

# 11

## Everyday Gambling in New Zealand

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### **Everyday Gambling**

There is a sizeable body of statistics on gambling in New Zealand which points albeit unintentionally – to the everyday status of this activity. Max Abbott and Rachel Volberg,<sup>1</sup> two leading figures in the rapidly growing discipline of gambling studies, note that in 15 short years there have been no less than seven surveys on gambling in New Zealand (not including a large number of university theses). These include three assessments of people's participation in gambling by the Department of Internal Affairs,<sup>2</sup> plus two surveys funded by the department focusing on problem gambling.<sup>3</sup> To these can be added one conducted by a regional health authority, North Health, under contract to the Committee on Problem Gambling Management and one conducted on behalf of the Casino Control Authority.<sup>4</sup> This much research on gambling should suggest to the reader that there is something about gambling that piques the interest of government bureaucrats and agencies. Here the frequency of the phrase 'problem gambling' is the giveaway. In this section we will review some of the findings of this research and cover its more pathological rationale later.

The surveys commissioned by the Department of Internal Affairs indicate that gambling is an everyday or common activity for New Zealanders. Thus in the departmental survey of 1985, 85 per cent of respondents indicated that they had participated in at least one form of gambling that year.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990 and 1995 surveys this rose to 90 per cent.<sup>6</sup> A 1997 survey, commissioned by the Casino Control Authority, placed the participation rate in the previous twelve months at between 90 per cent and 95 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

Abbott and Volberg suggest 86 per cent for six months in 1999.<sup>8</sup> In other words participation in gambling seems to be increasing. Furthermore, in 1985 15 per cent of respondents reported participating in four or more activities. This rose to 40 per cent in 1990 and 41 per cent in 1995. Monthly or more frequent participation levels in the 1995 sample were: Lotto (55 per cent), Instant Kiwi (31 per cent), raffles/lotteries (19 per cent), gaming machines (9 per cent), track betting (7 per cent), Daily Keno (4 per cent) and housie (3 per cent).<sup>9</sup>

This recounting of rates of participation in gambling may (and should!) be of concern to readers, especially those with any familiarity of the longstanding criticisms of survey research. Undoubtedly these surveys suffer from a number of conceptual and methodological flaws.<sup>10</sup> At best they can be considered snapshots of the situation. The more we try to use them for detailed analysis, the more problematic they become. Nevertheless the sketch they offer of gambling's everyday status is confirmed by other sources, most notably the figures on consumer spending. The Department of Internal Affairs surveys of 1990 and 1995 estimated a 'mean expenditure' of \$446 and \$413 per gambler per annum, while the Casino Control Authority estimated it at \$1,794. Abbott and Volberg suggest the amount was \$492 in 1999.<sup>11</sup> More significantly the latest figures drawn from the returns of gambling operators suggest that New Zealanders spend around six billion dollars per annum on gambling. These figures tend to corroborate the high estimated mean expenditure of the Casino Control Authority *vis-à-vis* the low Department of Internal Affairs estimate. About five-sixths of the amount spent on gambling (this spend is usually called the turnover) is returned to individuals as prizes. What remains (that is, what is lost by gamblers) is called gross profits. The operators who sell gambling products retain these gross profits.

The principal gambling operators in New Zealand are a mixed lot. They include two state-owned enterprises, the Lotteries Commission and the Totalisator Agency Board (TAB); a handful of commercially owned casinos; several hundred clubs and pubs running gaming machines; and an even greater number of housie (or bingo) organisers. A breakdown of the expenditure on gambling and the shares of these operators is provided in Table 11.1.

The mix of gambling venues and products supplied by these operators provides further confirmation of the everyday status of gambling. Certainly the days are long gone when legal gambling options consisted of Golden Kiwi raffle tickets sold by stationers and tobacconists, and a few concrete-block TAB agencies hidden up side streets and alleys. Today gambling venues

**Table 11.1 Licensed Gaming Activity: Estimated Turnover and Expenditure \$(million)**

	1998	1999	2000
<b>TAB-Racing</b>			
Turnover	999	992	1009
Expenditure	190	188	192
<b>TAB-Sports</b>			
Turnover	53	64	69
Expenditure	7	8	9
<b>Lotteries Commission</b>			
Turnover	639	644	624
Expenditure	288	288	280
<b>Clubs and Pubs/Trusts</b>			
Turnover	2100	2600	2888
Expenditure	292	360	400
<b>Casinos</b>			
Turnover	3060	3675	4125
Expenditure	245	294	330
<b>Housie</b>			
Turnover	45	45	45
Expenditure	15	15	15
<b>Other Forms (Raffles, etc.)</b>			
Turnover	20	20	20
Expenditure	10	10	10

and products are on the main street, in the mainstream and advertised on prime-time television. They include racecourses, TAB agencies, lottery outlets, pubs, clubs, casinos, phone and Internet accessed betting, plus extensive television, radio, Internet and print coverage. Together these consumption opportunities ensure that gambling is a readily available activity for all New Zealanders.

But not everyone gambles equally. Returning to the survey results for a moment, and remembering their weaknesses, there are obvious disparities in the degree to which different types of people gamble, and on what. Much of this material confirms some stereotypes about gamblers: men spend more than women; seniors (55 plus) and the young (24 and under) spend less than average; Maori expenditure is roughly double that of non-Maori; Catholics spend more than non-Catholics; those with high educational qualifications spend less than those with low-level qualifications.<sup>12</sup> More interesting results can emerge when these sorts of socio-demographic divisions are used to delineate expenditure in terms of specific gambling products. Unfortunately because of limits in the existing research we can only get hints at what is unfolding in gambling. The most important trend could well be the 'proletarianisation' of gambling.

Proletarianisation is a term that refers to the middle classes assuming working-class values and habits. In this case we mean the growth of gambling – as a legitimate form of entertainment – beyond its stereotypical, masculine and labouring strongholds. Much of this transformation can be encapsulated in the shift from gambling to gaming. In the case of this terminology the proponents of gambling use the latter and its opponents the former. An important part of this sanitisation of gambling is that it is becoming more attractive to women, the educated and the middle class.<sup>13</sup> This is good news for gambling operators as these groups in New Zealand are notoriously antithetical to gambling. There is a separate article to be written on how respectable, essentially middle-class tastes became defined as 'public good' and codified through public policy. Here it is sufficient to note that historically a concern with respectability and the morality of others has meant policy-makers have done their utmost to limit and quarantine gambling (Austrin, 1998; Grant, 1994).<sup>14</sup> Vestiges of this moral imperative remain – indeed those currently running the Labour-Alliance Government are exemplars of the tradition – but the tide has for some years run with those in favour of the expansion of gambling in New Zealand.<sup>15</sup>

### **Defining Gambling**

A definition of gambling is by no means as simple as it first appears. Recently an extensive literature review commissioned by the New Zealand Government could find no single definition. Instead Max Abbott and Rachel Volberg decided to cite a range of options.<sup>16</sup> The clearest of these is drawn from the work of Michael Walker, a psychologist. Here gambling is: 'Risking

money in order to win money on an outcome that is wholly or partly determined by chance'.<sup>17</sup> This seems straightforward enough. All the elements that we might associate with gambling are there – risk, money, wins and losses, chance. But there are at least two deficiencies in this definition. First, it is exclusively money-focused. There is no acknowledgement of 'fun' as motivator for gambling. In part this reflects a blind spot of psychology in which fun – the social construction of fun – is more or less inexplicable. Among gamblers, having fun appears as the most common explanation for the activity.

Second, the psychological definition lacks specificity. It can be applied equally well to many forms of what we might call 'risk-taking'. For example, it applies in choosing a course of study at university. Selecting between majoring in sociology or accountancy is a form of risk-taking. Putting aside the thrill of the former and the drudgery of the latter for the moment, we can see that the choice of courses involves money (course fees), chance (the quality of teaching, developments in the economy), wins and losses (getting good grades or poor), and risk (potential career paths). But this sort of choice can't sensibly be described as gambling. Nor can the range of risk-taking activities that make up our everyday lives: starting a business, planning a marriage, buying a house, etc.

Fortunately sociologists have refined a definition. Gerda Reith provides a version that interestingly reworks notions of the everyday: 'Gambling can be defined as a ritual which is strictly demarcated from the everyday world around it and within which chance is deliberately courted as a mechanism which governs the redistribution of wealth among players as well as a commercial interest or "house"'.<sup>18</sup> This is a neat definition for a number of reasons. First, it captures the ritual aspects of gambling. By 'ritual' is meant the rules and practices particular to (forms of) gambling. These rituals must be learnt and to some extent understood in order to gamble. For example, none of us were born with an instinctual knowledge of how to buy Lotto tickets, nor of how to play multiple lines on a gaming machine, nor how to place a nullified field bet on the sixth race at Trentham. And despite the best advertising efforts of the Lotteries Commission and New Zealand On Air, this information is not readily available through our televisions or in schools. Rather, gambling remains demarcated from the humdrum experiences of the everyday. Consequently, in order to gamble we must seek out gambling possibilities.

The second important notion Reith uses is that of 'the house'. The house is central to gambling. 'The house' is the term used for the individual or business that accepts bets and pays out winnings (simultaneously keeping

gamblers' losses). Sometimes the house is called 'the bank' and the range of gambling opportunities it offers 'banked games'. This terminology is largely associated with casinos, but every house/gambling operator acts as a bank. The most important aspect of the house/gambling operator is that inevitably it wins. In this sense the house does not operate simply as a clearing-house for bets. Gambling is not a nil-sum-game in which the winnings of some gamblers are offset by the losses of all the rest. Gambling operators are in the business to make profits, the only source of which are the net losses of their 'customers', the gamblers. Positioning the house and gamblers leads us to a discussion of the main elements of gambling.

### Elements of Play

#### *Odds and Handicapping*

Gambling operators ensure they make a profit (in effect, that losing bets outweigh winning bets) in a multitude of ways. Most significantly, odds are used to determine the payouts made by the house for winning bets. These calculations are made in favour of the house and are used to minimise its risk. At the same time, odds and the schedule of payouts for bets on games and events are used to make gambling more attractive to players and hence viable in commercial terms.

Odds can be subdivided in terms of games for which probabilities can be determined and events for which they cannot. Odds are structured into the rules of games. Some odds are relatively easy to grasp, while others are exceedingly difficult. The simplest example of odds and the schedule of payouts is a lottery. If 1,000 tickets are sold in a lottery then the odds of holding the winning ticket in a single draw are 1 in 1,000 (1/1,000). There are obvious implications from this. Let us assume that the tickets are sold for \$1 each. This creates the possibility of a prize pool of \$1,000. Any more than this paid out in prizes and the organiser of the lottery (the operator) will lose money. Clearly for the lottery to generate gross profits (that is, what is lost by gamblers) the winning ticket(s) must have a total prize of less than \$1,000 and all the tickets must be sold. But few individuals would buy the tickets if the winning prize was only \$1 or \$10. Thus to make the lottery more attractive the operator must offer a prize (a schedule of payouts) that is enticing, while leaving enough over to be retained as gross profits. Frequently the operator will offer a series of first, second or third prizes to make the lottery a more attractive proposition. This decision-making is of course a

balancing act: the greater the share of prizes, the less the share of gross profits.

Most gambling today is far more sophisticated than the discrete lottery described above. Most commercial forms provide the possibility for continuous forms of gambling in which the process of selling tickets, establishing a prize pool, drawing the winner and making payouts becomes blurred. In these continuous or banked games the use of odds to determine payouts is also central. Here the game of roulette provides a good example. Roulette involves a wheel with 37 slots numbered from 0 to 36, and what is called a layout. The layout is also numbered from 0 to 36 and is used by players to bet which number will be selected by the roulette wheel. Half of the numbers from 1 to 36 are red and half are black (the zero is normally green). Players can bet on any single number (called a straight-up bet), a combination of numbers, red or black, odd or even. Each roulette game begins when the dealer spins the wheel in one direction, and then rolls a small ball along the inner edge of the wheel in the opposite direction. The ball eventually falls into one of the numbered slots. That number is the declared winner for the game and payouts are made. There are about 60 spins of the roulette wheel per hour.

In roulette the odds are structured to favour the house through the use of the number zero. Thus the chances of any straight-up bet being successful are 1 in 37; however, the scheduled payout for winning a straight-up bet is at '36 to 1' (thirty-six times the amount bet). Similarly the so-called 'even-money' bets, where a player picks 18 numbers (all blacks or all reds, all evens or all odds) and the scheduled payout is to '1 to 1' are misnamed, because if the ball stops on zero then all bets are lost. Two processes are in operation. The first involves aspects of a nil-sum-game wherein for the numbers 1 through 36 the house can rely on gamblers cancelling out each others' bets. The second involves the number zero, from which only the house can win. In total the use of the number zero gives the house an advantage or edge over roulette players of about 2.7 per cent.

Clearly the house/operator has an interest in obscuring the extent to which the odds and scheduled payouts favour them. For example, despite all the advertising encouraging us to buy Lotto each week there is no mention that the chance of winning the major prize is less than 1 in 3.8 million. However, what the sellers of Lotto and many other gambling products do is conflate the possible combinations of placing bets (buying the product) and the schedule of payouts with the actual odds on winning.<sup>19</sup> Thus a gambler may know that buying a ten-line combination rather than a 4-line combination means he or she has 2.5 times the chance of winning Lotto, without

necessarily appreciating that the odds of any one of those lines winning is:  $1/40 \times 1/39 \times 1/38 \times 1/37 \times 1/36 \times 1/35 \times 100 = 0.00000003587766048$  per cent. Of course what makes Lotto viable is its massive ticket sales, which make it very likely that *someone* will win each week.

While the odds on Lotto are easy to calculate, the odds on other games are very obscure indeed. In this regard the odds for the gaming machines found in casinos, clubs and pubs are the exemplar. The chances of winning from any single spin of the reels on a gaming machine are rarely, if ever, given. While the schedule of payouts for the different combinations of symbols thrown up by the spinning reels are typically plastered across the front of the machine, the odds for these combinations are not. With the old-fashioned electro-mechanical reel machines it was just possible to work out how many symbols were on each reel and so calculate the odds of winning. But with the electronic video machines this is no longer a possibility. Consequently, one way or another, the players of gaming machines have to have faith.

Specifically, the players must believe that there is a genuine chance of winning. Whether or not they know it, this requires a faith in the software and hardware which run gaming machines. The core of this technology is the EEPROM (electrically erasable programmable read-only memory) which establishes a random number generator and links it to the rules of the game within the machine. Winning or losing results are produced by the EEPROM continuously, only some of which are selected by players dropping coins into the machine, pushing buttons or pulling a handle. The electronic impulses generated by the EEPROM are more rapid than any human reactions. Among other things this undermines the strategy of playing a machine continuously on the basis that it is due to pay out. Even if this was the case, the EEPROM generates far more winning and losing combinations than the player can access. At the same time faith in gaming machines can be diminished, as was the case some years ago when Sky City casino refused to pay out two cars won by a player in twenty minutes. Sky City argued that there was a fault in the EEPROM. This of course begs the question of what happens if the EEPROM is faulty but the malfunction is in favour of the house?

The odds which are structured into the rules of games can be obscure. In the case of wagering (betting on events) these odds are no more than a representational fiction. Thus the high-profile advertising campaign by the TAB – ‘You know the odds, now beat them’ – is doubly false. First, it is impossible to ‘know’ the odds of an event like a horse race or a rugby test in advance. Horse races and rugby matches are not analogous to the spin of a roulette wheel, or to the draw of a lottery, or even to the software in gaming

machines which simulate these random selections. Horse races, rugby matches and all other sports events which people bet on are one-off events, which probability theory and statistics have little to say about. Second, it is impossible to beat the odds offered by the TAB.

The term for odds associated with wagering is 'handicapping'. Handicapping makes wagering on events involving dead certainties and long shots viable. In particular, it is used to minimise the house's exposure. For example, if the All Blacks were playing Italy at Eden Park then the TAB might offer payouts of \$1.01 and \$8.00 for the win, respectively. If the All Blacks win then successful bets make one cent on every dollar bet. If the Italians win then successful bets make \$7.00 on every dollar bet. In terms of representing the underlying chances of winning, these payouts as odds clearly don't add up. If winning and losing are an either/or option (we'll forget the possibility of a draw) then the chances of someone winning must add to 100 per cent. The payout cited above for the All Black win suggests that they have a 99 per cent chance of winning. If this were so then the Italians should have a one per cent chance of winning. In this case the TAB should offer a payout of \$100 on an Italian win. Conversely, the payout cited above for the Italian win suggests that they have a one in eight chance of winning. If this were so then the All Blacks should have a seven in eight chance of winning. In this case the TAB should offer a payout of \$1.14 on an All Black win.

In practice the 'odds' posted by the TAB represent not so much its assessment of the chances of one team or horse winning an event, but its assessment of the punters' assessment. The TAB is centrally interested in making its product (betting on events) as attractive to the gambling public as possible, while at the same time minimising exposure and risk. This means that the TAB is involved in second-guessing the gambling public in the form of marketing a sports event as much as in predicting the outcome of that event.

### *Skill and Chance*

The differences between odds and handicapping provide one important dimension of gambling. Ultimately this relates to the payouts made on winning bets and how they are represented. Skill and chance is an even more fundamental division and relates to the capacity of gamblers to influence their likelihood of winning. In skill-based games it makes a difference whether one is a good or poor player. In games of chance, player ability is of limited consequence.

For some games – like housie – the dimensions of skill and chance are

somewhat blurred. Strictly speaking, housie games are a lottery. Players receive numbered cards, a 'caller' picks numbers from a barrel and players then cross out the selected numbers on their cards. Players can claim a prize only when they cross out a line or some other combination of numbers on their card. Here are the elements of chance: winning combinations are selected at random; good and poor players face the same odds; prizes are awarded to the winning combinations. But there are also elements of skill which centre on the capacity of players to use multiple cards in a single game or draw. Good players can keep track of the numbers called across four, six or more cards and thereby enhance their chances of winning. Thus the difference with a lottery is that in housie it takes skill to identify and claim a winning combination of numbers. Indeed it is this skill, displayed as it is in the noise, smoke and conviviality of a housie game, which arguably is as much prized as winning.

Skill is more clear-cut in wagering. In the case of betting on races or sports events, skill is expressed in terms of reading the form. Form relates to the past performances of the protagonists. Form guides for racing and sporting events take many forms, including specialist publications (e.g. *Turf Digest*, *Rugby News*), sections in newspapers, websites (e.g. <http://www.tab.co.nz/yahoo.html>), radio and television programmes (e.g. *Reunion*) and even dedicated sports stations (e.g. Trackside TV, Radio Pacific). It was argued in the preceding section that the gambling operator, the house, has no incentive to publicise the odds; however, the positioning of form is more problematic. Indeed, by and large the publication of form guides merges seamlessly with the advertising of related gambling products. As noted, the TAB advertising campaign challenges: 'You know the odds, now beat them'. This campaign emphasises form, form guides and all the related – some would say interminable – discussions of form. In so far as knowing the form gives confidence to gamblers (to gamble), then operators are supportive of guides. In truth this reflects the house's ultimate control, through odds and handicapping, over the payouts made on winning bets.

Nevertheless, gambling operators are particularly sensitive to form guides which they regard as cheating. Recently cricket and US college basketball have been wracked by match-fixing scandals. Putting aside these conspiracies for the moment it is also apparent that gambling operators are generally averse to form guides which operate in the realm of insider knowledge. Just as insider knowledge – insider trading – is supposedly disbarred in stock exchanges around the world, so it is illegitimate in gambling. In the case of gambling this insider knowledge is likely to relate to which players are carrying injuries, team strategies, personality conflicts, behind the scenes

ructions, etc. Insider knowledge poses a problem for gambling operators at two levels. First, there is the outside chance that such knowledge might result in losses to the house. This could be the case if gamblers knew something that gambling operators did not. The exemplars of this are 'card-counters' who are able to memorise the order of cards in the five decks commonly used to play blackjack. Such a feat of memory, coupled with a similar memorisation of the odds on winning hands, gives the accomplished card-counter a slight edge over the house. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this form of expertise is constituted as cheating and is illegal in all gambling jurisdictions. The narrative of all form guides is precisely of such insider knowledge, but this is actually a representational device which hides their construction as advertising or marketing.

Second, and more significant, is the problem of form guides as esoteric knowledge. This speaks to the credibility of gambling and in particular the notion that all gamblers face the same odds. Insider knowledge gives rise to the possibility that those who aren't 'in the know' may become disgruntled. In this sense the possibility that a few insiders win against the house is less important than the need to keep the majority in the game. There are parallels here with the faith needed to play gaming machines. Gamblers also need to have faith that the events they wager on are not fixed, and that all gamblers are treated equally. This conflation of faith and equity are two elements in the displacement of a discourse of gambling by one of gaming.

In so far as there is a discernable trajectory, it is found in the reconstitution of gambling as gaming. The difference between gambling and gaming is more than semantic. It speaks to the need for expertise in gambling – what sociologists call cultural capital. The traditional forms of gambling required this. The imagery here is of James Bond playing baccarat, of card sharks, of skilled people doing tricky and risky things. The antithesis of forms of gambling as forms of cultural capital is found in Las Vegas.<sup>20</sup> Las Vegas casinos provide gambling as entertainment available to everyone. No expertise is required to play these games, in fact anyone with the wherewithal can play. Similarly, televised lotteries like Lotto draw on images of games rather than gambling.<sup>21</sup> This extends even into the skill-based games, one example of which is found in the TAB's 'Pick6' option for placing bets. The Pick6 selection introduces a random, lottery-like element into the selection process which deskills the process and supposedly broadens its appeal. Similarly, rule changes in the card games that can be played in casinos increase the chance component and decrease the scope for skill. Hence 'Caribbean Stud Poker' deskills traditional poker, while the use of multiple decks and continuous shuffling deskills blackjack.

### Play and Pathology

So far we have discussed the prevalence of gambling, its main components and some of its contexts. What is left is to address the question: of why people gamble? In doing so, we immediately confront contesting, even oppositional, framings of gambling. These can be distilled in terms of the perspectives of play and pathology. Gerda Reith notes that:

In order to pick through the many approaches that constitute the contemporary literature, it is useful to look first at their historical predecessors, and so outline their intellectual heritage. Out of this morass, two separate traditions gradually emerge, from which our modern perspectives can be traced. One condones all forms of play as manifestations of the sublime element of human nature, while the other regards play in general and gambling in particular as inimical to a healthy society. Within a changing terminology of criticism, the latter has persistently regarded gambling as fundamentally problematic and condemned it as variously sinful, wasteful, criminal and pathological.<sup>22</sup>

Reith further argues that pathological framings have dominated framings of play. In the contemporary literature the ascendancy of pathology over play has a disciplinary locus: psychology dominates sociology.

We will return to the contesting frames of psychology and sociology in the following section. For now it is worth noting the claim by Wildman: 'The literature on gambling is the most disconnected, confused mass of materials that I have ever come across.'<sup>23</sup> This is not an encouraging starting point but it bears directly on the question of why people gamble. In short, there is no simple answer to this question or even agreement on how to go about answering it. Reith is correct to demarcate the approaches to gambling in terms of pathology and play, but at the level of explaining behaviour the discussion is indeed a morass. One symptom of this confusion is the plethora of literature reviews which never quite succeed in developing a synthesis from the mass of material they appraise. For example, the governments of New Zealand and the United States recently commissioned reviews of the literature.<sup>24</sup> These are characterised by their large size and lack of functional conclusion. Partly as a result, the typology of behaviour offered here is partial. Further, this abridgement is not intended as a set of exclusionary categories. The categories should not be read in terms of 'either or' statements but as potentially overlapping explanations.

*Addiction*

Logically the best explanation for gambling as pathology is that it constitutes a form of individual addiction. Gambling (meaning pathological gambling) can then be understood as analogous to alcohol and drug dependence.<sup>25</sup> Of course there is an obvious difference between gambling and substance abuse in that the latter involves the ingestion of something (such as alcohol, heroin, cocaine, marijuana, or even fatty foods) which generates a physiological response that is addictive. The lack of an obvious trigger to pathological gambling means that proponents of gambling addiction have to cast about for other causes of physiological responses. In this sense pathological gamblers might be similar to individuals with sex addictions or exercise addictions or even 'shopaholics'. In other words, gambling (like sex or exercise or shopping) stimulates changes in the brain and body that are addictive.

Anyone who has spent time watching a gambler feed coins into a gaming machine for hours on end should find the notion of addiction compelling. From the outside at least, little seems to be going on.<sup>26</sup> Indeed watching people gamble (especially with machines rather than with other people) is boring in the extreme. At the same time, there are plenty of potential triggers for addiction: the repetition of gambling, its periodic rewards, its exciting packaging, even its unquestioning inclusiveness. Perhaps some of these elements are responsible for raising (or lowering) dopamine levels, or serotonin levels, or heartbeat, or alpha-wave production. Maybe these physiological responses are addictive. At the same time an increasing body of research has stressed the comorbidity of pathological gambling – 'comorbidity is the medical term used to describe the cooccurrence of two or more disorders in a single individual.'<sup>27</sup> Again anyone who has spent much time around gamblers will be able to testify to the presence of at least one addictive substance – tobacco. Casinos, racecourses, TABs, housie nights, clubs and pubs are typically very smoky places indeed.

Perhaps what is going on at these sites of gambling is best explained in terms of multiple addictions. Certainly the recent court cases in the United States against the manufacturers of cigarettes show the mileage that can be gained from claims to addiction. However, there are a number of problems with addiction in the case of gambling. The first is the methodological one of measuring physiological responses. That is, it seems unlikely that gamblers at the Sky City casino or Riccarton racecourse, or anywhere else, will ever consent to giving blood and tissue samples while they are playing. Taking these sorts of samples in a laboratory situation is a distant second-best. Consequently, collecting the evidence to substantiate a physiological chain

of addiction is a highly problematic endeavour.

An even more significant problem is the conceptual one. If we accept that addiction (pathological gambling) is caused by engaging in gambling activities (as opposed to ingesting certain substances), then the problem remains of how to define gambling. Here the problem is one of identifying the unique characteristics of gambling that can act as physiological triggers. Unfortunately no such definition exists, largely because of the boundary gambling shares with other forms of risk-taking. In this sense what makes gambling distinct are laws, norms, contexts and culture, and not its physiological imperatives. If we are to talk of gambling addicts, we can also talk of people as addicted to all the other and myriad forms of risk-taking and thrill-seeking. While this might have a certain journalistic purchase, it is a poor foundation for analysis.

### *Irrationality*

Walker speculates on three core beliefs of regular gamblers:

1. That through persistence, knowledge and skill it is possible for a person to make money through gambling.
2. While many will fail in the attempt, the gambler believes that her or she, unlike those others, has the resources needed to win.
3. That persistence in applying oneself to the task will ultimately be rewarded.<sup>28</sup>

Walker regards these beliefs as irrational. And in so far as the intent of gamblers is to win money there can be little doubt that regular or sustained gambling is futile. Frederick Nietzsche long ago argued that when faced with limited resources and unfavourable odds, the most rational strategy for the gambler (in truth, all individuals) is the all-or-nothing wager. At least there is some, 'slim', chance of winning with such a wager, whereas a series of small bets only guarantees defeat. After all, the main operating principle of casinos is that if the gambler can be convinced to keep on gambling, he or she will eventually lose.

Psychologists explain this 'irrational thinking' in terms of cognitive dissonance. Gamblers, in order to justify their (losing) behaviour, deny the real odds and continue gambling under the misapprehension that they have a real chance of winning. The notion of addiction leads to abstinence as an appropriate response to gambling (or at least to problem gambling), while the notion of cognitive dissonance leads to harm-reduction strategies. Harm-reduction strategies centre on educating gamblers on the odds.<sup>29</sup> In

effect they are about making gamblers better players so as to better limit their losses. Providing information is seen as the panacea for irrational thinking.

Sociologists are less certain about the divisions between rational and irrational thinking than are psychologists. For example, psychologists label one form of thinking as the 'illusion of control' (which refers to the 'locus of control'). Put simply, this refers to determining the internal or external control of situations individuals find themselves in. In this case, according to psychologists, the gambler irrationally believes that he or she has control of the situation. The gambler posits internal control, the psychologists external. The above discussion of the elements of play might suggest that external control (e.g. odds, chance and probability) is indeed the case, but Reith problematises even this.

Reith argues that probability theory can only describe the spread of events in the long run – the very long run – and certainly not what is going to happen next. This long-term aspect of probability is of little or no interest to gamblers. Gamblers are acutely interested in what will happen next, in the determination of a bet or wager. Consequently, framing gambling in terms of rationality is pointless as a scientific endeavour and, worse still, one which invalidates the lived experiences of most people. In following this line of argument we have arrived at what might be called the postmodern critique of science and its disciplines (including psychology *and* sociology). In this respect Reith posits the 'magical-religious worldview' as an alternative framing of gambling. Within this worldview luck and superstition are as valid as the measures of rationality. Indeed this type of approach aims to obliterate the distinctions between rational and irrational portrayals of human action.

There can be little doubt that gamblers rely on luck and superstition to guide them. Banal examples can be found in the wearing of a 'lucky rabbit's foot', or using birth dates to pick Lotto, or insisting that a particular gaming machine is due for a win.<sup>30</sup> More broadly still, most of us seem to hold to some aspects of the magical-religious worldview. In part this is because of the impossibility of calculating the odds in modern life. For example, who can say if our superannuation schemes will pay out in thirty years, or if our partners are truly faithful, or if choosing sociology rather than accounting was the right choice? Like players of gaming machines we are all forced to rely on faith. In essence we have to accept others' representations of the world.

The division between rational and irrational thinking is then not so obvious as psychologists are wont to claim. Furthermore, luck and superstition have the advantage of being able to explain the runs of good

and bad luck which seemingly mark all of our lives. Not only are these aspects of luck and superstition inherently meaningful, they are ultimately irrefutable as analytical practice precisely because they are constituted outside the realm of evidence and rationality. However, while the postmodern critique has enjoyed considerable success in academic circles it is largely ridiculed outside of academe. This is deserved in so far as the critique ignores some fairly obvious aspects of everyday life. Most significant is the imbalance or asymmetry between framings of luck and probability.

The question should be asked: 'Which approach – luck or probability – is the better at explaining people's humdrum lives?' In this case luck opens up arguments about magic on the one hand and religion on the other. Magic offers the possibility for heightened forms of agency within which individuals can transcend the material constraints of their lives. Casting spells is one example of this transcendence, and positive visualisation is another. In contrast, religion engages with predestination and the omnipotence of an extra-human agency. The forms of agency made available through religion are that of the plaintiff and supplicant. But the issue remains of whether these framings of everyday life are credible. The short answer is no. The long answer is very long indeed. Suffice to say that the magical-religious worldview stumbles precisely at the point of inequality, at the distribution of results and life chances. That is, the inequalities of social life are so clearly patterned in terms of ethnicity, class, gender and wealth as to render the explanatory power of luck and superstition trivial in the extreme. In these terms the influence of probability swamps any of luck. Returning to gambling, the cliché is that places like Las Vegas are built on losers. This highlights that in the contest between the house and gamblers, probability inevitably beats out luck.

### *Action*

Addiction is the classical psychological framing of gambling. Its counterpart in sociology is that of action. Action is a concept developed by Erving Goffman to describe the 'willful undertaking of serious chances'.<sup>31</sup> The manipulation of chance is understood here in very different terms to that of the psychologists. The psychological approach is to emphasise gambling as a means of exchanging (winning or losing) money. Given that the odds are stacked against gamblers, this is an unavoidably irrational undertaking. However the classical sociological approach is to view gambling as an arena for the exchange of an immaterial commodity, what we might call social

honour. Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist now claimed by sociology, observed that wagering on cockfighting in Bali was as much about status as it was about the exchange of money.<sup>32</sup> Thus it was as important to be perceived as a good winner or loser as it was to win or lose wagers. From this perspective gambling, even where it sustains heavy losses, can be understood as rational. In short rationality is not universal but is bounded by the social context in which gambling takes place.

Goffman suggested that gambling represents one form of action, the purpose of which is to test and prove an individual's character. Winning money *per se* does not figure in this analysis, indeed it is the losing bets which best provide a test:

Plainly, it is during moments of action that the individual has the risk and opportunity of displaying to himself and sometimes to others his style of conduct when the chips are down. Character is gambled; a single good showing can be taken as representative, and a bad showing cannot be easily excused or re-attempted.<sup>33</sup>

Goffman even categorised the major forms of character that are so tested and displayed: courage, gameness, integrity, gallantry, composure and confidence. While the concept of action does not rule out the possibility of pathological or problem gamblers, it certainly problematises them. In this sense Goffman, like most sociologists, is interested in the gambler as normal rather than in the psychologically constructed deviant.<sup>34</sup> We'll return to this issue in the closing section.

At this point it is useful to identify some limitations in Goffman's version of action. Firstly, it is imbued with a Hemingwayesque machismo. There are obvious parallels here between the gambler and the bullfighter, etc., but is it reasonable to draw these comparisons? Putting aside the sexism of the language used, is it valid to approach the everyday as a series of definitional struggles? Goffman seems to approach the hyperbole of Nietzsche in this regard. Possibly Goffman's dramaturgy overstates and glamorises the humdrum everyday. Secondly, and more clearly, is his focus on human interaction? The examples Goffman uses are card and coin games which provide face-to-face interactions, but in the case of gambling these interactions are increasingly mediated by technology. The extent to which technology (e.g. gaming machines, the Internet) runs with or counter to the notion of action is left hanging. For example, the concluding section in Goffman's article seems to problematise his own argument, in so far as face-to-face interaction is marginalised:

Commercialization, of course, brings the final mingling of fantasy and action. And it has an ecology. On the arcade strips of urban settlements and summer resorts, scenes are available for hire where the customers can be the star performer in gambles enlivened by being very slightly consequential. Here a person currently without social connections can insert coins in skill machines to demonstrate to the other machines that he has socially approved qualities of character. These naked little spasms of the self occur at the end of the world, but there at the end is action and character.<sup>35</sup>

Of course another take is to emphasise the experience of having fun, of entertainment. This approach seems particularly useful, given the ways in which traditional forms of gambling are ceding to gaming. In this sense the tensions found in Goffman's account relate to the restricted possibilities for 'action' in forms of gaming. In other words, how inconsequential can something be before it ceases to be open to action? Rather the linking of 'gambling as gaming as entertainment as fun' provides a useful starting point for analysis. Zygmunt Bauman suggests that capitalist society is founded on a work ethic which marginalises the possibilities for undisciplined behaviour, including fun.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, fun emerges as an aspect of entertainment which – as Goffman rightly identified – is thoroughly commercialised. Thus fun isn't a free-floating spontaneous experience, but is channelled through commercial outlets and sensibilities. George Ritzer has coined the term 'McDonaldization' to account for the commercialisation and disciplining of modern life. Bryman has extended this idea in terms of 'Disneyization', in which entertainment is simultaneously packaged and disciplined as forms of risk-taking, albeit in very anaemic forms.<sup>37</sup>

### *Framing Gambling*

There can be little argument that psychologists rather than sociologists conduct the bulk of research on gambling. This is doubly true of research that is funded by agencies of government. In New Zealand, funded research on gambling has been monopolised by teams led by psychologists. Elsewhere in the world the dominance of psychologists in gambling research also holds. In part this reflects the focus of psychologists on pathological or problem gambling. Government funding is after all directed at solving social problems, and in this regard psychology is probably a safer bet than sociology. But this dominance is also the product of what Paul Starr calls 'the politics of numbers'.<sup>38</sup> The epistemology and methods deployed by psychologists result

in an appeal to science, hypothesis testing, screeds of numbers and, most importantly of all, the promise of certainty. We might call this a positivist approach. From the perspective of most government agencies a sociological approach is much less appealing, precisely because it may seek to problematise what are commonsense assumptions and is more often than not anti- or post-positivist. Putting it simply, government agencies are more comfortable with the results of psychological research in so far as it is characterised by claims to objectivity and to the validity of individualised treatment.

Arguably the developments in sociology which emphasise the social construction of social problems and attack the rationality/irrationality dualism make the discipline even less attractive to the bureaucratic mindset.<sup>39</sup> Indeed for sociologists, the category of pathological gambling is of more interest than the characteristics of putative pathological gamblers. The main thrust of this study has examined the social construction of 'pathological gambling' as a vehicle for professional and popular claims-making.<sup>40</sup> This speaks to the possibility that by categorising tens of thousands of New Zealanders as pathological or problem gamblers we deny the lived experience of people, while creating an 'out' for the gambling industry. After all, if individuals have problems with gambling because they are sick, social problems cannot be said to lie with gambling itself. This is an attractive proposition for both gambling operators and the government, which collects significant revenues from gambling.<sup>41</sup>

#### Endnotes

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