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Betting Their Lives: The Close Relations of Problem Gamblers

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By Lorne Tepperman. (2009). Oxford University Press. 350 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-543059-2. \$49.95 USD (hardcover).

This book has 14 chapters divided among three sections: Problem Gambling, Gambling and Family Problems, and Future Directions. In the first section, we find that the main objective of the book is to place problem gambling in a sociological context with a particular focus on family relationships. Two studies underlie the foundation of the book: an exploratory study of 360 respondents called "At Home with Gambling," and an in-depth study of 59 gamblers and 31 spouses. The first is a product of research into the gambling beliefs of individuals in six different ethnic groups in the Toronto region: Aboriginal, British and Irish, Caribbean, Chinese, Latin American, and Russian. Their rationales for gambling, gender differences, and ideas about quitting gambling are discussed. The second study provides the main basis for the book. From that report we find that while there are cultural and social variables, physical and psychological motives seem to predominate in the answers given by the gamblers as to why they gamble. The value of Tepperman's analysis here is his placement of this within a social context.

The chapter "The Downward Spiral of Gambling" treats problem gambling like a career (see [Lesieur, 1984](#), for an earlier example). In this analysis, chasing and its consequences are partially placed in the gambling context. Tepperman discusses the increased neglect of family, work, friends, and health as the gambler proceeds down the spiral. Much of this has been stated in other works on problem gambling.

In Chapter 7, "Worsening Family Relations," participant interviews give life to the data as well as to statements made by clinicians in other works. Money problems, time issues, increasing separation from family activities, and the predominance of negative emotional responses to increased gambling are described in the respondents' own words. "Lack of Spouse Awareness" is the title of Chapter 8.

Here, Tepperman ties sociological theories of secrecy to the specifics of the gambler's lies. He points out that spouses typically are not aware of the extent of the gambler's financial losses or the extent to which they gamble. From my clinical experience, problem gamblers tend to be literalists. They lie through omission. For example, when I ask if they gambled in the past week, they will sometimes state something like "I didn't go to the casino at all," without mentioning that they bought lottery tickets, bet on sports, or engaged in some other form of gambling.

Tepperman's case study of Zab and Delkash sounds like some of the gamblers I see. After the case study he provides the rationales for lying in a clear fashion, from both the gamblers' and spouses' points of view. Conflict and conflict avoidance, as well as different paths to disclosure, are discussed in this context.

The value of adding a sociological perspective becomes very clear when Tepperman discusses the *embeddedness* of couples and the impact of this on gambling in Chapter 9. He defines it as follows: "Embeddedness refers to the intertwining of partners' social networks..." (page 185). Couples with strong couple embeddedness "occupied the same social world, knew each other's families, worked together, spent time with the same group of friends, or belonged to the same organization" (page 185). The more embedded the gambler and partner, the more they know about each other and the more influence the partner can have on gambling-related activities. However, when the gambler is embedded in the gambling world and the spouse is not, this increases secrecy and makes it harder for the spouse to have an impact on gambling. His treatment here is well worth the price of the book.

In Chapter 10, his discussions and examples of ineffective strategies for helping the gambler are similar to what is present in the literature on gambling and the family. Comments like "[c]ounseling is only as helpful as the gambler allows it to be" (p. 217) and "nagging appears to do little to improve the problem and much to worsen it" (p. 219) are widely known in therapeutic circles. Not surprisingly, some of the individuals interviewed went to Gamblers Anonymous or other treatment and did not like it. Others did not believe they had a problem or did not want to change.

Chapter 11—"Ability to Promote Treatment and Change"—is worth showing to significant others of gamblers, as it can give them hope that change is possible. Increases in shared activities, couples counseling, increasing awareness of treatment options, increased financial intimacy, and paradoxically both gambling with the gambler and ultimatums to quit gambling can work under the right circumstances. Perhaps future research will be able to tease out the difference.

Tepperman's recommendations for treatment, policy, and research represent a very good integration of sociological knowledge and theory with problem gambling and will be of interest to sociologists and researchers, as will the last chapter on regulation theory. The idea of role exits and the inherent "delay, mind-changing and

backsliding” (p. 290) will be familiar to clinicians and those who study abstinence and relapse cycles among addicts. Regulation theory posits that embeddedness can produce overregulation, spouse regulation or kin regulation, while lack of embeddedness generates underregulation. Therapists would do well to pay attention to this.

This reviewer has one major critique of the book. On page 19, Tepperman makes what is an incredible comment: “problem gambling has never been studied from a sociological perspective.” The following would disagree with this statement: Mikal Aasved, an anthropologist who wrote “The Sociology of Gambling”—a book filled with 440 pages of references to sociological research on gambling and problem gambling ([Aasved, 2003](#)); Rachel Volberg, a sociologist who does epidemiological research and focuses on social policy issues ([Volberg, 2001](#)); Jay Livingston, a sociologist who wrote about gamblers in action and at Gamblers Anonymous ([Livingston, 1974](#)); John Rosecrance, a sociologist who wrote about problem gamblers (“degenerates”) at an off-track betting parlor and about the need to place problem gambling in context ([Rosecrance, 1985](#); [1988](#)); and myself, a sociologist who wrote about the career of the (male) compulsive gambler from an interactionist perspective ([Lesieur, 1977](#); [1984](#)). However, having stated this, Tepperman's book adds considerably to what we know about the relations between gamblers and their spouses.

Like all good research, this book raises many questions, some of which he discusses in the latter chapters of the book. In addition, one wonders about the interconnections among the gambler, parents, children, other relatives, and friends—for example, how family secrets, and squabbles over control, enabling, and treatment are negotiated in families. While Tepperman touches on these issues at different points, further questions remain: What is the impact of the embeddedness of gamblers with their family of origin on the family they create? Given that a large percentage of problem gamblers are divorced or separated, how can the factors that Tepperman uncovered be used in interventions and the treatment setting with those clients? [Rosecrance \(1985\)](#) discussed the informal regulatory mechanisms within off-track betting communities that help keep regular “degenerates” from going overboard. Similar mechanisms sometimes work in informal settings at work, in bars, and other places. If researchers became more attuned to these contexts, they might uncover keys that therapists and others may use to help problem gamblers.

At the same time as members of family networks attempt to regulate the gambler, other social forces are at work that move gamblers in the opposite direction. Tepperman discusses a few of these. We could add others like casino self-exclusion programs that are either poorly enforced or not enforced at all. Perhaps the most insidious example of movement in the opposite direction from regulation

is the increasing technological sophistication of gambling machines and gambling environments that are geared to keeping gamblers playing longer (increasing “time on device”) and playing until their money has run out ([Schull, in press](#)). It is important that future researchers build on research like this, as well as studies like Tepperman's.

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