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The Real of problem gambling households

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Abstract

In this article, problem gambling stories of eight Norwegian households are interpreted in the light of Jacques Lacan's concept of the Real. It is argued that the concept of the Real may help us to see, formulate, and visualize aspects of these stories that usually elude our attention: the hidden and incomprehensible order of a household that impacts its members' everyday lives and concepts of self.

Résumé

Dans cet article, l'histoire de huit foyers norvégiens ayant connu des problèmes

liés au jeu est soumise à une interprétation reposant sur le concept de Réel élaboré par Jacques Lacan. On y défend l'idée selon laquelle le concept lacanien de Réel peut contribuer à voir, à formuler et à envisager différentes facettes de ces histoires qui habituellement échappent à notre attention. Ces facettes sont liées à un ordre familial caché et incompréhensible qui exerce une influence sur la vie quotidienne des membres de la famille et la constitution de leur personnalité.

Introduction

If you ask problem gamblers why they gamble or why they keep on gambling even though they know how damaging it is, they may have no answer. Likewise, if you ask spouses if they know why their partner gambles or if their partner has stopped gambling, they probably do not know. Indeed, they may refer to theories of addiction and relapse statistics, but for some reason the lack of answer and the “I-do-not-know” seem more convincing, more to the point, than the clever explanations. And as you listen to their stories about what problem gambling does to a household, you realize that these households, more than any other, know how it is to live under insecure household conditions of not knowing what the household's situation is, how it got to this point, and if and how it will change in the future.

The research question of this article is: how do households¹ experience and handle gambling problems? The analysis draws on typical problem gambling stories, as told by eight Norwegian households in which one adult member (in all cases the man) had been in group therapy for gambling addiction. The households' stories are interpreted in light of Jacques Lacan's term *the Real*, in brief referring to parts of our existence that have not been wholly perceived or interpreted. It is argued that the concept of the Real may help us to see, formulate, and visualize aspects of problem gambling at home that usually elude our attention: the hidden and incomprehensible aspect of problem gambling that impacts the household members' everyday lives and concepts of self.

Over the last decades, problem gambling at home has been researched in a number of contributions (for a literature review, see, for example, [Abbot, Cramer, & Sherrets, 1995](#); [Gaudia, 1987](#); [Kalischuk, Nowatzki, Cardwell, Klein, & Solowoniuk, 2006](#); [McComb, Lee, & Sprenkle, 2009](#); [Shaw, Forbust, Schlinder, Rosenman, & Black, 2007](#)). A common notion is that problem gambling is an addiction that has an impact on households financially, socially, legally, medically, emotionally, and existentially (see, e.g., [Abbott et al., 1995](#); [Custer & Milt, 1985](#); [Franklin & Thoms, 1989](#); [Gaudia, 1987](#); [Lorenz, 1987](#); [Øren & Bakken, 2007](#); [Shaw et al., 2007](#)). Households with gambling problems go through phases of denial, stress, and exhaustion (e.g., [Dowling, Smith, & Thomas, 2007](#)). Spouses of problem gamblers

may experience a loss of trust that can “never be restored” ([Dickson-Swift, James, & Kippen, 2005](#), p. 8). Children may feel “a pervasive loss [that] encompassed both physical and existential aspects of the child's life, including their parent(s), relationships, trust, security, sense of home, and material goods” ([Darbyshire, Oster, & Carrig, 2001](#), pp. 23–24). Yet, although previous gambling studies have given valuable insight into the impact of problem gambling on households, very few, if any, have seriously discussed the hidden and incomprehensible aspects of problem gambling and its impact on the household's everyday life and self-concept. In this respect, this research dealing with the Real of problem gambling households fills a gap in previous gambling studies.

The Real is the most difficult and at the same time the most fascinating concept of Jacques Lacan's theories. The theories, which can be described as re-readings of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis combined with ideas from scholars such as Edmund Husserl, Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Ferdinand de Saussure, had great influence on intellectuals in the 1960s and the 1970s. Today, psychoanalytic theories have been used to describe a variety of topics, including problem gambling (e.g., [Bjerg, 2008, 2009](#); [Jacobs, 1986](#); [Livingstone, 2005](#); [Schüll, 2006](#)). As the theories may be new for some readers, the first part of this paper presents the basic concepts of Lacan's psychoanalysis. Special attention is given to the Real and its closest related terms, the symbolic and the imaginary. The second part provides a brief description of the sample on which the analysis is based. The third part analyses problem gambling stories of eight Norwegian households in the light of the Real. The last section summarizes, concludes, and raises questions for further research.

Lacan's Psychoanalysis and the Concept of the Real

Jacques Lacan's theories are part of a long philosophical tradition in which human existence is understood as based upon a desire for existential meaning and completeness ([Rekdal, 1992](#)). Some of its most basic components can be introduced by using Lacan's *schema L*.

S refers to the subject, *a* to the mother, who is also called “the thing” (that which the subject desires) or the “objet petit a” (the cause of desire), and \tilde{a} to the real father (the ego ideal). *A* refers to the symbolic father, also called “the symbolic order,” “the Other,” “the name of the father,” and “the law” (of which the incest taboo is the most original prohibition of all). As a starting point, the child (the subject) desires the mother. However, at some point, the child starts separating from the mother, partially because it begins to see itself as being different from her (amongst other things, because she lacks a phallus), and partially because the child realizes that the mother cannot be possessed (amongst other reasons, because she is hindered by the law). When the child separates from the mother, its

desire changes from being directed towards the mother to being directed towards the object of the mother's desire: first the real father, and then the symbolic father. This separation from the mother creates a feeling of absence and a lack that is articulated both as a trauma and as a longing for total pleasure, existential meaning, and wholeness ([Bjerg, 2008, 2009](#); [Rekdal, 1992](#)). During a process often referred to as “the symbolic castration,” the subject accepts the absence, the lack, and the law and becomes part of the symbolic order, that is, the social context of which the subject is a part. As the thing (the object of desire) cannot be attained, it is by means of fantasy replaced by a substitute that first has a sexual component, and then is transformed to other forms of desire – art, work, family, money, consumption, gambling, and so forth. Subjects who refuse the symbolic castration may become psychotic. The symbolic castration is, in this respect, decisive in terms of the formation of subjects and cultures.

As indicated here, Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis is based upon the idea that the thing is the object of desire, but as the thing cannot be attained, the desire cannot be satisfied. The thing plays a role in the three dimensions of human existence: the Real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. The Real is the experience of the missing thing. The imaginary masks the absence of the thing and is the illusionary experience of wholeness, despite the lack. The symbolic accepts this lack and replaces it with a substitute ([Rekdal, 1992](#)). The next sub-sections provide a more detailed description of the Real, the symbolic, and the imaginary order. Although the three orders are heavily simplified and tentatively translated from an individual or social level onto a household level, much effort is made to keep their original meanings intact. To show how my use of the terms differs from their original meaning, each sub-section starts with a brief presentation of how the terms were originally used.

The Real

A social constructed reality is a reality primarily based on language. What cannot be symbolized, that is, expressed verbally, bodily, or materially, is not part of the reality. Yet, while most social constructivist theories focus on the symbolized parts of our existence – on “Reality” – Jacques Lacan also paid attention to that which is not being symbolized. Inspired by Heidegger's term “ex-ist,” he reserved a special term for it, the Real, in brief, referring to an “ex-istence” outside or apart from Reality ([Fink, 1995](#)). Although the term changed meaning throughout Lacan's career, its basic function remained the same, to name the part of our existence that resists symbolization, “that” which may be approached, but never grasped ([Evans, 1996](#); [Homer, 2005](#); [Lacan, 1977](#)).

Although Lacan placed the Real “outside” Reality, parts of the Real are here placed “inside” the household's Reality, representing that which has not been wholly perceived or interpreted by its members. The household's Real has two modalities,

one that is not perceived at all, and one that is partially perceived and interpreted ([Žižek, 1991](#)). Whereas the not-perceived Real represents black holes that by virtue of being “nothing” can be filled with anything – meaninglessness, hopes, dreams, horror, and anxiety ([Bjerg, 2008](#); [Fink, 1995](#); [Lacan, 2006](#)) – the partially perceived Real represents grey holes of “something” that can be sensed and acknowledged but never wholly comprehended ([Fink, 1995](#); [Lacan, 2006](#); [Žižek, 1991](#)). The Real's modality and its content change throughout a household's problem gambling career. For instance, before the problem gambling is discovered, the Real is disputable – sensed but neglected (Real₁). However, after the problem gambling is discovered, it is indisputable – acknowledged but incomprehensible (Real₂; [Fink, 1995](#); [Lacan, 2006](#)). The moment in which the problem gambling is discovered should not be underestimated. To illustrate the drama of the discovering, by [Hook \(2003\)](#) called “the moment of collapse”, I draw on an example from Lacan, in which he describes Freud's experiences as his patient, Irma, opens her mouth and exposes her inner body:

There's a horrendous discovery here, that of the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things, the other side of the head, of the face, the secretory glands *par excellence*, the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery, the flesh in as much as it is suffering, is formless, in as much as its form in itself is something which provokes anxiety. Spectre of anxiety, identification of anxiety, the final revelation of *you are this – You are this, which is so far from you, this which is the ultimate formlessness*. ([Lacan, 1988](#), pp. 154–155)

As Irma opens her mouth, Freud gets a glimpse into the Real and sees something he has never seen before, “the most horrific sight” ([Hook, 2003](#)), the other side of Irma's head, the ultimate formlessness that he – in a spectre of anxiety – recognizes as himself: This, which is so far from him, is also him.

A Real is, in other words, basically referring to “the other side of the household,” the unknown nothing or incomprehensible something that has an impact on the household members' everyday lives and concepts of self. From Lacan's point of view, the Real is supposed to influence the symbolic and imaginary order from its “outer” position without being mutually impacted upon (see, e.g., [Fink, 1995](#)). In accordance with the basic social constructivist view, however, processes of symbolization are based on previous experiences – on experiences that, in the terminology of Lacan, are placed in the symbolic or the imaginary. For instance, if the symbolic does not offer any models explaining the Real, it will not be symbolized, but remains Real. In this respect, the resistance may not be located in the household's Real, but in the symbolic.

The Symbolic

The symbolic, introduced in the 1950–60s, essentially refers to an order of signs (“signifiers”), linguistics, and discourses, including “the unconscious,” “the Other,” and “the law”. The symbolic order is based on a social exchange of signs structured by laws. Each sign exchanged gets most of its meaning in relation to other signs. “Presence” is, for instance, understood as the opposite of “absence,” “ordinary” as the opposite of “deviant,” and so forth ([Evans, 1996](#)). The subject is an effect of the symbolic order and is, like its source, split ([Rekdal, 1992](#)). Although Lacan primarily saw the symbolic as an order of signs, linguistics, and discourses, it here refers primarily to the household's order of practices – the routines and rituals of everyday life – which again is shaped and reshaped by the order of signs, linguistics, and discourses. The order of practices constitutes, in other words, not only the behavioural articulation of the order of the signs, linguistics, and discourses, but also the Reality in which their order is rooted. Hence, in contrast to the theory of Lacan, the symbolic order of a household operates at two levels, both as an order of signs and as an order of practices. Behind this radical change is the idea that a practical order may seem strange in a theory about the human psyche, but is decisive in a theory about household structures.

Like Lacan's order of signs, linguistics, and discourses, the household's order of practices is supposed to be based on social exchange. The exchanged signs get most of their meaning in relation to other signs, particularly their oppositions. The idea of a dysfunctional and chaotic “problem gambling household” may, for instance, be regarded as the opposite of the vital and harmonic “non-problem gambling household.” Yet, even though households may be regarded either as imbalanced and dysfunctional or as balanced and vital, they are, according to Lacan's theories of the subject, split; that is, they are both dysfunctional and chaotic and vital and harmonic at the same time. As all household members have undergone the same process of separation, both the non-problem gambling household and the problem gambling household are traumatized. However, whereas problem gambling households may attempt to handle this trauma, non-problem households may neglect it.

The Imaginary

The imaginary is most essentially associated with Lacan's concept of “the mirror stage,” first introduced in the 1930s, in which the subjects look at themselves in the mirror and learn to distinguish themselves from the Other (symbolized with the mother). The separation from the Other is associated with a trauma. When subjects look at themselves in the mirror and compare what they see with how they experience themselves and others, some spots, the Real, are missing. Although some of the missing spots are filled in and smoothed out with ideas from the symbolic, others remain a Real. The Real constitutes in this respect an important part of a subject's self-understanding, representing the genuine I and me: that part

of ourselves that can be neither articulated nor grasped ([Bjerg, 2008](#)).

In this article, the imaginary primarily refers to the household's self-concept. When household members look at the household in the mirror, missing parts are filled with images shaped and reshaped in the household's symbolic order. For instance, before the problems are discovered, the Real may be filled with images of the non-problem household. After the problems are discovered, however, it may be filled with images of the problem gambling household. The change from being a non-problem household into being a problem gambling household is thereby assumed to be experienced as a traumatic, irretrievable loss of a previous household image, the thing, the household that once was or could have been.

Whereas Lacan insisted on distinguishing between the Real, the imaginary, and the symbolic ([Lacan, 1977](#)), the limits between them are here regarded as blurred. The concepts put forward by Lacan must not, of course, be seen as actual orders of the households, but as analytical tools for helping us to approach problem gambling in households.

Method

This research is part of the project entitled “Digital Adventure-Oriented Media: Content and Context” (DigitAdvent), which was led by The National Institute for Consumer Research (SIFO) in cooperation with Norsk Tipping, Norsk Rikskringkasting, and Telenor from 2003–2007. My part of the study was to focus on the contextualization of gambling in households with, and without, gambling problems. This article reports the main results from a qualitative research study dealing with problem gambling in households.

Recruiting

Six households were recruited through a public clinic that offers group therapy. Two were recruited through a self-help group for relatives of problem gamblers. As I (the researcher) am not a therapist and have no relationship with the counselling service in any way, contact with the recruitment centres was established through meetings in which I interviewed a therapist and a member of a group of relatives of gambling addicts. The therapist and the member of the relative group informed problem gamblers about the research project and asked them to contact me if they wanted to be interviewed. Married or cohabiting gamblers were encouraged to ask their partner to participate in the conversation. A recruiting criterion was that the gamblers should have been undergoing group therapy or group meetings for some time and should be accustomed to telling their stories about problem gambling in front of others. By interviewing “experienced” group members, I hoped to avoid difficult emotions and situations that the informants and I were not professionally trained to tackle.

The Sample

A detailed description of the sample is provided in [Table 1](#).

The sample consists of eight Norwegian households in which one adult member, in all cases the man, had been in group therapy for gambling addiction. The spouses had joined them in one meeting. One gambler stated that he had had gambling problems since he was a child. The other gamblers reported that their problem gambling started after their household had been established. However, on this subject, the gamblers might have had a reason to not tell the truth. If their partner had not been informed about the gambler's habit before the household was established, the household may have been formed on false pretences.

All of the gamblers had lived with a partner while they were gambling excessively. Two of the households had split up by the time the interviews took place, one of them allegedly because of problem gambling. Five couples were still married or cohabiting. Four of the married gamblers were interviewed together with their partners. Two single gamblers, one cohabiting gambler, and one spouse of a gambler were interviewed alone. Five households included children. None of the children were present during the interview sessions. One household, the household of Zaina and Abaan, reported having 858,000 US dollars in gambling debts. The debt of the remaining households was between 0 and 171,650 US dollars. For most gamblers, their main problem was related to slot machines, but two were related to sports betting and one to betting on horses. Most of the informants were between 30 and 60 years old. On the basis of the homes' locations and interiors, as well as on the informants' education and occupations, most of the households could be associated with [Bourdieu's \(1992\)](#) concepts of “working-class” or “lower-middle class”. For example, only one gambler had been educated at a higher level than secondary school. Three were clerical assistants, two were transport workers, two were on social security, and one was a student. The partners' education and occupations did not differ significantly from those of the gamblers. This is in line with previous research, indicating that gambling problems are higher among less educated and low-income groups (e.g., [Pran & Ukkelberg, 2010](#)). It should, however, be noted that the sample had some characteristics that distinguish it from other problem gambling households. For instance, whereas previous gambling studies indicate that at least one third of problem gamblers are women ([Martins, Lobo, Tavares, & Gentil, 2002](#)), this sample contained no female problem gamblers. Whereas previous research also shows that some spouses knew about a partner's problem gambling before a household is established (e.g., [Heineman, 1992](#)), all but one spouse in this sample discovered the problem after the household was formed. Third, whereas some gamblers resolve their problems without their spouse knowing about it (e.g., [Anderson, Dobbie, & Reith, 2009](#)), all but one spouse in this sample discovered

the problems before they were resolved. Finally, whereas previous gambling studies show great variation as to how hard the impact is on households (e.g., [Anderson et al., 2009](#)), all households in this sample seemed to be relatively moderately hit – too seriously hit to get rid of the problems by their own means, but not so seriously hit that they needed debt settlement.² One exception was Zaina and Abaan's household, which was so financially disturbed that its problems could hardly, if ever, be resolved.

The Interviews

All but one of the households was located in the Oslo region. Four of them were interviewed at home, two at cafés, and two in an office. The households were encouraged to tell their gambling stories as freely as possible. The interviews took 1.5 and 2.5 hr each, and were all tape-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. As problem gambling in households is a sensitive issue, I had “a balancing interview style” ([Borch, 2010](#)) through which I attempted to support the informants' stories rather than questioning them. Questions, comments, laughter, and jokes were used to navigate the conversation into safe areas.

Data Analysis

The research design was primarily exploratory, meaning that the themes of the analysis and the research questions were not set before the interviews were conducted, but deduced from experiences that occurred before the interviews. From previous gambling studies, I was taught that excessive gambling was a form of “addiction”. The interviews, however, gave me the impression that neither gamblers nor their partners knew why the gambler gambled or why he kept on gambling even though he knew how damaging it is. As these hidden and incomprehensible aspects of problem gambling hardly (if ever) have been the subject of research in gambling studies, I decided to interpret the households' gambling stories in light of Jacques Lacan's concept of the Real.

The households' stories contained both unique and common aspects. As I hoped to grasp how the Real was experienced and handled by most households in the sample, the common aspects of the households' stories formed the focal point of the study. In order to distinguish the common aspects from the unique ones, each household's story was first read vertically (one by one) and then horizontally (across). From the horizontal reading, a generalized version of the households' stories was written down and illustrative examples and quotations were added to the text. As we will see, the generalized version of the households' stories did not differ significantly from those reported in other countries ([Custer & Milt, 1985](#); [Franklin & Thoms, 1989](#); [Lorenz, 1987](#)). The stories might therefore be regarded as typical, both in terms of representing the generalized version of the sample's stories and in terms of being reported in previous research.

An important question during the analysis was how to interpret the households' stories. Should they, for instance, be interpreted as reflections of reality, as discursive data in social research are usually based on the concept of “scientific realism” ([Hacking, 2000](#)), or should they rather be analysed from a socially constructivist point of view, suggesting that the households' stories were based on the informants' subjective interpretations? My choice was twofold. As a general rule, the households' stories were interpreted as if they were descriptions of events that had really taken place in the informants' lives. However, as all of the stories may have contained a fantastic component, the main function of which was to mask the households' trauma ([Rekdal, 1992](#)), the households' stories were sometimes interpreted as if they were subjective interpretations of real events. This social constructivist approach is also evident in my interpretation of problem gambling, as I, on the basis of the informants' own statements, do not regard it as a form of addiction, but as an absence of knowledge – a Real – that is filled with theories of addiction that help household members to deal with the households' traumas.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were made during the whole research process. As previously mentioned, initial contact with the informants was established through a therapist. In order to reduce the pressure to participate, potential informants were asked to contact me, and not the therapists, if they wanted to participate. The fact that very few patients contacted me might indicate that the pressure was not too strong.

When first contact was established and before the interviews started, the informants were informed about the project, their right to remain anonymous, and their right to withdraw from the interviews. They were also encouraged to tell the interviewer if the conversation touched upon issues they did not want to talk about. Having received the information, the informants formally consented to participate.

As previously mentioned, the gamblers were accustomed to telling their stories in front of others. The partners, however, had joined them in only one meeting. Therefore, a great deal of effort was made during the interview sessions to avoid difficult situations. Even though the informants could be emotional, the situation was never out of control. In fact, all the interviews went smoothly. One reason for this might be that the informants knew that they had a fascinating and important story to tell. Another might be that the gamblers, as a result of group therapy, had learned to tell a story that others would believe to be reliable and would want to hear. A third might be that my moral opinion of problem gambling was easy to predict. Problem gambling is, in contrast to the ordinary consumption of gambling, always “bad.” If the interviews had dealt with ordinary consumption, the informants might have wondered if I regarded their practices as good or bad.

Results

The Disputable Real of Households

According to the households' stories, seven of the eight gamblers had developed gambling problems after the households were established. Seven of eight kept their gambling hidden. Common hiding strategies were to lie or utilize the household routines or “right for privacy” ([Borch, 2010](#)):

Kurt: Our finances were good. I worked a lot. It was no problem explaining why I was late, why I was not at home, why the money was gone. I became an excellent liar. It was no problem making excuses.

Per: My wife's mother lived in the cellar apartment. When my wife visited her mother in the evening, there was some serious gambling going on upstairs.

Alan: My wife was not allowed to open my letters from the bank. I knew what was in them.

The spouses may have sensed that something was wrong. It was something to do with money. There was not enough money to go around. Although some spouses broke into the gamblers' privacy and searched their pockets and mobile phones for signs, most spouses neglected the signs and excused them as the result of stress, health problems, and so forth. A typical example of such neglecting strategy is given in the story of Bibi and Alan:

Bibi: Shortly after we met, I got pregnant and we moved in together. One year after, we split.

Me: May I ask you why you split?

Bibi: It had nothing to do with money. Well, yes, in fact it had something to do with money; because I felt that he was irresponsible...He was not clever with money. He earned 3,431 USD a month, yet he was always broke. So I broke with him. He was not the man I...Actually, I saw that he was fond of gambling when I met him. He was always standing next to the machines. But I never suspected that...or, in some way, my unconsciousness suspected that...but I have never believed that it was about so much money...In fact, my uncle used to tell me that Alan was a compulsive gambler. “You must get rid of that guy,” he said. “He always plays the slot machines.” I did not like him saying that. Then I forgot all about it...Personally, I don't think I wanted to know.

Me: That it was a kind of mental blocking?

Bibi: Yes, because that famous Monday I remember telling a girlfriend that 429 USD had disappeared from our bank account. She suggested that Alan might have gambled it away, but I said no, he cannot have gambled away that much money. When she left, I was thinking about what my uncle used to say. I was not allowed to open Alan's post, but then, for the first time, I opened his bank statements, one after another, and realized that this must be a gambling problem. Then I called him.

Hence, rather than tracing the Real, Bibi filled the missing spots with images of the non-problem household. The neglecting of a partner's problems must not necessarily be regarded as a naive reaction. In fact, without this capacity to fill the household's Real with pleasant images, hopes, and dreams, most households might never have been established. Previous gambling studies are sometimes based on the assumption that the household's troubles are caused by the problem gambling (see, e.g., [Darbyshire et al., 2001](#); [Dickson-Swift et al., 2005](#)). In accordance with Lacan's theories, however, the main function of problem gambling is to be the substitute that replaces the thing, the object of desire that cannot be attained. In this respect, the main function of problem gambling is to mask an even greater trauma in the gambler's past.

The Discovering – The Most Horrific Sight

No matter how the problem gambling was discovered, the one event that actually made the household members see the problem gambling marked the beginning of a long recovery process in which the household members, step by step, acknowledged the gambling as a problem and started to de- and reconstruct the household. As often exemplified in previous gambling studies (e.g., [Custer & Milt, 1985](#); [Dowling et al., 2007](#); [Franklin & Thoms, 1989](#); [Lorenz, 1987](#)), the acknowledgement tended to be described as a process. In the light of the concept of the Real, the process might be divided into three:

The moment of collapse, in which the problem gambling is discovered. The spouses get their first insight into the Real, and all previous meaning about their husband, their household, and their life falls apart.

The big talk, in which the household's Reality is discussed. The spouse feels relieved that the gambler seems to have realized how irrational, irresponsible, and damaging the gambling is. The gambler feels relieved that the spouse did not leave him after all. The air is cleared. The couple mobilizes. The solution seems simple: The gambler must stop gambling. For only if the gambler stops gambling can the household get back on track and return to the ordinary household it used to be.

The first relapse refers to the point in time when the first relapse is discovered. For

the spouse who hoped and believed that the gambler had stopped gambling, this second moment of collapse is as agonizing as the first. As the gambler keeps on gambling, the couple realizes that a problem gambling Reality is based on another logic, another way of thinking and acting that cannot be understood by means of Western ideas of rational and responsible behaviour.

Although the first moment of collapse may constitute a narrative height in the households' stories, the drama of the event was seldom emphasized. A possible exception is the story of Liz:

Liz: Per had disappeared. I didn't know where he was. One of the employees told me that he was in a meeting with the franchise company. The employee was concerned because Per the day before had told her to help me take care of the shop. I called the company, and asked them if they knew where Per was. They told me that one of Per's bosses was on his way to visit me. Why would he visit me? Finally he came. He wouldn't tell me where Per was, but gave me this letter. I opened the letter and started to read, but I couldn't... Then the boss said that Per had embezzled because of problem gambling, that the business was..., and that Per was at the hospital because of a nervous breakdown...(cries)...Can you believe it! In any other arena he is a reasonable man.

As Liz told her story, her hands and voice were shaking, as if she relived the moment, her first glimpse into the household's Real, the other side of *her* husband, of *her* household, of *her* life. Although some glimpses vanish after a second or so, others eat into the spouses' retina and become part of their side-view for years, like “a reminder which persists alongside the symbolic” (Fink, 1995, p. 27).

The Indisputable Real of Problem Gambling

As the problem gambling is discovered, parts of the household's Real become indisputable – not to be denied. Yet, even though the problem gambling is acknowledged, the gamblers may not know why they gamble and why they keep on gambling even though they know how damaging it is:

Me: Why do you gamble?

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

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

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

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

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

Nor do the spouses understand why their husbands gamble:

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

Hence, even if the gambling problem is sensed and acknowledged, part of it remains unsymbolized, not necessarily because it resists symbolization, but because it is refused by the symbolic. In Western countries, problem gambling is hard to understand. Not only does it break with fundamental norms telling us that we should not spend more on gambling than we can afford to lose, but it also violates our expectations of how rational and responsible people act. So, even though the problem is partially acknowledged, it is too irresponsible and too irrational to be comprehended – it is, so to speak, not of this world. By virtue of being outside Reality, problem gambling was often approached as an outer force, an alien creature – a bastard, a devil, a monster – that had taken place in the gambler's brain, controlling his actions:

Liz: I have been so pissed off. That bastard! He only lies and lies and lies to me. I have had my turns, sleepless nights. I have been really down, taken pills, prayed to God... It was not so much the money. There was this sorrow. I had lost the husband I could trust.

Per: Can you believe it! Here I have been living this decent life for 50 years. It was like the Devil took hold of my head. When I am 70, I will start smoking hash.

Amina: It is like a monster is inside his brain. If it hadn't been for his gambling, my life could not have been better. I had everything – love, money, a social life.

As indicated here, the incomprehensible aspects of problem gambling not only threatened the household's *raison d'être*, but more fundamentally, it also threatened the household members' prospects of life – what the situation is, how it got to this point, if and how it will change in the future. When the household members looked at themselves in the mirror, the missing spots were no longer filled with images of the non-problem household, but of the problem gambling household. The household members felt disillusioned and deceived. If I understand

them correctly, the spouses believed that their husbands' gambling had reduced their chance of living “the perfect life” – the life that they could have had if the gambler had not gambled. From a Lacanian perspective, however, the husbands' gambling does not destroy the concept of a perfect life, but rather makes it possible to keep the idea alive. If the husbands had not gambled, then their spouses might have been forced to realize that the perfect life is an ontological impossibility.

Centre of Gravity

Problem gambling has been discovered and yet not comprehended. At this point, some of the informants reported finding themselves overwhelmed by the problem gambling, problem gambling so frightening, amoral, and shameful that it has to be hidden from the children:

Abaan: I could stop gambling, one month, two months, three months, but I always started again. “I save money, and you throw it all away!” she used to say. I had no answer. It was just how it was. I couldn't stop. She tried to get my cards, so that I couldn't get money from the cash dispenser.

Interviewer (Me): How did you react to that?

Abaan: I got grumpy.

Me: Grumpy?

Zaina: Fought.

Me: You got violent? Hit her?

Abaan: Hit her, no. Pushed her, yes. I pushed her on the bed when she tried to stop me.

Me: Then you got the cards and ran out?

Abaan: Maybe not that night, but the next. I always had an excuse to get the cards back. I gambled two-three days, went back for one night, and then out again. In the worst periods I could spend NOK 20–25,000 (USD 3,526–3,527) on gambling per night. I wasn't much at home. I didn't see much of the children.

Zaina: I called him at night, again and again, but he never took the phone. I couldn't sleep. I knew he was gambling all the money away.

Me: Did the children know anything about the problem?

Zaina: No! This is not for children!

Me: Why?

Zaina: They can't understand it. Maybe when they are 8 or 9 years...?
This is not good for children! A mama and papa not talking with each other, just fighting.

The problem gambling gets the whole household's attention and becomes, as [Fink \(1995, p. 28\)](#) formulates it, a “centre of gravity, a Real₂, around which the symbolic order is condemned to circle”:

Eve: It is all about getting him well.

When the household members look in the mirror, the missing spots, the Real, might seem more threatening than ever. Inspired by Lacan's theories, it may be argued that the household's loss of previous image causes a lack and becomes an object of desire that the household members try to attain by means of different reconstructing strategies, for example, by theorizing on the household's Real, reorganizing the symbolic, and balancing the imaginary.

Filling the Real

One coping strategy is to reduce the harm of the problem gambling Real by filling it with reliable theory. Through Norwegian news and therapy, the gamblers and their spouses have learned to understand their experiences of gambling as a kind of addiction ([Borch, 2006](#); [Reith, 2004](#)):

Me: Why do you gamble?

Pamir: I do not know. I have been addicted so long that I no longer know why I gamble.

Me: It is a kind of escape?

Pamir: No, not for me.

Amina: Do you get kicks from it?

Pamir: No, no kicks.

Me: Is it a habit?

Pamir: Yes.

Me: A relief from the strenuous everyday life?

Pamir: Yes, it satisfies the body, in a way.

Me: You feel it physically?

Pamir: Yes.

Amina: Yes, because we went to group therapy once. They focused a lot on abstinences. Problem gambling is like alcoholism and drug abuse. You get the same kinds of abstinences.

Pamir: When I quit gambling, I struggled mentally, fought against myself – “now I want to gamble,” “no, you don't.” I was in constant dialogue with myself.

Amina: The same happened to me when I quit smoking.

Pamir: Yes, you sweat and tremble.

Amina: Yes, I woke up nights, had nightmares, sweated and trembled. So it is absolutely a chemical reaction. It happens so much in the brain, so it must be...

Pamir: It is like the brain is producing something.

Me: What?

Pamir: I do not know...Actually, you are at home, thoughts strike your brain. You hardly notice them, but when you know about them, you can recognize them. You are at home, a thought strikes your mind, and all of a sudden you find yourself in front of a machine: “Wow, why am I here?”

Amina: These are the thoughts that you are supposed to control.

Pamir: Yes.

Amina: It is horrifying. No family should experience this. His addiction is like cancer. It destroys families, like drugs.

Pamir: Yes, there *is* something inside me that I cannot control. But I do get better. I used to think that I would win [on slot machines]. Now I think that I will lose, lose, lose. Yes, I relapsed and gambled on the Internet two weeks ago. But I will be totally abstinent.

According to the theory of addiction, problem gambling is regarded as a disease presumably caused by inner biological forces – genetic disposition and chemical reactions in the brain – making some people vulnerable to being addicted, and

outer social forces – the government, gambling businesses, and others – making “the drug” available to them. A common assumption is that gambling addiction can never be totally cured (“once a gambler, always a gambler”). On the other hand, it can be held in check, for example, through natural recovery, participation in Gambling Anonymous, pharmacotherapy, cognitive and cognitive-behavioural therapy, and motivational enhancement interventions ([Petry, 2009](#)). Filling the Real with the theory of addiction has several implications for households. First, because the gambling problem is regarded as an addiction, some of the responsibility, blame, and shame is transferred from the gamblers and the immediate family to those who have made the gambling services available ([Borch, 2006](#)). Second, because the household's enemies in this respect are located outside the home, the bonds inside the home may be strengthened. Third, because gambling is caused by inner and outer forces beyond the gambler's control, the problem may be easier to accept and forgive. And fourth, because the addiction can be held in check, the problem can be regarded as temporary. As indicated by Amina, filling parts of the household's Real with theories of addiction may legitimate a spouse's choice to stay:

Amina: I do get angry and frustrated because of his gambling sometimes. But I know that it is a disease that he cannot control himself... That is why I have not left. Many would have given up. But I manage to put myself into his situation.

Possible dangers may, however, be that too much responsibility falls on other household members, in this case the spouse, and that parents may start worrying about their children's genetic disposition towards addiction.

Eve: I don't like my kid using the Internet too much, even though I know he is just doing his homework. What if he is disposed towards addiction like his father?

Reorganize the Symbolic

If the gambler cannot have access to money, another reconstructing strategy is to reorganize the household's symbolic order, that is, to put the household under another member's administration, in this case the spouse ([Custer & Milt, 1985](#)). The reorganizing strategy is particularly evident in the story of Amina and Pamir. To help Pamir to recover, Amina has taken control over Pamir's finances and time. She has informed possible lenders – the bank, family and friends – about Pamir's problem. If Pamir needs money, she gives him pocket money – the exact amount in cash. At her request, he has stopped driving taxis, as this made the slot machines more available ([Revheim & Buvik, 2009](#)), and is taking courses at a school for adults instead. Also at her request, he does body building and trains two sports teams for kids in his spare time. A new baby is expected. “Hopefully,” Amina

maintains, “that will keep his hands even busier.”

Me: You seem to have taken control over his finances and time. Don't you feel that you have put him under guardianship?

Amina: I help him, and by doing that, I put him under my guardianship, yes. I am the stronger. If it hadn't been for me, this family would have fallen apart.

As indicated here, the reorganizing of the household's symbolic order has increased Amina's power. Not only does she control Pamir's resources, but by taking his burdens on her shoulders and playing the role of a martyr she also puts him in serious debt to her, a debt that is unlikely to be repaid ([Mauss, 1954](#)):

Pamir: I am very thankful. She is very patient with me.

Me: How come?

Pamir: Well, you know, because of the gambling. She has sacrificed a lot for me. Sometimes I do not think I deserve her.

The shift of power may affect the intimacy and mutual respect between the partners (e.g., [Steinberg, 1993](#)):

Eve: We became like mother and son. Well, to put it like this: You do not have sex with your own son...How can you respect a husband who cheats on you? How stupid does he think I am?

In Eve's case, the shift of power had changed the relationship between the partners, from a symmetric (female-male partner) to an asymmetric (mother-son) one (Kalischuck et al., 2006). Because this form of infantilization (where a grown-up is given the position of a child) usually is ascribed to women (e.g., [von der Lippe, 2006](#)), the shift of power might also involve a femininization of the man and corresponding masculinization of the woman. Eve also seems to relate the change to the incest taboo, indicating that her increased power and the infantilization of her husband break fundamental laws of the symbolic order of the household and, presumably, of society as a whole. In one or two households, the change of power was openly articulated. In most households, however, it was made a taboo – banished from the household's discursive order. The households' self-imposed censorship was particularly evident in the case of Liz and Per. When Per embezzled money to pay the household's gambling debt, Liz took over the household's finances and Per's franchised business. She therefore moved from being his wife and employee to being his mother and boss. Yet, although the power between them had obviously shifted, both Liz and Per maintained that the problem gambling had not influenced the power between them:

Me: Has the power between you changed because of the problems?

Per: No.

Me: What do you think, Liz?

Liz: No, I do not think so.

Me: (Teasing.) You haven't felt tempted to dupe him once?

Per: She is not that kind of woman!

Liz: (Teasing.) I could have duped you.

Per: If you did, this relationship would have been history by now! You have done everything right. You are perfect!

(Silence)

Liz: You know what? The more I think of it, the more I ask myself why I haven't shown him my anger and despair. But I need him to be strong.

When I questioned the power between them, Per refused to discuss the subject. The refusal was harsh, almost formulated like a threat: If we keep on discussing the subject and come to the conclusion that he is subordinate to his wife, he will revalue his view on the household and on Liz. Although Liz seemed to admit that she was superior to her husband ("I could have duped you") and to realize that it was her "right" to show him her anger and despair, she seemed not to have used her position to make him feel bad about himself, ostensibly because "she needed him to be strong". Both seemed, in other words, to have a common interest in keeping the question of power unspoken, a censorship that according to the theories of [Foucault \(1979\)](#) and [Butler \(1990, 1993\)](#) may confirm dominating gender discourses and hence the power structure between genders in households and in society at large. Common to all informants was a longing for the household and its structure of gender and power to be as they used to be. For some informants, this involved a longing for a household model that may be associated with [Parsons's \(1955\)](#) "total integration of roles":

Liz: I've always been strong and done my best. Per was just like me. Together we were dynamite!

For other informants, it involved a longing for a household model based on "role segregation" ([Parsons, 1955](#)):

Amina: I really look forward to the day he is cured, when he can do something on his own, when he can have his own bank account, bank

card, and money, and when he can invite me to a restaurant or a holiday abroad.

Indeed, the reorganizing of the household's symbolic order might have given the women increased power. Because, however, the power was not based on their free will, but forced on them because of a difficult situation, it could be seen as a sign of powerlessness:

Amina: I am supposed to be the stronger, but I do not feel that I am. His problems suck all my energy. It is a continuous fight. I am tired now.

As here indicated, being responsible for another member's recovery involves a transfer of work from the gambler to the spouse. Because the problem gambling is the centre of gravity around which the household revolves, other people, tasks, and needs – children, job, and own health – get less attention. One of the spouses, Bibi, pushed the line too far and burned out:

Bibi: I was totally exhausted. On top of this, one of my kids nearly drowned in a lake nearby. I hit the wall and got a sick note from my doctor.

To Bibi, the situation was unbearable. The strategy was clear. As soon as her husband had proved that he could have access to money, the household would organize back to the household it once was.

Balance the Imaginary

To become the households they used to be, a third recovering strategy is to balance the households' realities – live as ordinarily as possible, but keep their problem gambling Reality at a bearable distance. For spouses, this implies living two parallel realities, one non-problem Reality they share with the husband they once chose as partner, and one problem gambling household they share with a stranger, a heavy gambler, whom they hardly know. Finding the right balance between them seemed important: If they let the unproblematic Reality dominate, they may show too much trust, and the gambler may relapse. But if they let the problematic Reality dominate, the emotional bond may weaken, and the household's *raison d'être* is at risk. Living two realities seemed, however, difficult:

Liz: Anything you do seems wrong. It is extremely difficult. I feel that, and that is probably the worst, that you are supposed to trust and not trust at the same time, and when he tells you that he is innocent, you don't want to be suspicious, because then everything gets worse. It is quite insane... I really can't stand the idea of Per gambling again.

Me: Him relapsing, is this something you think of often?

Liz: No! I cannot keep on digging our own grave. I have chosen to believe that he has stopped. That he is that brave! But if it happened again, it would not be a bombshell. I am prepared! How I will take it, is something quite different. But I am prepared!

As indicated here, households may choose to let the unproblematic Reality dominate and keep the problematic Reality as a possibility. Keeping the problem gambling at a bearable distance is not always easy, however, as reminders of the Real – the thought of a husband's relapse, a notion of being poor, a kid absorbed in his Game Boy – may keep on paying visits:

Bibi: In the beginning [after Alan had stopped gambling], I was scared to death when I knew he was close to a slot machine.

Zaina: Our children want more space, nice things, Barbie dolls. I wanted to give them everything.

Bibi: Watching him play the Game Boy can make me furious. That is something I have to work with.

Getting reminders from the Real is, of course, highly unpleasant, as they impose navel-gazing questions like: Is this what the household really is? Why can't I stop worrying? Would it be better if I left? In the light of modern theories, the reminders of the Real could be seen as hindrances that reduce a household's possibility to move back to the household they once were or could have been. From a Lacanian perspective, however, they may rather be seen as hindrances reminding them about what they really are: a split between the dysfunctional and the vital, the chaotic and the harmonic. From this perspective, the household members' nostalgia for the household they once were or could have been does not necessarily represent a movement towards the household they really are, but rather a movement away from it. On the presupposition that problem gambling households can never return to the household they once were or could have been ([Dickson-Swift et al., 2005](#)), the illusory image of the previous household can never be reached. In that case, the balancing of the household imaginary order and the repression of the Real have a traumatic character, a character that seemed to be masked by the imaginary in all households, even the household of Zaina and Abaan, which was so financially disturbed that its problems hardly (if ever) could be resolved. According to Abaan, the household had 171, 650 US dollars in gambling debt. Both Zaina and Abaan lived on social security. Even if they got a job, their income would not cover the bank interest. And even if they had their bank loans settled, their private loans from family and friends and the loans from bookmakers at illegal casinos downtown would remain unpaid. Yet, when I asked Zaina if she believed that the household's financial problems would be resolved, she confirmed: "Yes," she said, "at the longer sight."

Summary, Conclusion, and Questions for Further Research

In this paper, I have addressed the question of how household members experience and handle gambling problems. The analysis has drawn on the problem gambling stories of eight Norwegian households interviewed in 2005. The households' stories have been analysed in the light of the Lacanian concept of the Real. The choice of theory is based on the observation that the problem gamblers and the spouses interviewed in this research tended not to know why the gamblers gambled and why they kept on gambling even though they seemingly knew how damaging it can be. The problem gambling thereby caused an existential insecurity regarding the household's situation – a black hole of uncertainty that the concept of the Real could help us see, formulate, and visualize.

The analysis suggests that the modalities of the Real change throughout a household's problem gambling career. Before the problem gambling was discovered, the Real was sensed but neglected. After the problem was discovered, it became acknowledged but not comprehended. Missing spots in the mirror were no longer filled with images of an ordinary household, but of a problem gambling household. Rather than being adjusted to the household's everyday life, gambling became the centre of gravity around which the household's everyday life revolved. To reduce the harm of the Real and return to the household they once were or could have been, the household used different strategies. One was to fill the household's Real with theories on which household members can agree. Another was to reorganize the household's symbolic order, that is, to put the household's administration under the responsibility of the spouse. A third strategy was to balance the household's imaginary order, that is, to be a non-problem household and keep the image of the problem gambling household at a bearable distance. On the presupposition that problem gambling households can never return to the household they once were or could have been ([Dickson-Swift et al., 2005](#)), the balancing of household images had a traumatic character, a character that seemed to be masked by the imaginary in all households, even those hardest hit.

Over the last decades, the impact of problem gambling on households has been the subject of social research. Although these studies have given valuable insight into the study of gambling, very few, if any, have seriously discussed the hidden and incomprehensible aspects of problem gambling. In this respect, this research fills a gap in previous research. Yet, even though the concept of the Real has illuminated aspects of problem gambling that usually elude our attention, there are still areas to be explored. This research has dealt with the Real in households in which one member, in all cases the man, has been to group therapy for gambling addiction. The fruitfulness of adapting a Real perspective on other households, for

example, in problem gambling households in which no one has been to therapy, or in households in which the problem gambler is a female, a child, or a parent, remains to be explored.

Notes

¹In contrast to most researchers studying problem gambling, I prefer to use the term “household” rather than “family”. One reason is that I, inspired by the theories of Roger [Silverstone \(1994\)](#), see a household as a unit that functions as an economy, a home, a family, and a way of organizing the routines and rituals of everyday life. According to this perspective, the function of being a family is one of the many functions of a household. Second, whereas the term family usually covers units consisting of multiple members, the term household also covers units consisting of a single member. Third, the term household is more strongly associated with economic conditions than is the term family ([Silverstone, 1994](#)), that is, with the conditions that are particularly important in a study of problem gambling.

²Although Norwegian legislation offers possibilities for bankruptcy, the only way for over-indebted private individuals to get out of their difficulties is through a debt settlement, in which private individuals can have their debt cancelled if they commit themselves to a thrifty life for a period – normally 5 years ([Poppe, 2008](#)).

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Figures

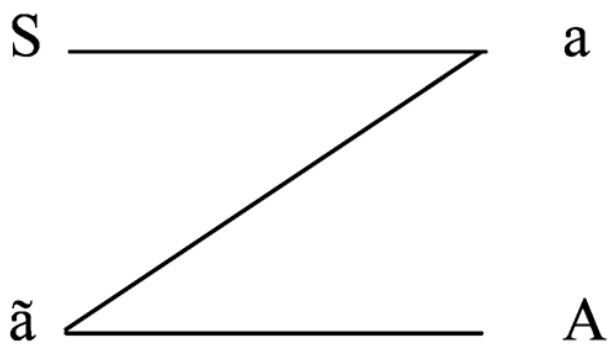


Figure 1

Schema L.

Tables

Table 1

Sample of Problem Gambling Households

Interviewee pseudonym ¹	Age(s)	Civil status (# of children living at home)	Main problem gambling activity	Reported gambling debt (USD)	Time of problem gambling discovery
Bibi & Alan	35-45	Married (2)	Slots	–	After marriage (2-3 y)
Zaina & Abaan	25-35	Married (0)	Slots	858,000+	After marriage (2-3 y)
Amina & Pamir	35-45	Married (3)	Slots	85,800+	After marriage (2-3 y)
Liz & Per	55-65	Married (0)	Horses	171,650	After marriage (5-6 y)
Eve (& Leo)	40-50	Married (1)	Slots	–	After marriage (17 y)
Tom (& Aina)	25-35	Live-in (0)	Sports	0-51,500	Before household establish
Kurt	30-40	Single (2)	Sports	171,650	Not discovered
Ben	35-45	Single (2)	Slots	51,500	After household established (2-4 y)

¹ Pseudonyms shown in parentheses indicate person was not present at the interview with their partner.
 Note. Dashes indicate that the data were not reported; y=years; ages of respondents are estimated.

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