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## Reflections on Responsibility

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**Responsible:** *adj*: Answerable, accountable (*to another for something*); liable to be called to account; as being in charge or control; morally accountable for one's actions; capable of rational conduct; deserving the blame or credit for; being a free moral agent.—*Oxford English Dictionary* ([Simpson & Weiner, 1989](#))

In recent years, discourses of *responsibility* have, along with the proliferation of gambling and problem gambling itself, become increasingly prevalent throughout Western nations. The concept, which originates in notions of power and morality, has been appropriated by a range of stakeholders who utilize it in particular ways. In a pragmatic sense, ideas about responsibility are often generated and fostered through strategic alliances between, for example, government, the gambling industry, community groups, and treatment providers whose interests can be made to coalesce around this central theme. For instance, governments have moved to formulate *responsible gambling policies*<sup>1</sup>, while some sectors of the gambling industry have attempted to demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility by, for example, not encouraging excessive play and providing realistic estimates of the chances of losing (or at least by paying lip service to those principles). At the same time, treatment agencies provide advice and information that is designed to encourage the development of responsible, self-regulating behaviour in their clients. Meanwhile, a range of organizations have come to identify themselves in terms of this increasingly dominant discourse, including, for example, the Responsible Gambling Council in Canada, the National Center for Responsible Gaming in the USA, and the Responsibility in Gambling Trust in the UK.

However, the demands on this rather modest concept are considerable. It has come to embody both the problem (in terms of irresponsible behaviour) and the solution (responsible behaviour by individual gamblers, government, regulators, and industry) in current debates on problem gambling.

But what exactly does this concept—responsibility— mean? This question takes us to the heart of the issue, as the core concepts tend to be vague and characterized by an apolitical acceptance of the assumptions that underlie them. Linguistically, descriptions often appear to rest on a tautology whereby *responsibility* is demonstrated through *responsible behaviour* and *responsible behaviour* is evidence of *responsibility*. There has been little critical academic debate about what it actually means to “be responsible’ and why such ideas have become so popular in recent years.

At its heart, the notion of responsibility is based on possession of power and implies accountability—“to another *for* something”—so much so that the idea of responsibility without power is virtually meaningless. It also possesses a moralizing element—“morally accountable for one's actions.” Responsible behaviour is also appropriate behaviour for which the individual can be held to account: can be blamed or praised for.

However, in current usage responsibility (and with it, power) is dispersed among a wide range of stakeholders, all of whom are exhorted to behave in a responsible manner. Such a broadening of the focus in this way actually serves to diffuse genuine responsibilities to such an extent that it is often not clear with whom ultimate power— and so accountability—rests. Out of all this, the party who emerges as the main subject of notions of responsibility is the individual gambler. It is with the individual gambler that the tasks of seeking out information, setting limits on the amount of time and money he or she spends playing, making reasoned decisions, and controlling his or her own behaviour ultimately rest.

The increasing popularity of discourses of responsibility can be seen as at least a partial shift away from a reliance on the largely medicalized discussions of problem gambling which became dominant in the 1980s ([American Psychiatric Association \[APA\], 1980](#)). The first explanations of gambling problems tended to be discussed within a reductive, materialistic epistemology of mental and/or physical illness. As many have pointed out, such a view of problem gambling was part of a more general medicalization of behaviour regarded as marginal or deviant and represented a social achievement as much as a scientific one. It demonstrated the ability of particular groups—in this case researchers, clinicians, and other treatment specialists—to make their voices heard and to have their opinions count above those of others who may have held different views ([Castellani, 2000](#); [Rosecrance, 1985](#)). However, today the focus is changing. We are witnessing a shift in which medicalized conceptions of problem gambling increasingly embrace discourses based around notions of responsibility and consumer choice. Such a shift is congruent with broader socio-economic changes taking place throughout affluent consumer societies. These changes include the embrace of commercial gambling by state and federal governments, the ongoing normalization of the

activity, and the increasing salience of neo-liberal ideologies and policies. In a climate in which commercial gambling is no longer considered marginal or deviant, is pursued by a large proportion of the population, and is encouraged by the state, new ways of talking about gambling and problem gambling are coming into being.

Although medicalized discourses of problem gambling are still widespread and influential, they are increasingly being joined by discourses of responsibility that focus on individual gamblers as consumers who are in charge of their own decision-making in the marketplace. The emphasis here is on freedom of choice —particularly *informed* choice—on the part of the individual and the gambling industry as a mainstream leisure provider. This change of focus is reflected in language in which the euphemistic “gaming” has replaced the harder connotations of *gambling* and discussions of gambling problems are often couched in terms of *gambling-related harms* and *consumer protection* rather than in the more medicalized terminology of *pathology* and *compulsion*.

Just as the dominance of medical models was a reflection of particular groups’ successes in promoting their ideas about the nature of problematic behaviour, so the rise of notions of responsibility reflect similar convergences of stakeholders’ views that arise within particular social climates: in this instance, the socio-economic and political climates of advanced consumer societies.

The emphasis on the responsibility of the individual player and/or the gambling provider, rather than on, say, the responsibility of state regulation, dovetails with wider political and fiscal policies of neo-liberalism, with its emphasis on individual freedom and choice. Its underlying ideology is exemplified in [Milton Friedman's \(1980\)](#) famous maxim “free to choose,” and it is characterized by the state's reduced intervention in social and economic life, its decreasing responsibility for the provision of public services, and its promotion of competitive enterprise.

In particular, this *minimal state* is characterized by increasing unwillingness to levy unpopular taxation on voting populations. In the revenue vacuum created by such policies, the economic utility of gambling as a source of revenue is clear ([Abt et al. 1985](#)). And so, as the presence of the state in the regulation of public life recedes, its involvement in the business of gambling increases, creating a relationship that has seen a proliferation and liberalization of commercial gambling throughout Western economies over the past three decades.

The reduction of external governance that is central in neo-liberalism is accompanied by an increasing emphasis on individual self-control. Here, the requirement is for individuals to control their consumption through behaviour that is rational, self-limiting, and based on informed and prudent decision-making. Such features are the foundation of the neo-liberal ideal: the sovereign consumer ([O'Malley, 1996](#); [Rose, 1999](#)). So, crucially, the corollary of all this emphasis on

freedom and choice is the exercise of self-control on the part of the rational—or responsible—consumer. As one writer has put it, in order to be free at all, individuals must first demonstrate that they are “capable of *responsibly* exercising that freedom through systems of domination” ([Dean, 1999](#), p. 165; [italics added]). In this way, responsible or “appropriate” consumption has come to be regarded as behaviour that contributes to both individual and social health, as well as demonstrating moral well-being.

The emphasis within neo-liberal policies typically represents a shift away from a focus on what can be termed *production side* issues, concerned with, for example, supply, availability, accessibility, and the formats of products, and a shifting towards what can be termed *consumption side* issues, concerned with, for example, the choices, freedoms, preferences, and habits of individual consumers.

As a feature of these broad socio-economic trends, the increasing liberalization and deregulation of commercial gambling is accompanied by rising demands for self-control and responsible gambling by players themselves. Rather than resting on restrictive legislation, the onus now rests on both individual and corporate responsibility. Gamblers are considered rational, sovereign consumers; the gambling industry is considered a legitimate, mainstream leisure provider; the interests of both are assumed to come together in responsible self-regulation.

The responsible gambling tropes that are found in these kinds of discourses reflect a continued focus on the individual as both the site of gambling problems and their resolution. Despite the apparent diffusion of responsibility among a wide range of stakeholders, the real focus here is on individual players themselves whose actions, beliefs, and intentions are the repository of ideas about “appropriate” behaviour.

Milton Friedman, the architect of neo-liberalism, was famously scornful of the very notion of corporate or government responsibility, arguing instead for a narrowly individualistic definition of responsible behaviour: “What does it mean to say that government might have a responsibility? Government can't have a responsibility any more than business can. The only entities which can have responsibilities are people” ([Friedman, 1970](#), p. 32).

It is not only free choice, but also *informed* choice, that is crucial here, and the informed consumer is the cornerstone of ideas about responsible gambling. The hope here is that informed choice will result in rational, and therefore responsible, behaviour, and this hope is based on the assumption that decisions about whether and how much to gamble should be largely left to the individual.

The individual player is also the focus of public health strategies, which aim to provide information and education in order to facilitate informed choice and

responsible play. Indeed, such approaches have come to be almost synonymous with ideas about responsibility themselves. However, the relationship between the two is not a necessary one. In fact, the links are largely political, and they reflect the ideological dominance of notions of responsibility as much as the supposed efficacy of individual responsibility as the best strategy for improving public health.

The blueprint for responsible gambling initiatives, the *Reno Model*, proposed by Alex Blaszczynski, Robert Ladouceur, and Howard Shaffer outlines such sentiments, stating that a responsible gambling program “rests upon two fundamental principles: (1) the ultimate decision resides with the individual and represents a choice, and (2) to properly make this decision individuals must have the opportunity to be informed” ([Blaszczynski et al., 2004](#), p. 311).

In outlining the parameters of responsible gambling, [Blaszczynski et al. \(2004\)](#) also articulate the principles of neo-liberal policies more generally: the emphasis on individual freedom and choice, and, particularly, the emphasis on the centrality of information for the facilitation of autonomous and rational action. They go further down this path when they invoke the idea of civil liberties to argue that “external organizations cannot remove an individual's right to make decisions” ([Blaszczynski et al., 2004](#), p. 311), and they go further still along this path when they claim that “responsible gambling ... rests on the principle of informed choice [which] is a fundamental principle of human rights policies” ([Blaszczynski et al., 2004](#), p. 312). It should be pointed out here that this is not the case: Informed choice may be a fundamental principle of neo-liberal ideology, but it has not yet been incorporated into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

However, the point to be made from all this is simply that these ideas about responsibility, freedom of choice, and information extend beyond debates on gambling, and they are actually embedded in wider socio-economic contexts, where they reflect current political ideologies and policies.

It is no longer the prerogative of the industry, the state, or the courts to restrict the consumption of gambling—this is now up to the individual, who becomes responsible for his or her own fate at the tables. It is the task of rational consumers to temper their enjoyment of the thrills of gambling with a prudent awareness of the risks involved, to exercise self-control, to manage their losses, and even to exclude themselves from gambling venues altogether.

In this context, discourses of responsibility reintroduce an element of agency that was lacking in some of the most deterministic medical/psychological models. They begin to challenge the notion of responsibility as something that could be lost, undermined, or somehow given up, whether through powerful external agents (such as “addictive” features of certain types of games) or through individual vulnerabilities (mental, physiological, or environmental). Current discourses return

such responsibility to the individual, as well as introducing a quasi-moral element to it. As has been noted already, the idea of responsibility also implies the existence of power. However, it is precisely a *lack* of power that characterizes those who have lost control of their gambling behaviour. For problem gamblers themselves, and those with a predisposing vulnerability to the development of such problems, responsibility is not a particularly helpful concept.

At the same time, within these discourses the concept of “free” choice is something of a misnomer. Free choice is only really regarded as such when it is deemed to be responsible, yet various sanctions exist to guide behaviour in socially acceptable directions. It has been pointed out that liberalism conceals a “hidden despotism” ([Valverde, 1997](#), p. 93) whereby those who cannot or will not act responsibly are subject to various prohibitions and restrictions, as well as a moralizing agenda that persuades and cajoles individuals into “responsible” patterns of behaviour. In the case of problem gamblers, interventions range from voluntary therapy to compulsory counselling and rehabilitation, and, in cases where legal transgressions have occurred, court orders, fines, and even imprisonment. All of these approaches work on individual players themselves, bypassing production side concerns such as availability or access. As [Campbell and Smith \(2003](#), p. 143) have pointed out, dialogues about responsibility relegate such structural issues to the background: They “transpose social problems affiliated with excessive gambling into individual problems and depoliticize them.”

Ultimately, the increasing salience of discourses about responsibility, with their related emphasis on freedom, choice, and information, is a reflection of wider trends that extend beyond the domain of gambling and into the broader political and ideological climates of modern Western societies.

Such a trend is demonstrated in a shift from the language of medicine to one that increasingly incorporates the language of consumerism and responsibility. And, when language changes, so too does the way we think about an issue. Discourses are always tied up with relations of power, and reframing the parameters of debate means that certain viewpoints become easier to articulate while others are downgraded and/or excluded altogether. In recent years, we have already witnessed gambling lose its hard edge (or perhaps more accurately, its *b*) in the shift to the terminology of gaming, and the increasing prevalence of discourses of responsibility appear as another step in this linguistic direction. We are currently in the early stages of this transition, the future direction of which remains to be seen. Whatever this turns out to be will have implications for policy, treatment, and research: for the ways that we conceive of gambling and problem gambling, and the ways that we think we should deal with it. It is because of this that we need to encourage much more critical reflection on these notions of responsibility, and, at the same time, we need to remain alert to the subtle shift that means we are

increasingly talking in this new language.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Even if these might be largely interpreted as policies which enable individuals to act responsibility themselves.

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