Gambling and the human condition: Transcending the deviant mystique

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Abstract

Henry Lesieur's (1977) *The Chase* belongs to a rather elite group of ethnographic
texts. It is a volume that transcends its substantive area to elucidate generic
aspects of the human condition. In this essay I encourage a reframing and re-
reading of the text in light of generic social process theory. Lesieur's work places
gambling in the context of community life and, by so doing, resists what Prus and
Grills (2003) have characterized as the deviant mystique.

Introduction

Permeating the deviant mystique requires viewing deviance as a relativistic but
inevitable feature of community life. No social act or object (e.g. perspective, joint
action, solitary undertaking, image, text) is inherently deviant. Rather, deviance is
best cast as a quality that is attributed by some audience. In contrast to those who
develop agendas, interests and identities around the designation of this or that

behaviour as immoral, students of deviance must make a clear distinction between cases at hand and the moral attributes which may be assigned to such cases by practitioners or audiences. Those who approach gambling from the vantage point of moralists, control agents, secondary-aid professionals, voyeurs or rule enforcers, privilege the problematic qualities of gambling.

Overcoming the deviant mystique requires developing an understanding of the life-world of the professional gambler as it is lived. To do so is to view gambling apart from its status as deviant activity, as simultaneously fascinating and repulsive, disrespectable and interesting. For example, cinematic representations of the gambler such as the pool hustler, the card shark, the riverboat gambler and the con artist, trade heavily on the tension between the maverick and the fool (Klapp, 1962). While such fictionalized accounts may shed some light on the human condition, they also contribute directly to the mystification of gambling activities, and clearly demarcate the gambler's life as a source of entertainment, interest and intrigue.

Lesieur's ethnography transcends this deviant mystique while also resisting those who would allow the ascribed moral status of gambling to define the activity. The result is a text whose importance extends deviance studies and remains of interest beyond its substantive area. In this essay I enumerate what I take to be the most important of these contributions and argue for the generic applicability of Lesieur's position to contemporary gambling studies and to deviance research more generally.

Getting Close

Lesieur's work is a legacy of the Blumerian tradition. *The Chase* takes Blumer's (1969) call to pursue an intimate familiarity with the social world seriously. In concluding his volume and encouraging others to take up the research that his work foreshadows, Lesieur writes:

> Ask about women, professional thieves, and gambling in prison if you will and do not leave it to neglect as in the past or to the psychiatrists, about whom the gamblers themselves say, "He never had much experience with gamblers obviously … from the gems he keeps pumping out." I hope no one will ever say that about me (Lesieur, 1977, p. 239).

I cannot overemphasize the importance of this deceptively simple position. As Rosaldo (1989) has argued in his work *Culture and Truth*, every position involves a mixture of insight and blindness. To the extent that we locate ourselves as theorists and students of the human condition, we can, to some degree, influence our

insight by privileging various forms of knowing and being known.

If we seek to know the lived experience of those whose lives are touched by gambling (such as practitioners, family members, confederates, or secondary-aid professionals), there is no substitute for engaging the world of the other. This requires getting one's hands dirty — going where the action is, gaining entry, developing relationships, maintaining a presence in the field, and overcoming resistances to field research (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991). Field research is time-consuming and disagreeable (Wax, 1971). Field research, as problem-solving activity, involves making pragmatic adjustments to the specifics of the field setting (Grills, 1998). The payoff for all this grief is a rich tapestry that weaves multiple voices into a singular text while preserving the integrity of the various speakers that make the whole. To know gambling as a lived experience one must know gamblers — their passions, principles, hustles, selves, and relationships.

Regrettably, much of what passes for research on deviant behaviour has little to do with the activities, perspectives, life-worlds, or relationships that accompany deviant involvements. Rather, social scientists have distanced themselves from an authentic interest in the other. In his wonderfully presented and researched volume *Inventing Criminology*, Piers Beirne (1993) argues convincingly that, with the exception of the period of research to which *The Chase* belongs, modern criminology has been dominated by positivistic thought. By positivism, I am referring to the broad range of theoretical traditions that understand human behaviour to be the product of "forces, factors, or structures (internal or external) that act on people to generate particular outcomes" (Prus, 1996, p. 4).

While not wishing to venture down an unhelpful tangent, it is useful to note that much of modern positivistic criminology owes a large debt to the analysis of social organization offered by Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874) whose *Sur l'homme* (1835) established a clearly articulated argument against the metaphysical notion of the "born deviant." While Quetelet was a pioneering thinker and original voice in the mid-1800s, his contribution to modern criminology and sociology has been, regrettably, lost to time and a preference for distillations of intellectual history. His contention that the maturity of a science rests upon its statistical/mathematical sophistication, his interests in aggregate data, social regularities, rate-based analysis, causal reasoning, social mechanics, and his concept of *homme moyen* (the average person/man) as an instrument through which societal-level mechanics pass, placed Quetelet squarely at the forefront of the new positivism.

While it is most certainly the case that our positivist colleagues view human actors as more determined than determining, few are so committed to their position as to reject the juristic traditions which allow for some version of free will, the possibility of crimes of intention, and the notion that actors select from lines of action. As Beirne (1993) summarizes:

> In the soul of Quetelet's criminal, as in that of Victor Hugo's ex-convict Jean Valjean, in *Les Miserables*, there dwelled a primitive spark, a divine element, incorruptible in this world and immortal in the next, which could be kindled, lit up, made radiant by good, and which evil could never entirely extinguish (Beirne, 1993, p. 230).

Such attempts to preserve the human individual from the tyranny of positivism's own renderings of causality simply serve to embrace a metaphysical position that is unsatisfying and, in the last instance, inconsistent with understanding deviance as human endeavour.

This brief discussion of 19th century positivism is included here for two rather central purposes. First, the dominant model within current gambling research posits that gambling is caused by external factors, which render the life-world of the practitioner irrelevant for the understanding of gambling practices. Second, positivism's prioritization of the social scientist as moral entrepreneur permeates those traditions that define gambling in negative or risk-based terms.

This is not to suggest that gambling activities cannot be accompanied by unwelcome outcomes for practitioners and others who are directly and indirectly implicated in their activities. The financial implications of gambling, the illegal dimensions of gambling activities, the informal and formal sanctions that may accompany gambling, and the relational and interactional results of the gambling life may hold significant consequences that limit life chances. However, the recognition that gambling may be accompanied by real harms does not logically move one to models based upon pathologies. While positivists have applied social pathologies to gambling behaviour, others have developed models based upon individual pathologies. Notable here is the extension of the disease model of addiction to gambling behaviour captured within the Gambler's Anonymous tradition (e.g. Cattano, 1996).

I began this section by arguing for attentiveness to the position of the researcher. Lesieur's interest in "getting close" reflects the analytical need for closeness. There is no substitute for intimacy when one is genuinely interested in the world of gamblers — their commitments, activities, relationships, undertakings, and involvements. When one attributes to practitioners the possibility of authentic action, then a genuine analytic interest in their life as it is lived follows. When, however, the practitioner is framed as an instrument of some pathogen, be it structural, biological, or psychological, the position of the analyst is inextricably altered.

I do not believe I overstate the case when I suggest that a consequence of positivism's dominance over the study of deviance and criminology is that we know comparatively little about deviance in a community context. Over time the words

have changed — progressive, positive, reform, participatory action — but wherever the researcher is more interested in enacting their version of the good life than knowing the world of the other, the practitioner of deviance becomes a target of moral entrepreneurial interest. This relationship may further the researcher's agenda as an agent of control, but it rarely sheds light on the human condition.

The Chase — **Sticking with loss beyond reason**

An intimate familiarity with the world of practitioners of deviance allows for a deep understanding of the perspectives that members bring to their activities. Of particular interest are understandings of social action that serve to make activities reasonable and reportable for all practical purposes (Garfinkel, 1967). The acquisition of perspectives that support deviant involvements can be central to facilitating ongoing involvements in specific activities. At times, the definition of the situation which participants bring to their activities rather centrally defines the activity and, when integrated into a complex understanding of deviance as social action, alters the way in which we understand the life-world of practitioners. I write here of sensitizing concepts that define the lived experience of practitioners. While a complete inventory of such concepts is well beyond the scope and interest of this essay, I offer two modest illustrations.

Sykes and Matza's (1957) concept of neutralization alters the way in which juvenile delinquency is framed. By alerting researchers to the reality that juvenile offenders often support the very community expectations they violate, Sykes and Matza turned the notion of rule violation on its head. They asked the important question, "how do those engaging in deviant behaviour come to suspend rule sets that they would otherwise support?" Their answer, encapsulated in the generic notion of neutralization, allows for a reframing of the process by which those involved with deviant activities come to acquire perspectives that facilitate involvement without necessarily setting aside prior understandings of "the good."

People working in the field are familiar with neutralization talk — "They had it coming," "I was just looking out for my friends," "I didn't mean to do it," "A big store like that has insurance." What is true of young offenders is true of deviance in a variety of settings, including more formal court proceedings. Partial and full defense of crimes hinges on neutralization strategies. Self-defense, duress, drunkenness, and factual mistakes are all neutralization techniques that are recognized by the courts as defenses to crime. Any resulting deviance designation may have more to do with audience acceptance or rejection of the defense for rule-breaking behaviour than with general support for certain expectations of behaviour.

Katz' volume (1988)*Seductions to Crime* includes another fine illustration of the importance of developed, perspectivally based deviance research. His concept of

the "hard man" speaks directly to self-other identities. Katz argues that this concept of the assailant as an aggressor who is in control and whose will dominates the anticipated outcome of an interaction is an important reference point for understanding the willingness of "stick-up men" to "stick with [a] stick-up beyond reason." Katz' argument draws out the consideration that overly rationalized constructs of the offender fail to consider the importance of core identity constructs in understanding violent interaction sequences. When an interaction begins with the assertion that "This is a robbery, let's not make it a murder," the commitment to violence may supersede other concerns or interests — such a commitment may be irrespective of personal costs or considerations that others outside of the interaction sequence might define as relevant or reasonable. Lesieur's concept of the "chase" contributes to framing gambling activities from the perspective of participants, while at the same time providing a context within which practitioners may construct gambling activities as reasonable practices.

From an external, rationalist perspective, gambling activities may be defined as self-defeating, immoral, or built upon flawed understandings of randomness, chance and probability. Even where gamblers are not the target of a hustle which serves to reduce or eliminates the possibly of "coming out ahead" (e.g. Prus & Sharper, 1991), formalized gambling settings always maintain a statistical advantage which ensures the protection of the interests of "the house." Formalized gambling settings are designed and organized to ensure that, over time and on average, gamblers take a fall.

Lesieur makes an important distinction between gambling as entertainment and gambling with the expectation to win. In the first case, the participant may very well anticipate "taking a hit" as entertainment is expected to cost money. In the latter instance, the instrumentality associated with gambling is financial advantage. When this does not occur and the gambler gambles to get even, the chase begins. Those who attend to long-term gains and losses and become locked in to the longer term chase are cast as compulsive gamblers.

Lesieur's presentation of gambling allows for the same activities to be defined in multiple ways. While slots may be defined in entertainment or more financially instrumental terms, it is the commitment to the chase — to get-even strategies, to closing the gap on debt — which is the defining perspectival framework of the compulsive gambler. Here, compulsion is cast relative to the definition of the situation: the compulsive gambler violates the major philosophical canons of the non-compulsive gambler; he gambles more than he can afford to lose, and he does not forget losses once they happen. Instead of saying, "It's gone, it's gone," the compulsive gambler says, "I'll get them tomorrow" (Lesieur, 1977, p. 11).

This framing (or reframing) of gambling activities relative to the chase illustrates the importance of attending to practitioners' understandings of their activities, their

intentionalities, and their work developing accounts of gambling activities. Importantly, Lesieur's work resists the notion (one which is all too common in deviance research) that deviance lies, somehow, within the act or object of the researcher's interest: an image *is* pornographic; an idea *is* offensive; an activity *is* indicative of pathology. This position denies the work that goes into making the social world meaningful. Lesieur's is a richer understanding for it requires that we are open to the notion that gambling activity may simultaneously be understood as entertainment, a short chase to pay a bill or two, an integrated part of a larger and more developed gambling strategy, intriguing, worrisome, problematic or fascinating. These multiple orientations to the very same act may be held by multiple participants in the same setting and by individuals over time.

My point is not so much that perspectives matter (for they most certainly do), but that deviance, as a feature of human group life, is most profitably understood in a community context. This requires an interest in the multiple meanings that come to be associated with an activity and the pragmatic implications of attention or inattention to such definitions for practitioners and others. Simply put, the idea of the "chase" and a commitment to it places the practitioner in a very different relationship to their activities than is to be found in a variety of other understandings of gambling activities. Researchers who prefer to substitute their own understanding of the social world for that of participants will, necessarily, construct concepts considerably less helpful than those grounded in everyday life which make meaningful the world of the other.

Careers and community action

I confess to having a weakness for beautiful, little ideas that change the way we see our worlds. Nietzsche wrote, "It is my ambition to say in ten sentences; what others say in a whole book." Howard Becker (1963) crafted a little book that contained several of Nietzsche's "10-sentence books." His social insight, combined with the timeliness of the substantive area, established *The Outsiders* as a volume of lasting importance. In this text, Becker offers the deceptively simple assertion that sequential models of deviant behaviour are richer than simultaneous ones. Rather than understanding deviance as an end, it is more helpful to understand deviance in involvement terms. Involvements will vary over time and may be best understood in duration or career terms. For example, the interests and intentionalities that take one person to the racetrack for the first time are often distinct from those of another person who organizes his or her activities more centrally around betting on horse races.

Framing deviant activity in these terms allows for the development of a generic model of involvements or career contingencies. It lies well beyond the scope of this paper to undertake a detailed review of the career contingencies literature (Prus &

, pp. 97–180) or to draw out the multiple ways in which *The Chase* may be collected around such models. Instead, I offer this much more modest summary.

Lesieur's work recognizes the unevenness and uncertainties of initial involvements. The action accompanying card, sport and horse gambling is such that some participants come to construct preparatory activities, identities, relationships and strategies around particular enterprises. Others are more apt to seek out action in multiple settings. The extent to which participants will come to develop commitments to gambling is quite variable. Participation in gambling may not move much beyond initial interests, curiosities, fascinations or entertainment-oriented considerations.

The move from initial involvement to continuing involvements is uncertain at best. The extent to which practitioners acquire the perspectives of the life, develop and sustain identities associated with deviant activities, develop instrumental competencies related to deviant activities, make commitments to deviant activities and outcomes, successfully manage relationships with others, and experience emotional/personal attachments, directly influences the extent to which ongoing participation will be sustained. Failure to manage the multiple contingencies that accompany continuing involvements may disqualify or otherwise impede continuing participation. For example, the definition of gambling activities in more favourable terms (e.g. pleasurable, potentially rewarding, entertaining) is a rather essential feature of continuing involvements, as is overcoming or otherwise resisting more negative representations of gambling (e.g. immoral, a fool's game, illegal). Continuing involvements in gambling activities requires overcoming a variety of problematics that hold the potential to restrict or eliminate practitioners' ongoing involvement (e.g. neutralization strategies).

Lesieur's interest in careers in gambling extends to disinvolvement and focuses on enforced and voluntary abstinence (, pp. 200–216). Lesieur's work stands as one of the first ethnographic studies to explicitly address disinvolvement in a community context. This is particularly important as "leaving" is as fully social an activity as being involved. Lesieur's position is also one that fully locates participation and disinvolvement in the realm of human activity, reflecting human group life as problem-solving activity marked by uncertainties, unwelcome exclusions, and unanticipated re-involvements. This model resists more simplistic notions of "causation" which do not fully attend to the dynamics accompanying career contingencies.

Solitary deviance and other attentive action

Sociologists have been significantly remiss in the extent to which they have

attended to solitary action, generally, and solitary deviance, more specifically. I share Cooley's (1964) position that the distinction between individual and society is an abstraction that is unknown to experience. People's capacities for reflective action, language, the meaningful engagement of the social world, and taking the standpoint of the other are contingent and dependent upon relationships with others and facilitate solitary action that is other-attentive. The fundamental unit of sociological analysis remains the joint act (Couch, 1989), yet it is from such joint action that the possibility of socially meaning-filled solitary action is made real.

Solitary action is best framed in social terms. Prus and Grills (2003) distinguish between solitary operators and subcultural participants. While solitary operators may rely rather extensively on worlds that are enabled by subcultural participants, they nevertheless pursue deviance in more isolated and solitary ways. Solitary participation in gambling activities may allow for participation in gambling in the absence of relational dynamics that are inherent in a variety of gambling settings.

Solitary participation may prove quite useful for managing self/other identities, restricting the extent to which the self is associated with gambling, maintaining relationships, and otherwise isolating aspects of gambling involvements from other commitments and entanglements. Cyber-gambling, like cyber-sex, may allow for secret and solitary undertakings that would otherwise be impossible to pursue. More solitary pursuits may also facilitate the vicarious experience of gambling, as practitioners experience gambling "from afar" (e.g. virtual day trading). While practitioners may fully recognize the partial and in some ways limiting features of solitary vicarious experience, they also may appreciate the extent to which such activities serve to limit personal risk or harm while serving as at least a passable substitute for the "real thing." While sociologists, rather understandably, have attended more fully to subculturally based pursuits, we would be significantly remiss should we fail to attend to deviance as it is undertaken in more solitary ways.

Conclusion

This brief paper has attempted to identify a few of the ways in which Lesieur's *The Chase* has contributed to a generic understanding of deviance in a community context. In so doing, I have taken some liberties with the text itself and have made no effort to integrate my reading of the volume with Lesieur's subsequent scholarship. I take this to be something of the privilege of the reader. If this modest contribution has offered anything, I hope that it is to make relevant a 25-year-old ethnography to contemporary readers who may be coming to the text for the first time. Importantly, this volume:

- Locates the deviant status of gambling activities relative to the moral

judgments of some audience

- Attends to gambling in a community, activity-based frame
- Models the need to get close to life as it is lived
- Attends to the world as it is engaged by the people whose lives are considered
- Extends the conceptual frame by generating generically viable concepts.

The Chase joins a very small list of scholarly works in deviant behaviour – the list of works that take deviance to be a feature of the human condition; works which do not relegate deviance to the dustbin of the abnormal, the flawed, the pathological, or the otherwise defiled. The concept of the "chase" frames gambling behaviour relative to the meaning-rich context of participants' theatres of operation — theatres that are best understood in relational, action-based, morally-charged terms. By so doing, Lesieur resists the deviant mystique associated with the study of gambling and provides a model for research that is as relevant for contemporary scholars as it was a generation ago.

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