

Preface

This book documents the history of ideas about problem gambling (PG) and its link to addictions. We use a combination of literature review as well as conceptual and linguistic analysis to explore the ways in which ideas about PG have changed over time. Religious and medical influences are discussed, along with the ways in which ideas about PG were constantly influenced by ideas surrounding substance abuse. The history of mental illness, notably as it pertains to themes such as loss of control over behavior, is also addressed. We also consider how advances in the mathematics of probability and more recently advances in gambling technology contributed to the emergence of an awareness of problem gambling as a distinct entity. We end with a discussion of the current situation, and future prospects, with an eye on which ideas about PG and addictions seem most promising and which ones should perhaps be left behind.

Our book really is the first of its kind. While there is no shortage of manuscripts on the history of gambling, and even if many of these refer here and there to the addicted or pathological gamblers from days gone by, ours is the first effort to give the evolution of ideas pertaining to gambling addiction its own proper history. The evolution of ideas related to mental illness is now well documented, with substance abuse also a serious (though still emerging) field of historical inquiry. Yet PG had no documented history, so we decided to rectify the matter.

Some readers might be struck by the many twists and turns taken in this book. Chapters 4 and 5, for example, devote more attention to drugs and alcohol than to gambling. This was unavoidable. Any contemporary PG scholar can tell you that the discipline borrows many—maybe most—of its ideas from the sciences of substance abuse. What we today call “alcoholism” was once called inebriety or dipsomania, and it was the first “addiction” to receive serious attention in the West. Later, use of opiates and other drugs came to set the standard by which addictions were measured. Many of our current ideas about PG are still beholden to these early forays in chronic drunkenness and, later, heroin addiction—here, the purportedly irresponsible and psychopathic “junkie” became the model for other out-of-control behaviors.

Through the nineteenth century, there was an accompanying trend: sciences involving volitional deficiency perhaps best exemplified by Esquirol’s notion of

monomania. In order to understand how we came to the notion of “pathological gambling” in its current form, all of these determinants must be given their due and, somehow, streamlined into a coherent vision. Social, religious, political, technological, racial, class-based, and otherwise influenced, the history of PG’s conceptualization is laden with science, pseudo-science, and a vast array of determinants—any one of which could be the sole topic for a decent book.

Further to this, there has long been some debate about the literal veracity of psycho-behavioral disease constructs, with many suggesting that such afflictions are merely metaphorical diseases rather than real ones. We are the first authors to address this matter with a solid foundation in the role of metaphor in all forms of conceptualization, including scientific discovery. When discussing the ways in which ideas and concepts travel from one domain (e.g., biology) to another (e.g., mental illness), we do not shy away from issues pertaining to literal veracity. We tackle them head on, explaining the many twists and turns these ideas have taken.

Yet we have chosen to do more than write a history and have addressed the current understanding of PG with both the eyes of the historian and those of two PG scholars well versed in current issues and controversies. Here, one example will suffice. Since the early twentieth century, the governing wisdom has been that addicts of all stripes need to hit bottom—meaning that they must suffer degradation prior to any readiness to change. Knowledgeable critics are aware that this is questionable, that readiness to change is nowhere near that simple, and that in fact the afflicted are more likely to change in response to positive developments—ranging from social support to assorted (e.g., career) opportunities—than to humiliation and suffering (which are more likely to exasperate the condition). So we challenge the governing ideology as many experts do. The difference is that we also provide a historical backdrop. While addiction historians have discussed how the “addict” was reconstructed in the early twentieth century into the worst of all possible derelicts, we are the first to link that development closely to the parallel emergence of the “hit bottom” theory. In short, only when addicts of all stripes were perceived this way could the idea that they require extremes of degradation become dominant. So we trace the ideology of hitting bottom from its inception right up to current ideas about etiology and treatment, both for PG and substance abuse disorders.

We have done our best to do justice to our topic, though it really is vast. This book could have been a thousand pages long. Sympathy for our readership, however, prompted us to opt for a bit of concision.

Authorship of this book is alphabetical and the authors contributed equally to the book. Ferentzy took the lead investigating the histories of nosology, addictions, and mental illness concepts. Turner took the lead in terms of the history of gambling and gambling technology, the psychology of gambling, and the linguistics of metaphors. Both contributed to discussion of the current state of gambling research and the integration of these various topics.

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