

Journal Information

Journal ID (publisher-id): jgi

ISSN: 1910-7595

Publisher: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Article Information

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Received Day: 21 Month: 02 Year: 2003

Accepted Day: 22 Month: 12 Year: 2003

Publication date: July 2004

Publisher Id: jgi.2004.11.11

DOI: 10.4309/jgi.2004.11.11

How do we know what we know? Epistemic tensions in social and cultural research on gambling 1980-2000

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[This article prints out to about 36 pages.]

“Although we may know in part . we are also a part of what we know.” N. Frye (1963, p. 11)

Acknowledgements: This project utilizes an annotated bibliography prepared under a research grant provided to the author by the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. The annotated bibliography was prepared in collaboration with colleagues at the University of Lethbridge: Judy Droessler, PhD (University Library), Gary Nixon, PhD (Addictions Counselling Program, School of Health Sciences), and Misty Grimshaw, BHSc (Addictions Counselling Program, student research assistant). I wish to express my appreciation to the reviewers, two anonymous and one who chose to declare his identity, for their thorough reading of the submitted paper and thoughtful comments and advice. The final version of this paper was completed while the author was scholar-in-residence with the Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Council in South Australia, which provided a much appreciated collegial and reflective environment.

This article was peer-reviewed. Submitted: February 21, 2003. All URLs were available at the time of submission. Accepted: December 22, 2003

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Ethics approval: Not required.

Funding. The critical literature review on which this paper is based was funded by a grant from the Alberta Gaming Research Institute.

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Abstract

This project seeks to answer the question, how do we know what we know about gambling? With reference to a systematic review of the gambling research literature that addresses social and cultural topics and issues, this paper explores the epistemic cultures that created and gave authority to knowledge about gambling presented in scholarly research published between 1980 and 2000. From small beginnings in the 1980s, scholarly research in this area exploded during the 1990s and was dominated by surveys describing the distribution of problem and pathological forms. The trend in gambling research is towards an increasingly narrow range of topics, focused on pathology, and curiously disengaged from advances in contemporary social theory. The paper concludes with a plea for nuanced, politically engaged, and culturally informed gambling research grounded in the social, cultural, historical, and everyday contexts in which gambling is embedded.

Introduction

There is little doubt that gambling¹ has seized the attention of the public in recent times, evidenced in the news media by anxious discussions about hope for the economic benefits of gambling, as well as concern about the negative impacts. This wave of interest follows the increased accessibility and availability of gambling, with new forms and venues marketing to changing demographics of gamblers, such as increased involvement by women.

Paradoxically, gambling became more acceptable as a leisure activity at the same time that it gave rise to public expressions of moral panic and outrage. In Canada, interest in gambling as a leisure activity increased substantially with the “lottery amendments” to the Criminal Code in the late 1960s (Kelley, 2002). At this time, involvement in gambling by provincial and federal governments, charities, and

exhibition associations was legalized ([Pruden, 2002](#)) and has since generated significant revenues for cash-strapped organizations and public institutions. The increase in gambling activity subsequent to these amendments was accompanied by growing anxiety among health professionals, community leaders, and the general public about the potential impacts of gambling on individuals, families, communities, and society.

What is not so obvious to the general public is the recent growth of scholarly interest in gambling. Studies of the gambling phenomenon have exploded onto the research scene during the past decade, with new funding agencies, monographs, reports, scholarly journals, and professional electronic mailing lists attesting to vigorous interest in gambling on a global scale. New funding opportunities established by governments in response to public concern undoubtedly gave some impetus to scholarly interest in gambling - testimony to the notion that “if you fund it, they will come.” Regardless of the reason for the interest in gambling as an object of study among scholars, the latter part of the 20th century remains remarkable in the vigorous demand for and production of expert knowledge about this phenomenon.

Demand for knowledge and reliance upon experts to provide it is by no means unique to gambling. [Knorr Cetina \(1999\)](#) reminds us that contemporary Western societies are “ruled by knowledge and expertise” (p. 5). In these “knowledge societies,” decisions and actions in everyday life are based increasingly on information produced by distinct expert systems, usually described as disciplinary or specialist groups ([Knorr Cetina, 1999](#)).

Curiously, knowledge created by expert systems is often treated as though it were only a product, free of the social and cultural contexts in which it is created. Thus, the processes by which knowledge is produced are “black-boxed” and remain largely invisible and unexamined ([Knorr Cetina, 1999](#)). Only recently, beginning in the postmodern period and continuing into the present, have scholars been challenged to lay bare how scientific knowledge is constructed and warranted, their paradigms and assumptions questioned as potentially naïve ([Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986](#); [Gilligan, 1993](#); [Guba & Lincoln, 1994](#); [Knorr Cetina, 1999](#)). This process of recontextualizing the knowledge that is produced by scholarly inquiry is prompted by the simple question, how do we know what we know (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 245)?

We begin to answer this question by examining the nature of expert systems and the processes by which they construct and warrant knowledge. [Knorr Cetina \(1999\)](#) suggests that terms such as discipline and scientific speciality adequately describe neither the degree to which expert systems “curl up upon themselves” nor “the deep social spaces” where they practise (p. 2). Such are the distinctions between various expert systems that they become deeply entrenched and

internally oriented. Knorr Cetina offers the term “epistemic cultures” (1999, p. 1) to more accurately describe modern expert systems; it is within epistemic cultures that one finds paradigms (i.e., belief systems) and attendant practices and symbols (e.g., systems of classification) that construct and give authority to particular ways of knowing. She reminds us that examples can be found in the institutional structure of universities, which are fragmented into departments of physics, biology, history, sociology, psychology, etc. Each discipline is an example of an encapsulated epistemic culture, separated from others by distinct ways of knowing, objectives, expert practices, and symbolic structures.

These distinct ways of knowing create an epistemic gulf that is most often perceived to exist between the experimental laboratory-based “hard” sciences (e.g., high-energy physics, molecular biology, chemistry) and the “soft” sciences (e.g., qualitative sociology, anthropology), which are concerned with naturalistic inquiry. Differences are observable among subspecialties, however; consider the distinctions between clinical and counselling psychology, or quantitative and qualitative sociology. Historically, these differences reference modernist or constructivist perspectives, influenced by later developments in feminist, critical, or cultural theory. Further distinctions are evident within expert systems in the experimental laboratory-based sciences as well, such as between high-energy physics and molecular biology ([Knorr Cetina, 1999](#)).

[Guba and Lincoln \(1994\)](#), in their comprehensive comparison of positivist and naturalistic inquiry, suggest that the differences in paradigms that create the gulf between expert systems depend on conflicting sets of assumptions. One assumption concerns ontology, or what is understood as “reality,” and what can be known about it. Are only measurable phenomena “knowable,” for example? Yet another assumption concerns epistemology, or the relationship between the knower and what is to be known. This assumption indexes the objective or subjective understanding of “reality,” where knowledge is understood to be either value-free, bounded, and distinct from the observer (objective) or deeply contextualized, multilevelled, nuanced, and influenced by the observer (subjective). Highly dependent upon assumptions of ontology and epistemology is methodology, or what will reveal what can be known to us ([Guba & Lincoln, 1994](#)); that is, how can we “capture” data? Accordingly, to understand how we know what we know in any area of knowledge is to understand these assumptions that are drawn from the paradigms, associated practices, and symbolic structures that create and warrant that knowledge.

With reference to gambling research, our question becomes, how do we know what we know about the phenomenon of gambling? Can we make explicit the assumptions and ways of knowing that have led gambling researchers in the direction they are taking at present? What does this reflective understanding

presage about future developments in our understanding of gambling?

This paper begins to respond to these questions by examining the scholarly social and cultural research on gambling published between 1980 and 2000². This literature is informative to the current project for several reasons. First, following earlier legalization of gambling in many Western societies, this period witnessed a proliferation of opportunities to gamble and the emergence of new forms of gambling. Second, governments began to invest heavily in gambling as a source of revenue, and funding for gambling research increased substantially. Finally, this literature includes contributions from a range of disciplines that reference highly divergent paradigms, in contrast to bio-psychological, economic, or historical literature, which tends to be less interdisciplinary.

The present study explores how researchers have addressed social and cultural aspects of gambling and situates our current knowledge about gambling in the history of its development over the past two decades of increased public involvement and intensifying scholarly interest in this phenomenon. In this review, I examine epistemic themes, patterns, and trends in the social and cultural research on gambling in search of where this research is leading us. Accordingly, this approach shifts the object of inquiry from knowledge about gambling to the epistemic cultures that create and give authority to this knowledge.

These evaluative remarks and comments are not intended to disparage the quality of research during this 20-year period. Indeed, I believe very strongly that the significant contributions of these scholars and the impact of their studies should be acknowledged. Accordingly, these comments are intended to tease out gaps and areas where, even though some work may have been done, more substantive attention will likely lead to both a greater understanding of gambling and more effective and appropriate responses.

Twenty years of social and cultural research on gambling

Included in the annotated bibliography examined for this review were documents published during a 20-year period (1980 to 2000) in North America, Europe, and the non-European Commonwealth. Literature published in languages other than English or French was not included, and the subsequent predominance of studies by Western scholars is obvious. Studies from outside this linguistic scope are not only absent from this review but also do not contribute substantially to the dominant discourses in gambling research at the present time because, quite simply, they reside on the far side of the linguistic divide. Whether the field of gambling studies is impoverished by this is a matter of conjecture that should be explored further.

The bibliography was limited to literature based on empirical research considered to reside in the scholarly domain from peer-reviewed journals and “grey” sources (i.e., research reports generated by government agencies or nongovernmental organizations) identified by a standardized search-and-retrieval strategy described in detail in [McGowan et al. \(2000\)](#). This search strategy, using electronic bibliographic databases and keywords culled from the social and cultural research literature on gambling, identified nearly 300 separate documents, including prevalence, incidence, trend, and correlation studies; descriptive studies that addressed social impacts and policy implications; ethnographic studies (largely participant-observation in naturalistic settings); qualitative studies; and reviews of the empirical research literature. The final bibliographic list included 264 items after evaluation by criteria of scholarship described in [McGowan et al. \(2000\)](#).

This body of literature comprises studies focused primarily on patterns of play, such as frequency and distribution by gender, age, ethnicity, or other sociodemographic variable and, to a lesser degree, cultural contexts.³ This concentration on the social and cultural dimensions of gambling thus excludes biopsychological and economic studies, as well as psychological studies that focus on intrapsychic phenomena.

The 1980s: Small beginnings

A small group of researchers made significant contributions to the social and cultural gambling literature of the 1980s. As [Marshall \(1985\)](#) noted in his review of the early research on alcohol, the gambling research literature of the 1980s was largely descriptive and atheoretical. For the most part, this literature was concerned with the observed or potential social and economic impacts of gambling, the pattern and distribution of play, parental influences on youth gambling, and association of youth involvement in gambling with other perceived deviant behaviours.⁴ A few authors, taking a cultural relativist stance, treated gambling as a normalized leisure activity⁵ or examined its occurrence and significance in indigenous contexts prior to European contact (Wasserman, 1982).

Although a variety of methods were used to identify pathological gamblers, the published literature of the late 1980s includes the first large-scale surveys that screened for problem and pathological gambling using a standardized questionnaire, usually the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) or a screening instrument based on criteria codified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM IV-TR) of the [American Psychiatric Association \(2000\)](#), currently in its fourth (text revised) edition. The populations of interest included adults and youth in the general population, active gamblers, and substance abuse treatment groups; a variety of quantitative research methods such as telephone surveys and self-

administered questionnaires were used.⁶

Several significant reviews of the gambling literature were produced in the late 1980s and were concerned largely with methodological problems, conceptual issues, and identification of gaps in empirical knowledge. In their review of the literature on pathological gambling, [Knapp and Lech \(1987\)](#) described pathological gambling as a mental disorder with explicit diagnostic signs and symptoms. Further, they rang the alarm that this disorder was widely prevalent and likely to increase in the future. Two large-scale reviews of the general gambling literature ([Griffiths, 1989](#)) and studies of pathological gambling ([Lesieur, 1989a,b](#)) noted that previously published studies were plagued with methodological and conceptual problems and contradictions, however. Both reviewers called for more controlled or systematic research, particularly epidemiological research on the distribution of gambling among adolescents, ethnic minorities, and other population subgroups, and studies that would clearly demarcate the impact of gambling. Further criticism of gambling research focused on methods used to estimate the prevalence and incidence of pathological gambling ([Nadler, 1985](#)).

The single trend study identified from this period predicted rapid growth of the gambling industry as new markets opened up. Further, the perspective of gambling as deviant behaviour became entrenched (Rosecrance, 1985). Reflecting the emergence of alternative paradigms in the social sciences, several studies explored the social and historical construction of gambling and offered alternative perspectives to pathology.⁷ These studies situated gambling as a normative leisure activity amenable to the usual methods and subjects of social science inquiry.⁸ The shortcomings of social policy that were intended to ameliorate the impact of gambling, especially among children, were also discussed, but comparison to other jurisdictions and approaches - the cornerstone of social scientific inquiry - is absent in this literature ([Kelly, 1988](#)).

Only a handful of ethnographic and qualitative studies appear in the 1980s, although a sprinkling of these approaches appeared across the 20-year span examined. In a special issue of the journal *Oceania* devoted to anthropological studies of gambling emerge functional descriptions of gambling in postcolonial societies in the south Pacific. These studies describe patterns of resource distribution and involvement according to gender, age, and occupation and offer sociopolitical and cultural explanations for observed patterns and meanings given to play.⁹ In contrast to social epidemiological studies that problematize gambling as a deviance or disease, the ethnographic and other qualitative studies published in the 1980s present a thicker description of gambling in situ as a social form embedded in everyday life and warn against overmedicalizing such complex social forms ([Hunter & Spargo, 1988](#)). With the exception of two studies from the United Kingdom (Saunders & Turner, 1987) and Spain (Tubery, 1987), most

nonepidemiological studies published during this decade are concerned with gambling among indigenous societies experiencing rapid social change.

The 1980s: Key findings and directions

By the end of the 1980s, a deviance perspective on gambling was firmly established and the clear message emerged that more information about the distribution of problem and pathological forms was urgently needed to deal with anticipated social and public-health problems. Further, retrospective reviews of research encouraged scholars to take seriously questions of survey and sample design, variation in play and pathology among subgroups of the population, and methods used to screen for pathological gambling. The literature from this period signals clearly emerging concern about adolescent gambling and highlights the relative lack of information about diversity in the prevalence of gambling, particularly pathological forms, among subgroups. Most significantly, these early reviews and studies were unanimous in calling for better epidemiological data on gambling and predicted that increased opportunities and changing attitudes towards gambling would be accompanied by an increase in individual and social pathology. The few ethnographic studies from this decade reflect the functionalist orientation of anthropological studies of that time, with a clear focus on local settings. There is limited linkage to emerging global trends, however, and the predominantly cultural relativist stance is at odds with the position taken by the problematizing disciplines.

The 1990s: An explosion of surveys

A large body of research emerged in the 1990s, focused primarily on identifying the distribution of recreational, problem, and pathological gambling in society ([McGowan et al., 2000](#)). The largest contribution was made by quantitative sociologists and clinical psychologists who focused on problem and pathological gambling as deviant behaviours, although there is a limited representation from anthropologists, qualitative sociologists, social psychologists, and other less quantitative or pathology-oriented social scientists. Accordingly, the literature across this decade of research is dominated by prevalence studies in the form of social epidemiological surveys of the frequency and distribution of gambling (particularly problem and/or pathological forms as codified in the DSM) among representative samples of regional or national populations. Gambling for recreational purposes is given some attention, although usually as a descriptive prelude to analysis of the prevalence of problem or pathological gambling.

Prevalence of problem and pathological gambling.

Nearly half (47.5%) of the studies identified by [McGowan et al. \(2000\)](#) were concerned with describing the prevalence of problem or pathological gambling. Several methodological issues were addressed, including instruments used as screening tools. In short order, gambling researchers began to refer to probable or potential pathological gambling, reflecting earlier contestations of the validity of screening tools such as the SOGS, an instrument developed originally for screening individuals in clinical settings, but used increasingly in population surveys.

Seventy-eight percent of studies were concerned with estimating the prevalence of problem or (probable/potential) pathological gambling from primary data (i.e., collected by the authors for the purpose of the study, in contrast with data re-analyzed from other studies). Problem or (probable/potential) pathological gambling was ascertained by the use of screening instruments such as the SOGS or a variant, a DSM-based questionnaire, or another instrument such as the Manitoba Gambling Pre-Screen (MGPS) or Canadian Problem Gambling Instrument (CPGI). The SOGS became increasingly popular and was employed in 58 of the studies identified from the 1990s. In contrast, DSM-based screening instruments were used in 15 studies; other instruments were used in 6.

Included in the prevalence studies published between 1990 and 2000 were surveys comprising large representative samples drawn from populations in the United States,¹⁰ the United Kingdom,¹¹ Canada,¹²12 New Zealand,¹³ Australia,¹⁴ Spain,¹⁵ Switzerland ([Bondolfi, Osiek, & Ferrero, 2000](#)), the Netherlands ([Hendriks, Meerkerk, Van Oers, & Garretsen, 1997](#)), and Turkey ([Duvarci, Varan, Coskunol, & Ersoy, 1997](#)), as well as subregions within these countries.

This body of research included studies that focused on specific social and demographic sectors, such as children or youth,¹⁶ college students,¹⁷ and specific ethno-cultural groups;¹⁸ seniors ([Citizen Advocacy Society of Lethbridge, 1995](#)); persons seeking help¹⁹ or in treatment for gambling or other problems;²⁰ persons residing in medical or correctional institutions;²¹ service providers ([Doupe, 1999](#)); or groups such as lottery ticket buyers or other active gamblers ([Hendriks et al. 1997](#)) and casino employees (Shaffer, Vander Bilt, & Hall, 1999). A number of studies that yielded estimated prevalence rates for problem and/or (probable/potential) pathological gambling included Native American/First Nations or other indigenous peoples.²² One third of these prevalence studies (which include both primary and secondary analyses of data) and nearly 40% of the studies concerning First Nations peoples were conducted by Canadian researchers studying regional or other populations ([McGowan et al., 2000](#)).²³

The estimated prevalence rate for problem gambling in the general population as

reported in this literature ranges from 1% to 11% for adults and from 2.3% to 21% for children and youths. Estimates of (probable/potential) pathological gambling rates range from 0% to 4.6% among adults and from 1.7% to 8.5% among children and youth, with higher estimates reported for First Nations and other indigenous populations and persons residing in correctional or treatment facilities ([McGowan et al., 2000](#)). Sampling and survey methods, screening instruments, and other factors vary widely across studies, however. Accordingly, estimates of the prevalence of problem and (probable/potential) pathological gambling should not be consulted without reference to the methods used.

Explaining and dealing with gambling

Among the research literature concerned with problem or (probable/potential) pathological gambling published in the 1990s were studies that did not centre on estimating the distribution of problem or pathological gambling in society. A limited number, attempting to understand why people (particularly youth) gamble, explored motivation and other factors influencing involvement with gambling, such as risk-taking behaviours.²⁴ In addressing the question of why people become involved in gambling, this research makes reference to both internal and external processes, including theories of self-determination and risk-taking²⁵ and an integrated set of internal (e.g., cognition and affect) and external (e.g., peer group and family) influences and processes.²⁶ The consensus among these studies, if one can be had, is that involvement in gambling is associated with a complex set of motivations and influences, with both external and internal dimensions.

As public concern increased over the negative impacts of gambling expansion, more attention was paid to the impacts of public policy or studies of behaviours and attitudes relevant for public policy development.²⁷ These studies relied upon a combination of original research (surveys) and review of data from other studies. The ambivalence of public attitude towards gambling is made apparent in much of this research, as the balance sheet of negative versus positive returns remains unresolved. Little clear direction for future public policy on gambling emerges, although regional, demographic, and other variation in attitudes and involvement are described.

As researchers looked to the wider contexts of gambling, they explored the relationship of problem or (probable/potential) pathological gambling with peer, family, and other societal influences (Browne & Brown, 1993); developmental patterns;²⁸ gender;²⁹ and coexisting problems such as substance abuse, suicide, homelessness, and crime.³⁰ A number of these studies were concerned with the implications of their findings for the development of prevention and treatment services,³¹ especially among youth³² and in particular where gambling coexists

with other problem behaviours or social-psychological attributes.³³

The literature of the period 1990 to 2000, although dominated by researchers preoccupied with estimating prevalence rates, also included research on public attitudes, social and economic impacts, and other consequences of gambling in various countries.³⁴ Of particular interest was the emerging concern with social and economic impacts and consequences for Native American/First Nations peoples, including public attitudes, coincident with a number of these communities investing in casino operations to revitalize their economies.³⁵

The 1990s: Key findings and directions

The prevalence studies that dominated scholarly research in gambling between 1990 and 2000 give some shape to the pattern and distribution of problem and (probable/potential) pathological gambling in contemporary society. We learned that most adults and many youth have gambled at some time, but only a small proportion experienced problems associated with this activity. In these studies, Native American/First Nations and other indigenous peoples, as well as adults seeking help or in treatment for a range of other problems (e.g., mental health, addiction to alcohol or other drugs), and persons residing in correctional facilities appear to experience disproportionately higher rates of problem and (probable/potential) pathological gambling than the general population.

This literature indicates that gender and religious affiliation correlate modestly with differences in involvement in gambling. Although lower income groups tend to be less involved in gambling than middle income groups, they spend a larger proportion of their disposable income on gambling. Several significant findings emerge concerning gambling among young people. Echoing earlier studies on youth substance abuse, these findings show that younger age at initiation into gambling correlates with greater involvement in adulthood. Further, youth problem gambling is demonstrated to occur most often in the context of coexisting substance abuse and peer and family involvement with gambling. These findings suggest that further attention should be paid to age, gender, development, and social-cultural-economic contexts as societal attitudes and forms of play change and gambling opportunities increase.

As noted by [McGowan et al. \(2000\)](#), the literature of this period is remarkable for the relative lack of systematic research on the social and cultural impacts of gambling, which tend to be commented upon rather than analyzed. The absence of explicit social theory, either as organizing conceptual framework or as new perspectives on the social reality of gambling ([Garner, 2000](#)), is particularly noticeable. Regarding Native American/First Nations and other indigenous communities, the limited research indicates that gambling in the modern context

contributes to the rapid pace of social and cultural change and is a “mixed blessing” ([Hsu, 1999](#)) with strong positive and negative impacts ranging from gambling as the “new buffalo” that invigorates local economies, on the one hand, to a destructive force that contributes significantly to the fragmentation of communities (e.g., over on-reserve casinos), on the other.

Discussion: Epistemic cultures and tensions in scholarly interest in gambling

Social and cultural research on gambling is remarkably diverse, including a number of disciplines operating as distinct epistemic cultures. The humanities, particularly literature, have paid attention to the social and cultural contexts of gambling over a significant period of time (cf., [Dostoyevsky, 1999/1866](#)). Other disciplines were relatively ambivalent to gambling as an object of scholarly research until the 1990s, however, with the exception of some earlier works by psychoanalysts (e.g., [Freud, 1928](#)), social theorists (e.g., [Goffman, 1969](#)), and anthropologists (e.g., [Callois, 1962](#); [Huizinga, 1949](#)). By the end of the 20th century, scholarly researchers from a variety of disciplines had embraced the study of gambling with great enthusiasm (cf., [Reith, 1999](#)).

Several contrasting epistemic cultures can be detected in this later literature, such as between perspectives focusing on gambling either as pathology or as social life writ large. The other contrast lies between positivist (or postpositivist; [Creswell, 2003](#)) and social constructivist paradigms. On the one hand, positivist/postpositivist research traditions objectify gambling; on the other, constructivists focus on the subjectivities and contexts in which gambling takes place.

Positivist/postpositivist disciplines such as clinical psychology came to dominate the scholarly literature on the social and cultural dimensions of gambling published over this 20-year span. The body of literature that emerged focused largely on describing the pattern of problem and (probable/potential) pathological gambling across sociodemographic sectors of society, with some attempts to identify associations and correlations among both discrete and continuous variables, such as diagnostic type, age, gender, type of play, frequency of play, and problems associated with gambling. Accordingly, this research exemplifies a focus on pathology within the realist tradition of modernist science, a perspective that emphasizes deductive knowledge obtained by capturing data through quantitative measurement of specific variables. From this point of view, the study of gambling emerges as an objective and value-free activity intent upon identifying and manipulating variables that may, in turn, be predicted and controlled ([Guba & Lincoln, 1994](#)). What is presented is a body of scholarly research that is rigorous in its methods and generalizable in its output, but curiously lacking social, cultural, and historical contexts of gambling as well as the lived experience of gamblers.

Some scholars have called for a deeper mining of observed patterns of gambling among particular segments of society than has emerged to date, suggesting objects and subjects of study, theoretical frameworks, and methods that explore gambling in the context of varied and complex life experiences. For example, [Lesieur and Heineman \(1988\)](#) called for more contextually based research to shed light on the overlapping social worlds of the substance-abusing gambler and the gambling substance abuser. [Mark and Lesieur \(1992\)](#), pointing to gender biases in gambling research, noted that research concerning women's experiences of problem gambling must take into account the relationship issues that women face, citing as examples dominance, subordinate status, and social sanctions. More recently, McMillen (1996), stepping deliberately away from a focus on pathology, reminded us that gambling is a social practice ubiquitous in human social history, occurring across culture, time, and place, and requiring that context be fully comprehended.

[Guba and Lincoln \(1994\)](#), among others, suggested that social institutions and practices - what Rowse (1996) has called “social technologies” - must be understood as embedded in particular cultural and historical contexts. Accordingly, the meanings given to the experience of engaging in a social practice or institutional form are understood to be socially constructed. It is to these meanings that we act, rather than to the thing itself. Taking into account the social construction of gambling as a social technology suggests that different conceptual tools and explicitly political approaches are required to fully comprehend contemporary forms (McMillen, 1996), including their influencers and impacts, than are commonly applied. Other than McMillen, relatively few scholars included in this review identified the need to situate our knowledge of gambling in the contexts in which gambling takes place. These pleas for research that contextualizes and provides a “thicker description” ([Geertz, 1983](#)) of gambling index a perceived need to reexamine the relative merits of alternative perspectives (e.g., of anthropology, qualitative sociology, and social and humanistic psychology) that will broaden our understanding of this phenomenon beyond the narrow focus of objectivist research.

Tension among epistemic research cultures is neither a new nor a recent phenomenon. Within the confines of alcohol and other drug studies, this tension has been noticed and commented upon previously. For example, [Room \(1984\)](#) placed his finger squarely upon the issue with regard to alcohol, noting the tension between scholarly perspectives that tend to either inflate or deflate problematic aspects of drinking behaviours. In gambling studies, [Reith \(1999\)](#) suggests that this tension traces to two dominant perspectives on gambling that derive, on the one hand, from the Platonic tradition, which sees gambling as a form of play that cannot be meaningfully separated from other social practices, and, on the other, the Aristotelian tradition, which perceives gambling as “essentially problematic”

and as a “deliberate courting of the chaotic forces of chance [and] a threat to the moral order of society” ([Reith, 1999](#), p. 5).

As [Reith \(1999\)](#) points out, the latter tradition is ascendant in the modern “risk society” and is reflected in public preoccupation with dangerous outcomes of behaviours associated with deviance and disease. Assessment of these risks is most often phrased in terms of probabilities and is depoliticized. Indeed, the “public perception of risk is treated as if it were the aggregated response of millions of private individuals” rather than a culturally standardized response ([Douglas, 1992](#), p. 40). In its treatment of risks associated with gambling, gambling research itself, as a specific human activity, can be seen to be embedded in the same cultural systems and paradigms that inform our most mundane experiences.

Present and possible trajectories

Why is the scholarly research on gambling so quiet about the place and meaning of gambling in everyday life and about the larger societal issues and trends in which gambling and the gambler's experience are embedded? One reason may lie in tensions among and between epistemic cultures of research. In their comprehensive review of anthropological studies of alcohol and other drug research, for example, [Hunt and Barker \(2001\)](#) suggested that, because social science traditionally functions as cultural critique, its methods and perspectives are viewed suspiciously and resisted by disciplines that engage “traditional” empirical epistemologies. The “culturally innocent” (MacDonald, 1994), individualized, and essentialized nature of gambling as perceived through a positivist/postpositivist lens is questioned and destabilized by social science perspectives that emphasize the messy business of gambling as symbolic, political, historically situated, or culturally constructed ([Hunt & Barker, 2001](#)).

The present trajectory of social and cultural research on gambling points to increasingly decontextualized knowledge focused on pathology and deviance and disengaged from advances in contemporary social theory. This trajectory leads away from research that situates the phenomenon of gambling in the rich texture of everyday life (Smith, 1987), social structural issues ([Bourgeois, 2003](#)), political and economic trends (Baer, Singer, & Susser, 1997), and the impact of misogyny and racism ([Gamson, 2003](#); [Ladson-Billings, 2003](#)). Furthering our knowledge about gambling in contemporary society requires that the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which gambling is embedded receive adequate attention. A socially and culturally engaged body of research will encourage critical examination of commonly used constructs (e.g., ethnicity, gender, culture) and challenge orthodoxies such as biomedical models that emphasize gambling as pathology (e.g., as per Spicer, 2001). Moreover, this approach will encourage exploration of the symbolic meanings of gambling in its diverse forms and contexts, as well as

social, political, and historical analyses and comparisons with other social practices and institutions.

Unfortunately, the underlying theory is rarely made explicit in gambling research. Indeed, in the present review of 20 years of social and cultural research on gambling, few studies tested, contested, modified, or developed social science theory related to gambling, such as advances in feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, narrative theory, globalization studies, and political economy. Fewer still employed the hermeneutic or dialectical methods characteristic of social constructivist approaches to research.

Have the dominant epidemiological and clinical psychological paradigms provided the key to preventing problems associated with gambling? Some would argue that this has not occurred in any arena where major health problems are concerned ([Hunt & Barker, 2001](#)). What is desperately needed is nuanced, politically engaged, and culturally informed research that is grounded in the social, cultural, historical, and everyday contexts in which gambling is embedded.

Notes

Notes

¹There exists some controversy associated with the terms “gaming” and “gambling” among scholars. “Gaming” is generally applied, particularly in government documents, to a variety of forms of play where games of skill or chance are involved, whereas “gambling” is understood to apply to activities involving wagering of money or items of worth, with varying degrees of chance and uncertainty in the outcome of play. Reith (1999, p. 1) offers this definition of gambling: “a ritual which is strictly demarcated from the everyday world around it and within which chance is deliberately courted as a mechanism which governs a redistribution of wealth among players as well as a commercial interest or ‘house.’” Although a commercial interest or house is not always involved in non-Western experiences of play, scholarly researchers most often use the term “gambling,” and this is the term selected for this paper.

²As presented in a critically annotated bibliography prepared for the Alberta Gaming Research Institute ([McGowan, Droessler, Nixon, & Grimshaw, 2000](#)).

³Where more than one study is cited, the author reference will appear in these endnotes to facilitate the reading of the text, as suggested by an anonymous reviewer.

⁴[Ellis, 1984](#); [Ide-Smith & Lea, 1988](#)

⁵Abt, McGurrin, & Smith, 1985; [Betzbe, 1987](#); [Dixey, 1987](#); [Panelas, 1983](#)

⁶[Dickerson & Hinchy, 1988](#); [Jacobs, 1989](#); [Lesieur & Klein, 1987](#); [Lesieur, 1989a,b](#); [Lesieur & Klein, 1987](#); Sommers, 1988; Volberg & Steadman, 1988, 1989 a,b.

⁷Abt, McGurrin, & Smith et al., 1985; Wasserman, 1982

⁸[Dixey, 1987](#); [Panelas, 1983](#)

⁹[Goodale, 1987](#); Rubenstein, 1987; Sexton, 1987; Zimmer, 1987 a,b

¹⁰[Cunningham-Williams, Cottler, Compton, & Spitznagel, 1998](#); Stinchfield, Cassuto, Winters, & Latimer, 1997; Volberg, 1993 a,b, 1994; Volberg & Stuefen, 1994; Wallisch, 1996

¹¹[Fisher, 1999](#); Griffiths, Scarfe, & Bellringer, 1999; [Pugh & Webley, 2000](#)

¹²[Dickinson, 1994](#); [Govoni, Frisch, Rupcich, & Getty, 1998](#); [Ladouceur, 1991](#); Ladouceur, Dube, & Bujold, 1994 a,b; [Ladouceur, Jacques, Ferland, & Giroux, 1999](#); Wynne, Smith, & Volberg, 1994; Wynne Resources & AADAC, 1998

¹³Volberg & Abbott, 1994; Abbott & Volberg, 1997

¹⁴[Dickerson, Baron, Hong, & Cottrell, 1996](#); [Moore & Ohtsuka, 1997](#)

¹⁵[Becona, 1997](#); Legarda, Babio, & Abreu, 1992

¹⁶[Adebayo, 1998](#); Cool Aid Society of Grande Prairie, 1995; [Fisher, 1999](#); [Moore & Ohtsuka, 1997](#); Westphal, Rush, Stevens, & Johnson, 2000; Wiebe, 1999; Wynne, Smith, & Jacobs, 1996

¹⁷[Adebayo, 1995](#); Derevensky, Gupta, & Cioppa, 1996; [Devlin & Peppard, 1996](#); [Frank, 1990](#); Ladouceur, Dube & Bujold, et al., 1994 a,b; Winters, Bengston, Dorr, & Stinchfield, 1998

¹⁸[Blaszczynski, Huynh, Dumlao, & Farrell, 1998](#); [Cuadrado, 1999](#); [Lo, 1996](#)

¹⁹Griffiths, Scarfe & Bellringer et al., 1999; [Pasternak & Fleming, 1999](#); Sullivan, Abbott, McAvoy, & Arroll, 1994

²⁰[Beaudoin & Cox, 1999](#); Ciarrocchi, 1993; Spunt, Lesieur, Hunt, & Cahill, 1995

²¹Daghestani, Elenz, & Crayton, 1996; [Miller & Westermeyer, 1996](#); Templar, Kaiser & Siscoe, 1993; Walters, 1997; Westphal, Rush, Stevens, & Johnson, 1998

²²[Cozzetto & Larocque, 1996](#); [Elia & Jacobs, 1993](#); [Hewitt, 1994](#); [Hewitt & Auger, 1995](#); Napi Friendship Centre & AADAC, 1996; Peacock, Day, & Peacock, 1999 a,b; Volberg, 1993a, 1994; Volberg & Abbott, 1997; Zitzow, 1992

²³For a complete chronological list of prevalence studies published by country, region, sample, methods, and results, the reader is referred to the review matrix presented in McGowan et al. et al., 2000 (Appendix B, pp. 196-209).

²⁴Chantal, Vallerand, & Vallieres, 1995; Coups, Haddock, & Webley, 1998; Cross, Basten, Hendrick, Krostofic, & Schaffer, 1998; [Moore & Ohtsuka, 1997](#); [Powell, Haroon, Derevensky, & Gupta, 1999](#); Westphal, Rush, Stevens & Johnson, et al., 2000; Wood & Griffiths, 1998

²⁵[Chantal et al., 1995](#); [Cross et al., 1998](#); Westphal et al., 2000

²⁶[Coups et al., 1998](#); [Moore & Ohtsuka, 1997](#)

²⁷[Albers & Hubl, 1997](#); [Azmier, 2000](#); [Azmier & Smith, 1998](#); [Albers & Hubl, 1997](#); [Blevins & Jensen, 1998](#); Browne & Brown, 1993; [Campbell & Smith, 1998](#); [Cosby, May, Frese, & Dunaway, 1996](#); [Huxley & Carroll, 1992](#); [Kearney, Roblek, Thurman, & Turnborough, 1996](#); Ladouceur, Dube & Bujold, et al., 1994a; [Lorenz, 1990](#); [Preston, Bernhard, Hunter, & Bybees, 1998](#); Pu g h & Webley, 2000; Quintim Business Services, 1995; [Reno, 1996](#); Thompson, 1998; Wynne, 2000

²⁸Derevensky et al., Gupta, & Cioppa, 1996; [Griffiths, 1990](#); [Mok & Hraba, 1991](#); Trott & Griffiths, 1991; Vitaro, Ladouceur, & Bujold, 1996; Wenger, McKechnie, & Kaplan, 1996; Winters, Stinchfield, & Kim, 1995

²⁹[Bruce & Johnson, 1994, 1996](#); Toneatto & Skinner, 2000; Trevorrow & Moore, 1998

³⁰[Barnes, Welte, Hoffman, & Dintcheff, 1999](#); Blasczczyński & Farrell, 1998; Blasczczyński & McConaghy, 1994; Blasczczyński & Steel, 1998; Blasczczyński & Farrell, 1998; [Breslin, Cappell, Sobell, & Vakili, 1999](#); [Buchta, 1995](#); Campbell, Simmons, & Lester, 1999; Castellani, Wootton, Rusic, Wedgeworth, Prabucki, & Olson, et al., 1996; [Chang, 1996](#); [Ladouceur, Boisvert, Pepin, Loranger, & Sylvain, 1994](#); [Meyer & Fabian, 1992](#); [Meyer & Stadler, 1999](#); [Miller & Schwartz, 1998](#); [Ochrym, 1990](#); Smart & Ferris, 1996; Smith & Wynne, 1999; Stinchfield, Cassuto, Winters, & Latimer, et al., 1997; Templer, Moten, & Kaiser, 1994; Thomas, 1996; Winters, Stinchfield, & Fulkerson, 1993; Yeoman & Griffiths, 1996

³¹Ladouceur, Dube, & Bujold, et al., 1994 a,b; Ladouceur, Boisvert, Pepin, Loranger, & Sylvain et al., 1994; [Morgan, Kofoed, Buchkoski, & Carr, 1996](#)

³²[Kaminer & Petry, 1999](#); Ladouceur, Jacques, Ferland, & Giroux, et al., 1999; Lesieur, Cross, Frank, Welch, White, Rubenstein, Moseley, & Mark et al., 1991

³³[Kaminer & Petry, 1999](#); Ladouceur, Jacques, Ferland, & Giroux, et al., 1999; Lesieur, Cross, Frank, Welch, White, Rubenstein, Moseley, & Mark et al., 1991

³⁴Aasved, Schaefer, & Merila, 1995; [Abbott & Volberg, 1996](#); Brown, Kaldenberg, & Browne, 1992; [Hermkerns & Kok, 1990](#); [Hsu, 1999](#); [Kiedrowski, 1995](#); Nova Scotia Lottery Commission, 1993

³⁵[Azmier, 2000](#); [Cozzetto, 1995](#); [Duffie, 1998](#); [Goldin, 1999](#); [Gordon, Brassard, Coutts, Laing, & Oberg, 1996](#); [Long, 1995](#); National Council of Welfare (Canada), 1996; US National Gambling Impact Study Commission, 1999; Wojciechowski, 1997

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