Gamblers, grinders, and mavericks: The use of membership categorisation to manage identity by professional poker players

Breigh Radburn[aff1]

Rachel Horsley[aff1]

Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK rachel.horsley@ntu.ac.uk

This article was peer-reviewed. All URLs were available at the time of submission.

For correspondence: Rachel Horsley, PhD, Psychology Division, Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham, NG1 4BU, UK, +44 (0)115 8485599, E-mail address rachel.horsley@ntu.ac.uk
Competing interests: None declared for either author.

Breigh Radburn BSc (Hons) completed her undergraduate degree in psychology at Nottingham Trent University, and during this time developed a keen interest in the psychology of gambling. Breigh is currently training in counselling therapy.

Rachel Horsley BSc (Hons), PG Cert, PhD, C Psychol, is a senior lecturer at Nottingham Trent University. She obtained her PhD from the University of Nottingham in 2005. Her previous research has focused on associative mechanisms involved in reward-related behaviours, and she has recently been working to apply this expertise to frequent gamblers.

Abstract

Historically, gambling has varied considerably regarding its moral and social meanings. Whilst frequent gambling is often constructed as deviant, professional poker playing can be argued to occupy the conflicting position of both deviant and legitimate. This study explored how professional poker players negotiate this potentially troubled aspect of their identities. Semistructured interviews were conducted with four men from the United Kingdom who played casino poker. The data were analysed using membership categorization analysis. The following membership categorisations were in use within participants' accounts: gambler, *grinder*, *maverick*, and nongambler, as well as the central categorisation of professional poker player. Participants constructed themselves as stigmatised because they were frequent gamblers and poker players. Thus professional poker players utilised membership categorisation to distance themselves from other membership categories, particularly gamblers, which was achieved primarily through claims warranted by reference to skill and control.

Introduction

Gambling is a powerful act, with the capacity to elevate or debase its participants (Hill & Clark, 2001), and has varied considerably throughout history with regard to its social and moral meanings (Binde, 2005). Prior to its inclusion in the DSM-III (APA, 1980), frequent gambling was largely understood to result from some failing in a person's character (see Blaszczynski, 1985) or as a form of sin (Reith, 2003). Related to this, gambling (particularly poker) has been linked with criminality and organised crime. More recently, these understandings have been overtaken by discourses where frequent gamblers are the subjects of medical and social pathology (Nicoll, 2007), producing the identity of the compulsive (or pathological) gambler (Rossol, 2001). These discourses have latterly become the focus of public health perspectives (e.g., Blaszczynski, 2011). Understandings of gamblers have therefore varied from "immoral" and "criminal" to "ill" and "a public health issue", but nevertheless remain inevitably bound up with morality.

Issues of self-control are of key importance in Western culture, with loss of control seen as generally troublesome, leading to wrongdoing and immoral behaviour (Hammersley & Reid, 2002). Poor control is a critical element of many contemporary accounts of problem gambling (pathological gambling is included as an impulse control disorder in the DSM-IV (APA, 1994), which has driven many of these theoretical accounts). The amount of control exerted by a particular individual within a given wagering activity is an important determinant of whether or

not that activity is understood to be gambling *per se* (e.g., Smith & Preston, 1984). In view of the tension between these different renderings, the position of *professional poker players* as gamblers is likely to be contested, with control utilised as a pivotal construct in accounts.

There are few previous studies that look specifically at poker players. Zurcher (1970) participated in regular friendly poker games at participants' homes. He concluded (from interview data) that poker meetings constituted a separate world with its own norms and rules of behaviour. He also suggested that poker playing fulfilled social-psychological needs not satisfied elsewhere in life (see also Kusyszyn, 1976; Ocean & Smith, 1993). However, such accounts may be constructed for socially and personally functional reasons and cannot necessarily be regarded as factual (McAdams, 1993), particularly since gambling was a more stigmatised activity when these studies were conducted. It has been argued previously that gamblers draw upon various vocabularies of motives, including those centred around occupational characteristics, play, and recreation, to explain their gambling behaviour and neutralise the social stigma attached to it (Hayano, 1977; Smith & Preston, 1984). However, the socio-cultural context in which poker is played in the United Kingdom (UK) has changed. Poker playing is an increasingly prevalent activity, and there is widespread media coverage of poker tournaments, the players, and celebrity endorsement (Wood, Griffiths, & Parke, 2007). Thus, poker playing is becoming a normalised, even aspirational, behaviour. The frequency with which an individual engages in a gambling activity is an important determinant of whether a person is considered to be a gambler (Lange, 2001). Given their preoccupation with, and frequency of, gambling, professional poker players are likely to meet lay definitions of problem gambling and at least some of the clinical criteria for pathological gambling. However, this is within a context of significant financial gain, which is atypical of diagnostic, empirical, and lay conceptualisations of frequent gamblers. Taken together, these issues place professional poker players in an interesting position in terms of their identity; on the one hand, they are frequent gamblers (so possibly stigmatised as deviant psychologically and morally), while on the other, they are professional poker players and may be objects of esteem (see Prus, 2004).

Motivations for gambling have been reported to include factors such as tension release, escape, fun, excitement, and social interaction (e.g., Wood et al., 2007; Clarke, 2008; Southwell, Boreham, & Laffan, 2008; Lee, Lee, Bernhard, & Lee, 2009). A large number of studies suggest that winning money is also a central motivation (e.g., Wood et al., 2007; Southwell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2009, but see Smith & Preston, 1984). Lee, Chae, Lee, & Kim (2007) found that winning money effectively mediated other motivational variables (amusement, excitement, avoidance, socialising). Because poker is their livelihood, it seems not unreasonable to suppose that professional poker players too play primarily for the

money (although in this group other motivations might also be important, such as prestige and status). However, playing to win big as many gamblers do (Wood, Griffiths, & Parke, 2007) is different than playing to win in the long run, as might be the case with professional poker players.

The present study utilises membership categorisation analysis (MCA; Baker, 2000, 2004) to explore in depth the discursive resources employed by professional poker players to constitute and manage their identities. MCA developed from the ethnomethodological work of Sacks (1972, 1992) as an analytic technique that allows explication of how members of a particular culture, through interaction, formulate and manage categorisation of themselves and others. There is much in communicative interaction that is not necessarily explicitly stated, but that is implicitly understood, for instance, the way in which categories are linked with one another (e.g., husband and wife, wife and mother), and the normative behaviours and characteristics expected of particular categories—category-bound activities —(e.g., the category "wife" suggests running a household; Tainio, 2002). Thus, MCA is focused on understanding the ways in which people categorise themselves and others, the attribution of legitimate behaviours, and how these are recruited in the relative positioning of individuals and groups to one another (Baker, 2000). MCA is particularly suitable for the investigation of themes relating to morality (Watson, 1997); the activities involved in membership categorisation (describing others, with implied or explicit judgements and claim-making about those others) both reflect and compose moral reality (Stokoe, 2003).

As Nicoll (2007) points out, research directed at investigating the spaces and practices of gambling, particularly in casinos, where individuals of diverse backgrounds interact, is neglected. Membership categories in use by professional poker players are likely to be rich because this gambling group does not fit easily into and is unlikely to accept dominant problematised constructions of frequent gamblers. Moreover, their apparent motivations to, and outcomes of, gambling would appear to be at odds with those typically attributed to frequent gamblers. Therefore, it is the aim of the present study to document, in detail, the membership categorisations used by professional poker players to compose their own identities and those of others in the sociocultural domain of the live casino poker game.

Method

Participants

The four participants were all British men from the Midlands aged between 21 and 27 who met regularly during poker games at the casino. Recruitment to the study was based on participants' self-inclusion in the membership category of professional poker player, the self-report of poker winnings being an important source of income, and playing in a casino environment. The participants were from

varying backgrounds: two played poker as their full-time job; one was a full-time student who used his winnings to support himself financially, and the fourth ran his own business but poker provided an important additional source of income. All of the participants in the study had played poker for at least two years.

Materials

The semistructured interview schedule used general, open questions relating to experiences of gambling, motivations for playing, and other people's perceptions of their behaviour (see Appendix 1). Probe questions differed between participants as the interviewer followed up relevant points. The semistructured approach allowed the participants freedom to discuss issues of interest to them in order that emergent data would be, as far as possible, spontaneous rather than determined by the interview questions themselves.

Procedure

Individual interviews lasting 50–80 minutes were conducted by a female researcher who played poker regularly with the participants. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, recorded with the participants' permission, and then transcribed verbatim.

Analytic procedure

The transcripts were subjected to a basic level MCA based on the approach outlined by Baker (2000; 2004) and later summarised by Stokoe (2003). First the analysis focused on identifying the membership categories that were present within the data (e.g., professional poker player); these were either explicitly named by participants or inferred from subsequent analysis of category-bound activities (maverick was the only category not explicitly named). Category-bound activities reflect motivations, actions, rights, and obligations that are ascribed to, or implied by, a given membership category (Watson & Weinberg, 1982; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). For example, the category professional poker player implies the capacity to make a living from playing poker; thus winning money would be a legitimate (expected) activity for this group. In other words, category-bound activities are how members of each category "do, could, or should behave" (Baker, 2000, 2004). These were identified through close analysis of the ways in which participants spoke about the different membership categories that emerged from their accounts. Following this, membership categories were analysed in terms of their broader function within participants' accounts, for instance, how participants used membership categories and associated category-bound activities to make claims about themselves and others. Finally, the distinctiveness of and overlap between membership categories were examined to ascertain how participants grouped categories and/or isolated them from one another. This process

illuminates the structures within participants' social worlds and how these structures are justified and maintained through talk (Clayman & Maynard, 1995; <u>Garfinkel, 1967</u>).

The study was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society's ethical guidelines and was approved by Nottingham Trent University's Ethics Committee. Identifying information has been changed to preserve anonymity.

Analysis

Professional poker players

Professional poker playing was constructed as an occupation and/or as a sport. Poker playing constructed as an occupation affords self-sufficiency and independence with little direct influence of others; in the first extract below, Tony claims to play poker because he wants "to do something for myself" and to have his job or career in his "own hands". This construction is later reinforced when the participant refers to it as his "bread and butter". The data imply that the potentially influential "others" are employers, as he continues by saying he is "sick of working for people". Poker playing is further justified as an activity that the participant enjoys. There is an implied freedom and pleasure to professional poker playing that may not be available to others in their work. Thus poker playing is constructed as gainful self-employment, which affords both enjoyment and financial control, which subtly positions the professional poker player as superior to those employed by others for a wage.

The categories of *leisurely gambler* and poker player are distinct owing to the different levels of seriousness with which the game is taken; simply playing poker does not make a person a poker player. Competitiveness and winning are central characteristics of professional poker players, as is taking the game seriously. The term leisurely gambler suggests poker playing is recreational rather than occupational; thus these categories have different category-bound activities: whilst professional poker players are engaged in work, gamblers are engaged in recreation. The aforementioned themes are apparent in conversation with "Tony":

> Interviewer: I'd just like you to summarise your main reasons—the most important reasons why you do actually play.
>
> Tony: OK, because I want to do something for myself, because I want my career—I want my job to be in my own hands. I'm sick of working for people and also I do it because I like the game, I do it because I like the different aspects of the game.
>
> I: What is it about the game that you enjoy so much?

T: Like I said before—the psychology of it and the winning. Yeah, I like winning.

I: So, you're very competitive?

T: Yeah, you have to be competitive in order to succeed in poker.

I: How important is it in your life?

T: I'd say it's pretty important. I mean, I'd be willing to give it up if I had something else that I'd like to do or that I was moved into doing but it is quite an important part of my life. It's my bread and butter at the end of the day so I've got to think of it as important otherwise what kind of player would I be? I'd be just kind of a leisurely gambler and not a—and not a poker player.

Poker was also constructed as a sport; participants referred directly to poker as a sporting activity, and they regularly drew on sporting analogies to normalise *tilt* (tilt denotes losing control over gambling behaviour; [Brown, 1989](#)) in terms of a "bad day", such as may be experienced by sports people. References to sport were most often in relation to sport played as a profession; this dovetails well with the construction of poker playing as an occupation. Earlier, the analysis described poker playing as "work": reference to poker playing as a professional sport elevates poker playing from simply work or "bread and butter" to a profession that requires a high level of training and skill. "Carl" explains how poker players and tennis players are similar:

Well, basically being on tilt is every poker player's worst nightmare and anything can set you on tilt. In the same way that a tennis player can have a bad day, something can happen to them and when they get out on the court it all comes there and they can't play their A game and you know, they can't make the serve and then they're not playing as well as they could do and that's the same thing for poker.

According to "Tony", poker allows the opportunity to exert control and make money:

Tony: …I like to think that poker's within my control. Yeah, as I've said before, there's different forms of gambling—there's the detached and the attached forms of gambling. Detached forms of gambling are like the horse-racing forms where you've got to rely on a set of results from other people—you've got no control over it yourself apart from who you choose and that's about it. Whereas in poker you can work people out, you're not just relying—you're so much more in control when you're playing poker. You can just get out whenever you like, whereas horse-race betting you have to stay there until the end and you win or lose. It's

a fifty/fifty every time, pretty much.

Interviewer: So, is that very important to you—to have that kind of control in the game?

T: Yeah, otherwise—well, that's it—I don't consider poker to be a strong form of gambling. I see it as more of a sport where you win money. I see gambling as—like I say the pools or the lottery where it's a complete freak of chance half the time and you haven't got any deciding influence over it.

Tony draws on the idea that skill (e.g., "work people out") and control (e.g., "get out whenever you like") both allow influence over the outcome of the game and it is these features of poker that align it with sport and differentiate it from gambling. In contrast, gambling allows the participant little control or influence (e.g., "fifty-fifty every time, pretty much").

Skill and control were ideas that ran throughout participants' accounts to differentiate poker playing from gambling, as also shown in the excerpt from Carl below:

When I started playing poker a lot of my friends who didn't play thought I was going to be taken for a ride. I mean, their idea of a poker room is not really up and coming with the twenty-first century. Their idea of a poker room is shady people who'll break your legs if you take money off them in the car park. I'm not joking, some of them were like 'be careful, you know some of these men could be mobsters' and stuff like that. They almost felt sorry for me, like I was being taken for a ride. Now I just laugh—after they've worked a weekend earning seventy quid and I'm sitting there with four hundred that I've made in a night doing something that I love. That's just because they didn't understand that if you know what you're doing, you can make a lot of money from playing poker. They see it like other forms of gambling, where you don't have any control over what you're doing. But now they're cool with it.

Carl explains that nongamblers "didn't understand" and held outdated stereotypical views of poker as an immoral and/or criminal activity. Carl says that because of this "[t]hey [non-poker players] almost felt sorry for me". The data imply that the reason nonplayers were only *almost* sorry is because of how lucrative and enjoyable poker playing can be "…if you know what you're doing…" (i.e., if you are skilled). Thus the negative construction of poker players as disreputable is countered; the participant states that his nongambling friends are now "cool with it", thus bolstering his position that the enjoyment and financial reward that follow skilful play are sufficiently powerful justifications for poker playing.

In their interviews, both Tony and Carl drew on skill and control to distance poker playing from gambling. Control (over financial and occupational aspects of their lives and skill-based control within the game) is clearly an important attribute of professional pokers players. Emotional control, explained by "Steve below, is another type of control necessary for the successful poker player:

> I used to get a proper—proper buzz from winning, but the thing—the thing is you have to learn to control the variance, in order to be a good poker player, right? Part of that, ironically, is learning to control the rush you get when you win. It's a two-edged sword. If you have to learn how to curb your emotion when you're on a sharp downward spiral and completely eliminate your emotional response from your reasoned play, on the flipside you have to learn how to control your emotion when you're on a high winning streak, 'cause as I said, those are the two situations where your judgement is affected, either when you're winning a lot or when you're losing a lot and you have to learn how to control both of them.

"Richard" also touches on emotional control, using the concept of tilt:

> It's called tilt and there's a poker term for it and a lot of players do it and I sometimes do it. But the longer I play, I think the older I get, I think the less I'm gonna do it. It's one of those things as I get older, I think you kind of mature.

Participants claimed that emotional restraint allowed them to exert control over play; however, players admitted to losing this control at times. Because this is inconsistent with the category-based attribute of control, participants had to account for this. Tilt was therefore normalised, by Richard, as something that happens to a "lot of players", and by Carl as "every player's worst nightmare". Tilt was located in the past rather than the future and as something that over time can be overcome or managed. Hence, participants were able to acknowledge instances of loss of emotional control whilst limiting the impact of these on their identities by asserting that future instances will be avoidable or manageable. The control they develop during this process is cited as one of the defining characteristics of the professional poker player.

In summary, constructions of professional poker players cast poker as a profitable occupation or sport involving skill and control across a number of domains (occupational, cognitive, and emotional). Control was particularly important in differentiating poker playing from gambling.

Grinders

A fuzzy distinction was made between professional poker players and the hardcore of professional poker players (i.e., *grinders*), that grind out a profit through repetitive, low-risk play. Grinders show high levels of skill and control and use poker as a source of income; thus there are some category-bound activities in common with professional poker players. Differentiation of this group is achieved through reference to personal qualities: grinders are cast as morally inferior, aimless, greedy, and selfish. Below, Carl gives a negative account of poker playing, in that it involves taking money off people, but not giving back to society. The life of a professional poker player would not be fulfilling, according to Carl. Note that here, the participant oscillates between including himself in this group and not, shown by his use of "you're" in the first sentence, and "them" in the final sentence:

> The thing is from playing poker, is that you're basically taking money off other people. I mean, you're not really giving back to society in any way, shape, or form, which is kind of another reason why I think that being a professional poker player wouldn't be that fulfilling a lifestyle—unless you were being the best of the best or something, which would always be satisfying. But the fact that you're not adding to society would be a bit of a downer. I see professional poker players, especially the grinders that are down at the casino, I see them as selfish people who don't really have a direction.

To summarise, grinders are constructed negatively; Carl struggles to resolve the problematic construction of grinder with the overarching category of professional poker player to which both participants and grinders belong. Grinders may represent an unwanted aspect of the professional poker player identity; therefore narrative work is necessary to accomplish separation from this.

Gamblers

In the interviews, participants did not consider themselves to be gamblers, and emphasized that gambling was a preoccupation that lacked skill, control and gravity. The following section explores this further.

Richard, for example, at once embraces the identity of professional gambler, whilst at the same time rejecting gambling itself as an activity: "I don't like gambling but I'm a professional gambler". This participant specifically states that he is a professional gambler, which would seem distinct from gambler, particularly in view of the statement that he does not like gambling.

Steve explains a similar sentiment in more detail:

> I don't even consider myself to be a gambler. I take money off gamblers, yeah? People who come to the casino who want to gamble

when they've only got a four out of ten chance of winning against me—they're gamblers. They might win every now and again and they might get a buzz and they come back again but then six times out of ten, which they can never really count properly, 'cause they're gamblers, I take their money, so it's the edge that I keep playing as far as I can and—and that way I don't even consider myself to be gambling, do you know what I mean? Gambling is something that you have no control over but in my opinion if you're gambling it's like you're flipping a coin and that's gambling, yeah, fifty-fifty flipping a coin. But as long as I have the edge, even if it's a very small edge, one-two percent even, three-four percent. Ten percent edge is huge—huge, yeah. If I have any kind of an edge, right, I don't consider that to be gambling.

Gamblers are constructed as "others", shown in Steve's use of "them" and "they're". He states says that providing he is playing the edge (playing from a position of statistical advantage over the long term), he does not consider himself a gambler. Again gamblers are constructed as losers, with inferior skill and control: "I take money off gamblers, yeah?"; "they can never really count properly". In contrast to professional poker players, where emotional control and winning are category-bound attributes, it is implied that emotionality and frequent losses are attributes of gamblers: "…they might win every now and again and they might get a buzz…".

In summary, gamblers are constructed negatively (i.e., as lacking in skill and control, and playing poker primarily for recreation, rather than to win). Interviewees differentiate this group from professional poker players, most likely owing to stigma attached to gambling.

Maverick poker players

The behaviour of maverick poker players is described as often thoughtlessly extravagant, grandiose, and out of control. Mavericks include professional poker players, but *flash* behaviour in this group occurred within casino games other than poker (e.g., roulette). Whilst the participant acknowledges that this group may be of equal or even superior skill in poker playing, they can "lose vast amounts of money" on other games, because they cannot "add these things up in their heads" and "get drawn into the whole buzz". Thus, mavericks, like gamblers, are losers, lack skill, and have poor levels of emotional control, but only when engaged in games other than poker:

Steve: What is the point in flipping a coin where you have only a 49% chance of winning? People do this every day, because they can't add these things up in their head, I don't know why. Part of the reason is that they win so much money and it's the better players that do this.

They win so much money—the money seems immaterial to them. If they lose a thousand pounds a day [on roulette or blackjack] it doesn't matter because they can win it playing poker the next day so it doesn't really matter so much and they get drawn into the whole buzz of having one day when they win five grand and they miss the fact that they are losing extremely large amounts of money, which they do all the time.

Interviewer: Would you consider them to be gamblers then?

S: Oh yeah, they're definitely gamblers—they're definitely gamblers. They are people who are willing to lose vast amounts of money to get the buzz, every now and then, off winning a reasonable amount of money. They're completely comfortable with that. Part of the reason that they do that, as I said, they have a reliable income, well in their own eyes, but, you know, Pete's an ex-British champion and he's the best player down there. He can basically make money down there playing poker every day, every day, yeah and he doesn't have to worry about where his next meal is going to come from, even if he goes broke. Someone will lend him some money and he'll make some more money. He doesn't have to worry about that at all. So that's part of the reason why throwing a few extra hundred onto the roulette table doesn't seem as painful to those kinds of people. Even so, they still come to the casino going 'I can't believe I just put six grand on the table', I mean, those kinds of amounts don't really mean that much to them.

Mavericks share some category-bound behaviours with both professional poker players and gamblers. To distance the uncontrolled behaviour of the mavericks from the controlled behaviour of professional poker players, Steve portrays this lack of control as specific to other games. Moreover, the lack of control in this group is minimised; it "doesn't really matter" because to mavericks "money seems immaterial" owing to their ability to make more money from playing poker. Furthermore, there is some evidence that mavericks are held in some esteem for the characteristics they share with professional poker players: playing poker is their occupation (it produces a "reliable income", although it is interesting that Steve adds "well, in their own eyes" to this assertion); they are skilful players, and they win a lot of money. Above, it is stated that Pete can make money "every day … and he doesn't have to worry about where his next meal is going to come from". Employment is typically associated with daily routine, and as mentioned earlier is a source of "bread and butter". However, an alternative construction to the out-of-control and extravagant maverick, or the maverick engaged in employment, is that these individuals are carefree—their skill at poker is such that they do not need to be concerned with the day-to-day minutiae of life, such as a next meal, despite the casual loss of large amounts of money on other games.

In summary, mavericks share category-bound attributes with both gamblers and professional poker players, resulting in some conflict within accounts. Mavericks are constructed somewhat negatively (when gambling), and aspects of the account serve to distance professional poker players from this. However, their skill and success at poker is used to offset this, maintaining a positive portrayal of professional poker play.

Nongamblers

The following section looks further at the membership category of nongamblers. Nongamblers are viewed as not understanding poker and holding outdated ideas about the game. Not all nongamblers were viewed in this way; both Tony and Steve divide nongamblers into two polarised groups: those who understand and are open-minded, and those who do not understand, who stigmatise and are judgemental. To the question "What do your friends and family think about you playing poker?", Tony responds:

> To be quite honest I think they don't really give a shit. Really, it's not going to keep them awake at night. Most people just accept it because they're pretty open-minded people, they wouldn't be judgemental about it. Obviously there are judgemental people but it's because they don't really understand the game as much as I do and they just see it as one form of gambling and they don't understand the actual sport of it.

Tony uncovers two types of responses from nongamblers to poker playing: people who "don't really give a shit" and people who are "judgemental". It is not clear whether the former are conceived of as having an understanding of the game which allows them to be accepting. However, the latter don't understand the game and see poker playing as gambling (the implication is that it is not). Hence, nongamblers are negatively portrayed as lacking in understanding and as judgemental if they disapprove, but positively constructed as open-minded if they approve or are neutral.

Similarly, Steve speaks of others' responses to his poker playing:

> Interviewer: Ok, just one last question, what do your friends and family think about you playing poker?
>
> Steve: Well, they don't understand, as I said, there's a very stigmatised response to that information. I always have to be careful the way that I tell people. That whole spiel that I gave you about playing the part of the casinos, the bookies, where I'm always taking bets that I'm favourite to win? I've had to develop that to explain to people why I don't consider what I do gambling, yeah? Now people have a very

stigmatised response. When I told the people—when I started my business up and I had a support group, like, an incubation unit where I was working and they found out I was playing poker, there was this huge response of 'are you gambling, are you going to gamble our money away?' and I was like, well look, I'm four and a half thousand pounds up, I'm obviously not losing any money, I'm obviously winning, so you can never tell me that I'm losing money. They don't understand that there's a huge skill element, they don't understand that having a five percent edge is a really, really huge advantage in the long term. They don't understand the whole concept. So, in a way, sometimes I can't even be bothered to explain because they just don't even understand. But the people that I care about their opinions, i.e., my family, my good friends or anyone, I do take the time to explain it to them exactly why I'm doing something and how it's not self-destructive and if I was—if I was self-destructing I would stop. And some people just can't get over the fact that you are actually in control of something. They just think you're deluding yourself.

Steve states that nongamblers stigmatise professional poker players, and it is implied that nongamblers see professional poker players as self-destructive, deluded, and not to be trusted. To combat this, the participant again calls upon his own skill and the notion that nongamblers don't understand the game, or the skill element, or the "whole concept". In summary, nongamblers are divided into two distinct branches of this membership category: those who understand the game and are open-minded, and those who do not understand the game and because of this, stigmatise poker players.

Discussion

Four major membership categories were identified within participants' accounts: grinders, mavericks, gamblers, and nongamblers; the accounts also developed the central category, professional poker players. Grinders were very frequent long-term poker players, the hardcore, that grind a profit by playing their statistical edge on a daily basis. The term grinder suggests monotonous, repetitive play, resulting in small, but regular and sufficient, wins: as per the "daily grind". Grinders would not appear to be distinguishable from professional poker players in terms of the skill/control constructs; instead, differentiation was achieved through reference to gambling-irrelevant personal qualities (e.g., selfishness, aimlessness, and lack of fulfilment). Smith and Preston (1984) demonstrated that nongamblers tended to view gamblers as compulsive and greedy, which are characteristics similar to those attributed to grinders. Therefore, professional poker players may have taken some aspects of cultural stereotypes of gamblers and applied them to this membership category.

Mavericks cut across the categories of professional poker player and gambler. In the context of poker, mavericks, like professional poker players, were attributed with high levels of skill and control, but this was specific to poker. When playing other nonskilled games, mavericks resembled gamblers (poor control and loss of money). Professional poker players therefore utilised the concepts of emotional and cognitive control as context-specific devices that would differentiate themselves from gamblers and mavericks, categories that have poor control as a central attribute.

Gamblers were constructed as *others*. Category-bound activities of gamblers were playing poker as recreation and playing games other than poker with greater chance elements. Playing poker as recreation suggests a lack of serious approach to the game: leisure is "unobligated" time where the implication is that no work is done and activities are engaged in for fun and entertainment (Delaney & Madigan, 2009). Gamblers were also portrayed as unintelligent, passive losers, with low levels of skill and control. Throughout all accounts, claims that professional poker players were not gamblers were warranted by reference to skill and control. In order for professional poker playing to be constructed as something other than gambling, participants drew distinctions between poker and other gambling activities in terms of the amount of skill and control involved. These were consistently presented as the most important elements that differentiate poker from gambling. Likewise, the level of skill and control exerted when playing poker was a central determinant of whether players would be categorised as gamblers.

Professional poker players conceived of themselves as a stigmatised group. It is perhaps surprising that participants felt there was stigma to playing poker professionally, as poker has become an increasingly visible form of entertainment in the media in the UK over the past decade. There are two complementary accounts that might help to explain this. First, professional poker playing is a form of gambling, and gambling, especially frequent gambling, is a stigmatised activity (Smith & Preston, 1984; Preston, Bernhard, Hunter, & Bybee, 1998; Suurvali, Cordingley, Hodgins, & Cunningham, 2009). By necessity, professional poker players gamble frequently. As a consequence, nongamblers who "don't understand" may confound the two categories, and attribute the category-bound activities of gamblers (e.g., loss of control, loss of money) to professional poker players. Considerably more work (with reference to these constructs) was done in participants' accounts to distance themselves from gamblers than from any other membership category. Participants also claimed there were stigmas attached specifically to poker (rather than just to gambling) that they dismissed as arising from outdated views of poker and the context in which it is played. Telling stories about stigma means that professional poker players can refute unpalatable constructions of poker playing whilst simultaneously reconstructing it in the way they wish. Professional poker players were clearly keen to be dissociated from the

membership category of gambler. Ironically, professional poker players here aligned themselves with societal norms by themselves stigmatising gamblers. Yet, as already described, professional poker players also constructed themselves as stigmatised.

Participants' accounts worked to legitimise poker and to construct and manage their identities as professional poker players and not gamblers. The overarching attribute of professional poker players was control, which extended across a number of life domains: control over occupation/employment, control within the game (stemming from high levels of skill and experience), and emotional restraint. A considerable amount of attention has been given to the concept of control within the gambling research literature. However, this has mainly focused on skill and control in relation to particular gambling outcomes with the idea that these are generally illusory (e.g., Langer, 1975; Walker, 1992; Dickerson, 1993; Toneatto, Blitz-Miller, Calderwood, Dragonetti, & Tsands, 1997; Ladouceur, Giroux, & Jacques, 1998; Cantinotti, Ladouceur, & Jacques, 2004; Wood & Griffiths, & Parke 2007). Here, participants reported making money or even a living from poker, which would indicate that there is a rational dimension determining the choices that they make in play. However, the relative roles of skill and chance continue to be hotly debated in the context of gambling regulation. Surprisingly, control is not often reported as a key motivation for gambling (although see Loroz, 2004). Nevertheless, here control was a core category-bound activity that was invoked by professional poker players.

It has been suggested that the social rewards may provide an escape from the pressures in gamblers' lives (Ocean & Smith, 1993; Loroz 2004). Professional poker players did not justify their gambling in these terms. However, it may be that psychosocial motivations were cleaved away from the professional poker-playing domain for discursive reasons. Professional poker playing was generally constructed as both an occupation, which would also be consistent with a financial motivation, and a serious enterprise. To conflate this with benefits such as social contact (which is again suggestive of recreation) would dilute the power of this account.

The authors expected that linguistic devices would be employed more specifically and regularly in relation to gambling as a psychological disorder (another source of stigma), which they were not. Control is valued in Western cultures, and loss of control is viewed as problematic in almost any life domain. Gambling is often viewed as disreputable and as personally and socially destructive (Prus, 2004). Addiction, control, and morality are therefore intimately related—addiction suspends people's control, which can lead to wrongdoing (Hammersley & Reid, 2002). The participants in the present study had all experienced loss of control over their gambling in the past. Clearly, loss of control for professional poker

players is an illegitimate category-bound behaviour. Participants distanced themselves from this by locating it in the past and/or by arguing that episodes in the future will be controllable. Since both older lay and newer discourses of gambling have lack of control as pivotal, when referencing their capacity to be controlled, participants were also conveying that their poker playing was not a psychological or moral problem. Thus, invoking control powerfully substantiates the account of professional poker playing as unproblematic.

Here, some groups' category-bound activities were shared with professional poker players (see Figure 1 for a schematic of interrelations between the categories). There is overlap between the categories of maverick and grinder with professional poker players, since all three categories were constructed as playing poker regularly for monetary gain and as an occupation. Grinders and mavericks show core category-bound attributes of the superordinate category of professional poker player, for example, skill and control specifically when engaged in poker play. Mavericks also share some attributes (monetary loss, lack of control) with gamblers when not engaged in poker play. Nongamblers do not overlap in their category-bound attributes or behaviours with any of the other categories. Other interrelations are possible between the groups (for example, grinders and mavericks may share behaviours and attributes, independent of professional poker players), but were not suggested by the present data and might be explored in further research.

Questions regarding the sample remain: Firstly, participants were included in the study on the basis that they defined themselves as professional poker players and claimed to make a living from this at the casino. Whether or not participants objectively fulfil this category (even if an objective definition exists) is unknown. One criterion would be evidence of income from play; however, these data were not collected. Regardless, the study shows how this self-defined group separate themselves from other groups through the medium of language and categorisation. Secondly, the sample size could be considered small. Sample sizes need to be manageable to avoid data redundancy and allow a sufficiently deep analysis; however, it is important to have sufficient participants to allow theoretical saturation. The data did not suggest any further clear membership categories, and the membership categories presented were very clearly present in the data. Here, we argue that the participants, plus the researcher (who conducted the interviews and regularly played poker with the participants), represent a self-contained micro-culture. Although it could be argued that the researcher may have had a conflict of interest, the second author had no contact with participants, and both authors were committed to ensuring that conclusions drawn were thoroughly grounded in the data.

As is the case with in-depth qualitative studies, it is not possible, or desirable to

claim the data to be generalizable. Instead, the study should be seen as a portrayal of the use of membership categorizations to compose a particular social world that is culturally, historically, and location specific. The approach taken by Sacks (1992) was to move from individual instances and cases to aggregates of data. Therefore the consistency with which these categorizations extend beyond this time and locale is a matter for further research, although these 'types' seem recognizable. Take for example, the gambling stereotypes of the 'high roller' and the 'degen'. Whilst no technical definitions exist for these terms, high rollers are gamblers (or poker players) that gamble for inordinately high stakes. Degens exhibit unwise betting behaviour on non-poker-related gambling games, particularly table games (e.g., roulette). These gamblers often play poker with skill and panache, and can be said to exhibit degen behaviour when they lose large sums of money on bets away from the poker table and on games of pure chance. Both high rollers and degens clearly share attributes with the category presented here: 'Maverick'. However, participants did not use these terms. Moreover, degen in particular can seen as derogatory, which did not seem compatible with participants' accounts of this membership category.

Conclusions

From the current methodological perspective, we do not take talk necessarily at face value, but instead as a form of action that accomplishes something in social and interactional contexts. In the present study, what is achieved is normalisation of poker playing through reference to membership categories and category-bound activities. In addition, constructions of gamblers, grinders, and mavericks showed that participants used these membership categories as a counterpoint to, and an illustration of, what their behaviour is *not* in order to position poker playing as a legitimate, productive activity. By establishing that "poker isn't gambling" through the use of direct statements to this effect or analogies that legitimise poker, or by distancing themselves from gamblers, mavericks, and grinders, all of the participants were able to build and maintain their identities as professional poker players and "not gamblers".

Somewhat tautologically, outright denial of a gambling problem in a frequent gambler is commonly accepted itself as an indication of a gambling problem, placing gamblers in a discursive double bind. Participants therefore created delicately nuanced accounts of their behaviour using the problematic behaviour of others as a counterpoint.

Findings here are illuminating with regard to the general processes (describing others, with implied or explicit judgements and claim-making about those others) which individuals and groups use to differentiate between themselves and others, manage their identities, and construct a shared moral reality (Stokoe, 2003). When

identities and activities are defined as problematic, this can lead to objectification, isolation, rejection, and stigma; however, in some contexts these same identities may represent sources of prestige (see Prus, 2004). The connection of categories to individuals and/or groups is important because the categorisation process can lead to changes in the way individuals and groups experience themselves and, in turn, to external changes in behaviour and social practice (Hacking, 1999; Lloyd, 2005). The categories and fine-grained distinctions made between poker players by this particular group of participants suggests that gambling will be best understood from a number of different levels of analysis. Gamblers' own categorisations might help researchers differentiate more sensitively between different types of gamblers.

Although participants were not instructed to talk only about their casino experiences, no membership categorisations emerged in relation to online play; however, this may be because this particular sample rarely played online. It might be expected that the membership category of grinder will be well represented online, as this format of poker allows for the proportionally greater volume of play (e.g., playing multiple tables concurrently) for relatively low stakes that characterises this group. In view of the increase in online poker playing in the UK, it will also be important to explore the use of membership categorisation in online poker players, since the use of identity may differ between real and online worlds (e.g., see Wood et al., 2007). Given the move towards looking at data that involve social interaction beyond that of the researcher and participant, future research might use data gathered, for example, by recording interaction during poker games, which will allow a more realistic exploration of how categorisation is used within natural interaction.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Can you please describe your first experience of gambling?

Can you please describe your first experience of playing poker?

Can you tell me a bit about your poker playing now?

How often do you play poker?

Are there any particular people you play poker with when you go down to the casino?

Could you describe the aspects of the game that make it so attractive?

What are your main reasons for playing?

Is there anything else you gamble on?

How important is playing poker to you?

How does poker playing affect your finances?

Would you consider yourself to be a good poker player?

What do your friends and family think about you playing poker?
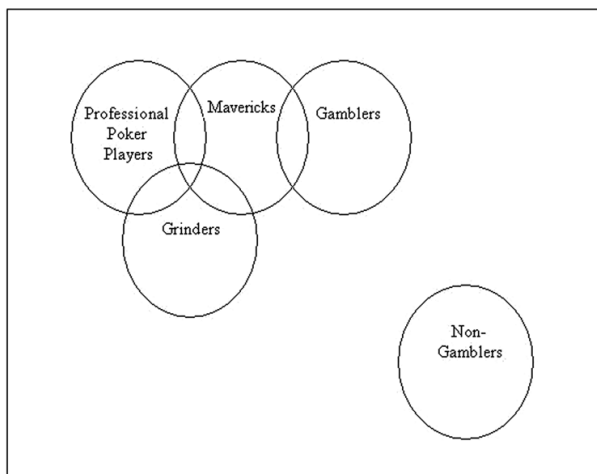
Figures

Figure 1.

Schematic of participants' constructions of interrelations between membership categories.

Article Categories:

- Research

Keywords:

gambling

, ;

poker

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membership categorisation

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qualitative

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