approach the study of deviance with the same care and dedication that they might use to examine other subject matters. Nevertheless, the study of deviance very much requires the same sort of conscientious and open-minded conceptual and methodological rigor that one would employ in other realms of inquiry.

In order to achieve this analytical plane, it is necessary to first *overcome or permeate the deviant mystique* – to look past or through the condemnations, repulsions, fascinations and other auras that surround deviance and concentrating, explicitly and intensively, on the ways in which the people involved in all aspects of the deviance process work out their activities in conjunction with others in the community. This requires a scholarly attentiveness to all aspects of human enterprise, including notions of interpretation and definition, activity and adjustment, influence and resistance, intimacy and distancing, control and tolerance, as well as related matters such as cooperation, conflict, compromise, negotiation, and renegotiation.

This is not to deny the importance of “the deviant mystique” as a phenomenon of study, but rather to emphasize the importance of researchers and analysts not becoming personally caught up or entrapped in moralistic or sensationalistic aspects of the sociological puzzle. Comprehending the mystique that surrounds deviance is an

essential aspect of the sociological venture, but an appreciation of this aura is best achieved through a detailed understanding of the community enterprise entailed in the production of deviance” ([Prus & Grills, 2003](#), p. 9).

Whereas Prus and Grills address the processes and problematics of the deviant mystique in some detail, acknowledging the many people who become involved in this essence as well as the implications of the deviant mystique for the study of people's involvements and careers in deviance more generally, the present statement concentrates more centrally on gambling as a realm of involvement. Further, in contrast to those who (a) consider gambling to be a deviant or troublesome endeavor and (b) define and act toward those thusly involved as deviants or troublesome cases, the emphasis here is on examining in nonjudgmental manners the ways that people engage instances of gambling as activity.

Although Henry Lesieur's *The Chase* is primarily a study of horse-race gambling, it also represents a particularly instructive reference point for comprehending other forms of gambling. This would include bingo, poker and other overtly competitive betting events as well as seemingly more solitary gambling involvements such as those associated with the purchases of lottery tickets, playing the slots and electronic online betting. [4](#)

Gambling as community-enabled activity

As with the other things that people do, gambling is best comprehended in terms of ongoing community life. One cannot understand gambling or any other form of meaningful human behavior except within the context of group life. The study of gambling may afford researchers and analysts some valuable avenues for learning about human group life more generally. However, only by learning more about the nature of community life will one be better able to understand gambling as activity and also permeate the “deviant mystique” that enshrouds so much of the speculation, research, analysis and treatment directed toward gambling and other behaviors deemed troublesome in the larger community.

When approached from an interactionist viewpoint, one of the major contributions of Henry Lesieur's *The Chase* is that it examines gambling as community activity. Likewise, to his credit, Lesieur does not vaguely invoke “society” as a (simplistic) causal force but indicates in extended detail the ways in which gambling and gamblers are embedded in a variety of activities and relationships that extend well beyond the immediate settings or contexts in which bets are made.

In a related point, instead of representing gambling as the (mindless) outcomes or

products of certain sociological or psychological forces, Henry Lesieur examines the things that people actually do as gamblers. Thus, while acknowledging the various intrigues, habits, sensations, and emotions that people may experience in the process of gambling, Lesieur also depicts people as acting, thinking, strategizing, assessing, communicating beings who knowingly engage in what he also indicates is a rather extensive, socially constituted life-world.

Lesieur makes no claims about people acting wisely in the longer or shorter terms, but he does show us, in detail, the ways in which people attempt to make sense of and manage the situations in which they find themselves.

That some readers or other people might condemn gambling involvements, say that people should make other choices, or offer “better advice,” does nothing to explain gamblers' lives and activities. Likewise, to say that gambling can be addictive, compulsive or deeply engrossing does nothing to explain the activity. As we know, people have the capacity to become engrossed in, and habituated to, all manners of activities, desires, and objects — from sports, music, television, and the internet, to business, love and religion.

Instead of trying to explain people's behaviors by imposing (external) moralities and rationalities on those involved in particular realms of endeavor, what is required are more direct, open and extended considerations of (a) the particular activities in which people participate; (b) the related life-worlds or subcultures ([Prus, 1997](#); [Prus & Grills, 2003](#)) that people develop around these realms of endeavor; and (c) detailed examinations of the ways in which people's activities and relationships in these life-worlds spill-over or otherwise become integrated into other aspects of those people's lives.

This emphasis on gambling as a community endeavor also encourages scholars to consider the roles that an assortment of other people may assume in developing and sustaining the forums in which gambling takes place as well as facilitating, participating and obstructing people's involvements in gambling activities. Readers may refer to [Prus and Grills \(2003\)](#) for a more extended analysis of the various “theaters of operation” that develop around people's involvements in particular realms of deviance as well as a fuller consideration of the ways in which a wide array of others enter into the activities and life-worlds of those involved in particular discredited ventures. Attending to the life-worlds of racetrack gamblers, Lesieur's *The Chase* instructively depicts some of the parameters of participants' associations with others, such as gamblers' relationships with bookies, loan sharks, spouses and counsellors.

There is much more to be considered about gambling as a broader community-based and enabled realm of endeavor, but it also is essential that gambling be understood as activity “in the making.” By attending to gambling as activity with

situated, career, fascinated and emotional dimensions, it may be possible to develop a framework for studying and comprehending gambling in ways that are more consistent with the things people actually do and experience as gamblers.

Gambling as situated activity

By focusing on gambling as situated activity or as instances of minded behaviors and interchanges that are accomplished in the “here and now” of community life, scholars may locate their research and analysis in the very settings in which things take place. Lesieur's *The Chase* also addresses gambling as a more situated realm of endeavor by attending to the ways in which participants anticipate and prepare for gambling events and forthcoming instances within, as well as the ways in which gamblers define, engage and adjust to the contingencies of the more exacting present, and subsequently make shorter- and longer-term tactical accommodations, mindful of things that have happened in the past.

This attentiveness to situated activity does not disregard people's linkages with others. Thus, even when people become deeply engrossed in particular instances of activity, these instances (as with people focusing intensely on their work or studies, for example) are to be understood within somewhat broader, but still situated frames.

Even the people who seem to be exclusively focused on gambling are still tied into other people in various ways, through money, goods, services, companionship, prestige, and desires for success. As self-reflective beings, people may be able to sustain specific sets of behaviors on their own for extended periods of time. However, it is essential that researchers and analysts be highly mindful of the meanings that the participants assign to their broader circumstances, activities and shifting situations along the way.

It should not be assumed that the first instance of placing a bet has the same meaning as the next one, and so forth; or the first bet at an event is the same as the next or last one. Indeed, as Lesieur observes, it is only after losing and “getting stuck” (experiencing closure and looking for a solution) in either the shorter- or longer-term that instances of “the chase” are apt to be engaged with greater intensity.

Further, not only may people define each instance of betting, winning, losing and any related matters (e.g. companions, money, work) differently as they work their ways through the situations at hand, but participants also may envision any of these aspects of gambling in mixed and possibly contradictory terms. Involvements, therefore, may be seen as possible mixes of desperation, excitement, strategic choices and foolishness. Thus, while it is imperative that analysts avoid assigning their own meanings and moralities (or those of third party

others) to the people involved in gambling in developing explanations of those activities, it also is important that scholars be attentive to the shifting and mixed ways that the participants may define their own involvements and experiences over time.

Likewise, while people may gamble or bet on a seemingly unlimited field of outcomes and may do so in a wide variety of forums, even gambling that is confined to very specific contexts is not one thing. Gambling does not have singular or invariant meanings, even for particular participants.

Although matters of these sorts may seem obvious as Lesieur develops his text, readers may be reminded that these situated, minded, enacted and adjustive features are almost entirely neglected by a great many social scientists and other students of gambling. Indeed, many social scientists, agents of control and members of the general public almost entirely disregard the study of these behaviors in their quest to identify psychological and sociological factors correlated with people's gambling behaviors and/or impose moral and remedial frames on the participants and their activities. Readers will find extended discussions of people's situated participation in both solitary activities and collective events in [Prus and Grills \(2003\)](#), but Lesieur provides a particularly valuable set of illustrations of gambling as situated activity in the race-track setting.

Gambling as career-related activity

People's "careers of involvement" may be seen as consisting of all of the things that participants do with respect to specific fields of activity or an extended linkaging of all of the "here and now" instances of particular sets of activity in which individuals engage. While an appreciation of these instances or the "here and now" occasions in which people do things is essential for a more adequate conceptualization of any field of involvement, it also is instructive to examine people's participation in specific realms of activity in more extended temporal terms.

Thus, whereas people's careers in particular fields of activity may range from the most fleeting of involvements to life-long ventures, we may ask about the ways people become involved in situations and when and how they continue. We also may ask when and how they become disengaged from, and possibly, re-engaged in these endeavors. Like (a) the notion of gambling as a broader community phenomenon and (b) the situated nature of people's involvements in gambling, (c) the career process has been largely neglected by those seeking factor- or variable-based predictions and explanations of gambling or other realms of deviant behavior.

Readers may refer to Prus and Grills for an extended consideration of people's careers in disreputable fields of endeavor in both solitary and subcultural contexts, but students of gambling are particularly fortunate to have Henry Lesieur's *The Chase* as an instructive prototype. Indeed, as Lesieur illustrates at considerable length, the concept of career is pivotal for comprehending people's involvements.

Gambling may be a situated activity but like so many other roles that people might engage over time (e.g. as salespeople, students, parents, scientists), gambling also encompasses an adjustive, learning process. Someone might “gamble” (in dictionary terms) simply by placing a bet on something, but it is another matter to become a more accomplished gambler (i.e. to learn even one technique for bettering one's odds). Likewise, it is another matter, still, to pursue gambling on a more extensive and sustained basis and to manage a life that has begun to revolve around ventures of these sorts. Similarly, the process of disengaging from a pursuit that has become a more substantial part of one's being introduces yet other dimensions into the analysis of gambling, as also does people's tendencies to re-engage activities in which one was formerly heavily involved. [5](#)

Further, if one is to gamble on a more sustained basis, this requires that one engage one or more gambling subcultures in a more comprehensive sense. As indicated in [Prus and Grills \(2003\)](#), people's participation in specific subcultures not only involves participants achieving a fluency with the language of the group and coming to terms with emotionality, but subcultural involvements also encompass the matters of people acquiring perspectives, developing identities, engaging relationships, making commitments and becoming adept at the activities of hand. Although not articulated in precisely these terms, Lesieur's *The Chase* provides extended testimony to the centrality of subcultural life-worlds not only for people's situated involvements but also for people's longer-term careers as gamblers.

In addition to those subcultures that revolve more directly around gambling per se, Lesieur also deals with gamblers' involvements in other subcultures. While people's circumstances, as well as their modes and intensities of involvement in gambling may vary considerably, those who become more heavily involved in gambling often extend aspects of the gambling life-world into other (subcultural) of interactional contexts, such as to families, work associates, bankers and loan sharks, and hustlers and thieves. While participation in these other life-worlds is especially consequential for understanding people's longer-term involvements in gambling, Lesieur also is mindful of the cycles of abstinence and relapse that long-term gamblers so commonly experience.

Although the preceding matters are by no means unique to gamblers (see [Prus & Sharper, 1977](#); [Prus & Irini, 1980](#); [Prus & Grills, 2003](#)), they are central aspects of the career process. Analysts who disregard the developmental flow of people's

long-term participation in gambling activities and associated subcultural life-worlds will not be able to understand gambling as humanly-engaged activity. Somewhat relatedly, while gambling is the central emphasis in *The Chase*, those who examine gambling in career terms also become attentive (as Lesieur illustrates) to the highly interconnected and often challenging matter of participants accessing money over the course of their involvements in gambling.

Gambling as fascinated activity

Whereas people often make reference to the fascinating or alluring aspects of gambling as an explanation to account for gambling, it should be appreciated that similar notions may be invoked in reference to many other things that people find intriguing. Instead of stopping there, thus, the more consequential issues pertain to how people develop and sustain fascinations with anything — whereby matters such as gambling, drinking, music, sports, religion or love connote but variants of the more general human capacity for developing and maintaining intrigues with things.

As with the other aspects of activity considered here, the matter of people developing fascinations with things considered disreputable or troublesome is given more extended attention in [Prus and Grills \(2003\)](#), but Henry Lesieur's *The Chase* provides some particularly valuable insight into the way in which people develop and sustain fascinations with race-track gambling. As is quickly evident in Lesieur's study, people's fascinations seldom develop around the aesthetics of the race or the beauty, grace and strength of well-bred horses in motion. Newcomers may attend to such things and both trainers and more experienced gamblers are apt to be highly concerned about the condition of particular horses and the track. Still, for more experienced gamblers, the emphasis more fully revolves around the matters of accessing money, defining probabilities, finding modes of hedging bets and achieving winning numbers. Thus, without denying aspects of the situation that participants may find enjoyable in various ways, it is important to recognize the ways in which gamblers also “work at,” struggle with and become frustrated with their activities.

Whereas some may have been attracted to the prospects of “quick and easy” money or other sensations associated with winning, many of the allures that people generally associate with gambling tend to dissipate as individuals “get stuck” and try to bail themselves out by re-engaging in the specific sets of activities at which they seem to become increasingly adept as they “pay the price of learning.” As well, people often believe that their luck will turn around, if only they are patient enough, wise enough, opportunistic enough, courageous enough or just plain fortunate enough, to make that next bet. Indeed, it may be in subscribing to what is sometimes termed “the gambler's fallacy” — that in matters of chance past

outcomes will affect future probabilities — that gambling retains one of its most potent allures. Likewise, as Lesieur notes, losses may be seen to represent lessons for the future, while interim successes bespeak hope for the future (as in inferences that one has a viable technique or has become “hot”).

No less consequential, perhaps, is the allure of another common human standpoint; that people “should get paid off in proportion to the things they have invested in something.” Thus, to gamble more intensively and have little other than losses and liabilities to show for one's time, effort and sacrifices is to invite imputations of (a) foolishness on one's part; (b) notions of injustice; and minimally (c) a desire to reclaim what may have a very extensive set of investments — “Gambling owes me, you know!”

A closely associated allure comes with the realization that other people, often people who seem less deserving than oneself, have had substantial, if not unbelievable, successes in gambling. This, too, may be envisioned both as an injustice that will be rectified over time as well as providing hope that a more deserving target could be the next recipient.

Relatedly, while there is a set of often intense, emotional sensations associated with the matters of strategizing, taking risks and dealing with the results, it is important that those who study gambling attend carefully to the ways in which people's experiences with emotionality are integrated into their involvements in gambling. As with people's other activities and definitions of the situation, scholars should be attentive to the ways in which the participants experience, define and attend to matters of emotionality both in more situated instances and over the longer term of their careers as gamblers.

Thus, whereas people may develop strong emotional sensations (as when winning, losing, anticipating and agonizing) while gambling and may define some of these as highly desired states to be experienced in the future, it is important to ask how these sensations develop and are sustained (and dissipated) rather than presume that these represent initial, primary or consistent forces that drive people to gamble. Also, it should not be assumed that gambling is inherently alluring or uniquely fascinating in itself. Instead, as suggested in studies of hustlers and thieves (Sutherland, 1937; [Prus & Sharper, 1977](#); [Prus & Irini, 1980](#); [Jacobs, 1999](#)), drug use ([Brown, 1931](#); [Ray, 1961](#); [Becker, 1963](#); Biernacki, 1988), drinking ([Prus, 1983](#)), involvements in the occult (Jorgensen, 1992) and Lesieur's work on gambling, participants not only learn definitions of situations, events and emotionalities from others, but also negotiate and redefine their notions of situations with others on a more situated basis.

While not denying that people may develop habits, intense sensations, and dependencies around gambling or other activities, it is essential that researchers

and analysts locate these matters within the broader life-worlds within which people find themselves. Otherwise, in focusing on the seeming allures of gambling or other, often intense involvements, scholars not only are apt to miss almost everything else that goes into people's experiences (e.g. perspectives, identities, relationships) but they also will fail to comprehend the ways in which these fascinations are developed and sustained within the realities of their respective subcultural contexts.

Gambling as persistent activity

Whereas the preceding material addresses aspects of what also has been termed compulsive behavior, it is important to acknowledge three other aspects of persistent behaviors that people commonly define as compulsive or uncontrollable. I am referring here to *labelling*, *subcultural embeddedness* and *emotional concretization*. These three processes are more closely interlinked than they might first seem and each has been discussed to some extent earlier in this statement. Still, it may be useful to make brief, but explicit reference to each of these matters.

As used herein (also see [Prus & Grills, 2003](#)), the term labelling refers to the ways that people (a) make sense of or define others and themselves, (b) designate others and themselves as certain kinds of people, and (c) develop and adjust their activities and relationships mindfully of these self-other definitions.

Although often applied to deviants (see [Lemert, 1951, 1967](#); [Becker, 1963](#); [Goffman, 1963](#)), these interactionist notions are relevant to all realms of human group life. Still, one of the implications is that in labelling or designating others (targets) as certain kinds of persons, people set up expectations that stabilize one another's activities and relationships with respect to those targets. As well, the names and expectations associated with particular targets tend to deter (disregard, discourage or prevent) these people from pursuing other options.

When labels are applied more intensively and extensively to specific individuals (or particular groupings), all of people in the setting tend to "objectify" ([Berger & Luckmann, 1966](#)) those identities by envisioning and acting toward the targets as if they (really) are those essences. In many cases, as well, this includes the targets and their (presumably) closest supporters.

Names and reputations do not automatically prevent targets from developing alternative senses of self or lines of involvement. However, to the extent that specific people (targets) become known and acted toward in certain ways, it may be difficult for them to avoid these (interactive) configurations even when they might very much wish to do so. Further, there may be certain advantages, intrigues or other enjoyable features that targets and others associate with the identities and

reputations of even distinctively negative sorts.

Also, even when people (targets) might wish to avoid certain identities and related treatments, they may find that it is easier or more expedient to assume the particular roles and identities to which they have been assigned than to contest or challenge these definitions. As well, the more fully people organize their lives around particular roles and identities, the more likely they will be successful in those fields of endeavor. And as [Prus and Grills \(2003\)](#) observe, the more fully people organize their lives around particular endeavors, the more difficult disentanglement from those situations is apt to be.

These matters of self, identity, role and activity, reflect basic interactionist notions of community life. However, when people's identities and activities are defined as negative, troublesome or problematic in the community, these typically assume a mystique or aura that objectifies, isolates, rejects or stigmatizes the person or group so defined (see [Lemert, 1951, 1967](#); [Garfinkel, 1956](#); [Becker, 1963](#); [Goffman, 1963](#); [Prus & Grills, 2003](#)). When these definitions are imposed in more intense and sustained manners, even the targets so identified may find it difficult to envision and act toward themselves in other terms.

Notably, too, although people designated as deviants or troublesome characters may be shunned or avoided by some people, these same identities may represent sources of prestige or esteem among others in the broader community (see [Lesieur, 1977](#); [Prus & Irini, 1980](#); [Wolf, 1991](#), for instance). In both respects — rejection and prestige — one's identity as a deviant (e.g. gambler, smoker, drug user) may be confirmed or objectified, thereby fostering a greater sense of realism. “That is what one is,” in more unmistakable and unavoidable terms.

People's identities as gamblers typically develop over time. However, the often intermittent anticipations of disinvolvement on the part of participants and their supporters, along with people's other definitions of the participants as “gamblers” and especially as “heavy” or “compulsive” gamblers, add aspects of realism to participants' senses of role entrenchment. In particular, apparent failure(s) to stop gambling when others or the gamblers themselves insist on doing so adds viability to people's convictions that indeed, one is a gambler (and ought to be recognized and treated as such).

Still, labelling only partially can account for people's persistent involvements in things. Thus, whereas some people may have maintained more conventional lifestyles, seemingly in part because they were not explicitly labelled (and treated) as gamblers, this is only part of the process.

A second but related matter may be termed subcultural embeddedness. Consistent with [Prus \(1997\)](#) and [Prus and Grills \(2003\)](#), the term subculture is used to refer to

the life-worlds that develop around specific realms of activity. Although often associated with deviance, it should be appreciated that people may develop subcultures around any realm of activity.

More importantly for our immediate purposes, however, is the recognition that each subculture represents a way of life for those involved within — as in perspectives, identities, relationships, activities, linguistic fluencies and emotionalities. Relatedly, the more fully people become immersed in particular subcultures (be these religious, political, work, or recreational), the more likely they will use the viewpoints and practices of those subcultures as central reference points. These are consequential not only for the ways that the participants define themselves, but also for the manners in which they define the activities, associations, and situations in which they find themselves. Participants may switch frames of reference as they move from one subculture to the next — as from gambling to work to one's family, for instance — but the people in each subculture have their own emphases and their own notions of reality.

To make the argument more succinctly in the case of gambling, as people become more familiar with the viewpoints, practices and other people who help sustain this life-world, one develops a set of experiences that define, occupy and give meaning to oneself and to others both inside of and outside of this life-world. To disengage from gambling, thus, is not a simple matter of not placing bets. If one hopes to be successful in this world, it seems necessary to engage these various dimensions of subculture. However, disinvolvement requires that one disentangle oneself from the perspectives, identities, activities, commitments, relationships, language and emotionalities of this life-world.

As Lesieur (1977) indicates, the subculture of the racetrack not only represents a multi-faceted life-world but also one that extends into or permeates a variety of other life-worlds (particularly in the quest for money and the problems of loss). In a related way, as people become involved with bookies and loan sharks, hustlers and thieves, and enter into various deceptions and scams involving families, work and legitimate businesses, they become more firmly entrenched in the reality of the gambling subculture.

The third aspect of persistence discussed here is what I have termed emotional concretization. ⁶ Although this would include aspects of people's emotional experiences associated with the more immediate and often intense sensations of winning and losing, as well as the sensations associated with anticipation of gambling, making bets, waiting for the results, and dealing with the outcomes, I am referring here to the more complete set of people's physical and mental sensations (perceptions, definitions, affectations and behaviors) associated with their involvements in gambling.

This would include notions such as being somebody, being smarter than other people or not being “a sucker.” However, it would also include both the risks that one takes as well as the anticipation that one can “beat the system.” It would encompass the work that one puts into gambling as well as anticipation of eventual pay offs. It also would include sensations of “being hot” and “being a big shot” as well as “blowing money” stupidly, feeling “really desperate,” and facing “points of no return.” It would include the sights, sounds and aromas as well as the images and recollections of the particular characters, including the amateurs, sharpies, hustlers, high rollers, lucky stiffes and losers that inhabit one's life-world. Likewise, in addition to any excitement, thrills or “adrenaline rushes,” it also would include people's experiences with boredom and the lack of action as well as the sensations associated with making “smart moves,” acknowledging missed chances, hedging bets and “hitting bottom.”

Because gambling, when done more extensively, permeates one's entire existence — not just one's thoughts but also one's associates, one's activities, and one's physiological-emotional being — gambling assumes a set of enacted realisms that cannot be readily left behind.

Thus, while people may attempt to reframe their perspectives, accept the losses of the past and give up on hopes of coming out ahead, these other elements are not so easily erased from the fibers of one's consciousness. Indeed, even were certain gamblers to “hit it big” and sustain a more affluent life-style, it is not apparent that most could detach themselves from gambling “as activity.” As long as they meet their debts, people may avoid being defined as “problem gamblers.” ⁷ Likewise, with “deeper pockets” people may be in positions to more effectively shape the outcomes of particular gambling contests (as in financially bullying or controlling games at certain levels). Otherwise, were they to forgo gambling more entirely, they seem likely not only to “miss the action” but also other aspects of the “gambler self.”

In sum

In contrast to those who would reduce gambling to sets of physiological, psychological or social structural factors, this statement has addressed gambling as a meaningful, humanly enacted realm of activity. Likewise, in contrast to those who would enshroud gambling in mystiques of various sorts, as well as those who would envision gambling as a totally unique phenomenon that requires a theory entirely of its own, this paper has examined gambling in more generic terms.

The interactionist paradigm introduced here has much more to offer to the study of gambling than possibly could be indicated within the present statement (see [Prus & Grills, 2003](#)). However, the present discussion may alert readers to the necessity

of examining gambling as well as other realms of human behavior both in the instances in which people do things and in ways that are mindful of the particular subcultural arenas or theaters of operation in which people do things in conjunction with others.

Although I have not summarized *The Chase* in the present statement or made as much use of the rich ethnographic materials found within Lesieur's as one might have, more experienced researchers may appreciate that there is no substitute for examining ethnographies in careful, more sustained detail. Indeed, a comprehensive ethnography such as that developed by Henry Lesieur should be read carefully and completely if one is to more adequately appreciate the wisdom about human knowing and acting that is contained within.

Attending to the ways that the people deal with hopes, ambiguities, risks, losses and associates in a shifting subcultural arena, Henry Lesieur's study provides considerable insight into the ways that people acquire perspectives on particular aspects of the life-worlds in which they operate, develop identities (reputations and self-images) as certain kinds of people, generate relationships with an assortment of others, engage activities in more fascinated, sustained, and habituated terms, deal with an assortment of emotional experiences and interchanges, make and disregard commitments involving others and strategically participate in an array of collective events.

Thus, whereas *The Chase* is a valuable portrayal of a particular form of gambling and an exceptionally instructive account of people's involvements in gambling more generally, Henry Lesieur's study makes a yet more important contribution to the transsituational and transhistorical analysis of people's activities. As a highly detailed and intimately informed account of a relatively distinctive life-world, *The Chase* represents an especially consequential resource for scholars questing for a broader and more enduring comparative understanding of human group life.

Notes

Endnotes

¹ In addition to those involved in the editorial review process, I would like to thank Fatima Camara and Lorraine Prus for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² Those who examine this text may quickly appreciate that a central objective is to “permeate the deviant mystique” — to take the deviance phenomenon apart, piece-by-piece, and focus more fundamentally on the things that people do. Thus, while attending to the ways that people bring their notions of morality into play in the broader deviance-making process, it is emphasized that the activities in

question are not “driven by” nor should they be explained by people's notions of morality. Hence — whereas the moral definitions that people invoke (i.e. place on particular activities and participants) tend to complicate both the explanation of deviance (as activity) and the broader involvement process in which those designated as “deviants” experience — the focus, first and foremost, is on activity as a humanly engaged process.

³ Although, I have not done a study of gambling per se, I have studied the activities and life-worlds of an assortment of hustlers and thieves ([Prus and Sharper, 1977, 1991](#); [Prus and Irini, 1980](#)) whose lives intersect with those of gamblers in various ways. I also have benefited from ethnographic accounts of poker players ([Hayano, 1982](#)) and the racetrack ([Scott, 1968](#)), as well as explicit considerations of the gambles associated with marketplace activity ([Prus, 1989a, b](#)).

⁴ For a more sustained analysis of people's “solitary” as well as “subcultural” involvements in deviance, see [Prus and Grills \(2003\)](#).

⁵ Although beyond the scope of this immediate statement, [Prus and Grills \(2003\)](#) also consider the disinvolvement and reinvolvement process, as well as the roles that people may assume as agents of control and the linkages between treatment and people's careers in particular realms of deviance.

⁶ For a more extended interactionist analysis of emotionality, see [Prus \(1996\)](#).

⁷ Although extended indebtedness is apt to be a major theme in defining someone's gambling as “out of control,” other sources of difficulty may revolve around gamblers' apparent neglect of work, family, and other relationship obligations.

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