

Goffman Revisited: Action and Character in the Era of Legalized Gambling

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Abstract

The expansion of legalized gambling opportunities in North America and elsewhere has proceeded rapidly since the early 1990s, and the current ubiquity of gambling has renewed interest in the sociological and cultural analysis of the activity. Erving Goffman's concepts of "action" and "character," discussed in *Where the Action Is*, and other aspects of his oeuvre, provide resources for interrogating the present legalized gambling environment and the micro-social aspects of gambling activities and identities. The latter are addressed through Goffman's contribution to the sociological understanding of processes of normalization and the social classification of selves. His analyses of stigma, moral career, labeling processes, and the institutional shaping of selves (e.g., *Asylums* (1961)) are drawn upon as resources for understanding gambling identities and stigmas as *sociological-dramaturgical* phenomena. Goffman's work is related to the changing institutional basis of gambling activities, and to broader social organizational changes that have been accounted for through the concepts of consumption and risk.

Introduction

The social world is such that any individual who is strongly oriented to action, as some gamblers are, can perceive the potentialities for chance in situations others would see as devoid of eventfulness...Chance is not merely sought out but carved out.

Where the Action Is (Erving Goffman 1967: 201)

The expansion of legalized and commercialized gambling that is occurring in the U.S., Canada, Australia, the U.K., and in many other countries, can be situated in relation to a broader cultural shift toward post-industrial, consumption-driven societies. This expansion has proceeded rapidly since the early 1990s, and the current ubiquity of gambling has renewed interest in the sociological and cultural analysis of the activity (Castellani 2000; Cosgrave 2006; McMillen 1996; Nibert 2000; Reith 2002, 2003; Schwartz 2003). In North America, most legal forms of gambling are easily accessible: from casino gambling and horse racing at specific sites, to lottery tickets and scratch and win games in convenience stores, to internet sports gambling and poker, which can be accessed from the comfort of one's home. Along with this expansion and accessibility has come the creation of new gambling markets, including the relatively recent participation in gambling activities by the middle class (Fabian 1990), and the participation by particular groups such as youth, women, and seniors. Gambling has become a widespread

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popular cultural activity and is marketed to everyone as a consumer activity, typically as a form of entertainment.

In its various legalized manifestations, gambling is a form of consumption whereby actors demonstrate orientations to pleasure, desire, and leisure in the “consumer society” (Campbell 1987; Hannigan 1998; Kingma 1997). While an analytical emphasis on consumption is displacing the classical sociological emphasis on production as a resource for theorizing the social organization and culture of (late) modern societies (Baudrillard 1975, 1988; Bauman 2001; Miller 1995; Ritzer 1998), the phenomenon of risk has also come to occupy a central place in the sociological analysis and understanding of these societies (Beck 1992, 1994, 1995, 2003; Giddens 1990, 1991; Lupton 1999; Lyng 1990, 2005).¹

This paper develops a Goffmanian perspective to formulate some of the significant cultural, institutional, and interactional aspects of the present legalized gambling environment, and examines the changing discursive constructions of gambling that have occurred. While much has changed since the publication of Goffman’s rich, but neglected essay *Where the Action Is* (1967), it and other pertinent aspects of his oeuvre provide the opportunity for interrogating the present gambling environment, as well as for sociological theorizing around the topics of consumption and risk. Goffman’s analyses of action, character, and fatefulness (1967), stigma (1963) and moral career (1959a), his conception of labeling processes (1961), and dramaturgical sociological approach generally (1959b), will serve as resources for the sociological interrogation of the micro-social aspects of gambling activities and identities within an environment that has been shaped by the rationalization, expansion and commercialization of gambling opportunities.

While *Where the Action Is* was not directly about the sociology of gambling, his interactionist analysis of action nevertheless contributes to this area and helps to understand the social organization of forms of risk-taking and the ways in which actors understand these activities and orient themselves to them in particular settings (Goffman 1967: 201). Goffman’s work also provides resources for understanding changing understandings and definitions of risk-taking, particularly as they pertain to gambling stigmas.

The paper begins with a discussion of Goffman’s contribution to the sociology of gambling and his formulations of “action” and “character.” These formulations are then related to three themes that address the changed gambling environment: first, macro social changes involving the rationalization, expansion, and commercialization of gambling. Secondly, contemporary discussions of consumption and risk as these topics are presented in social-theoretical perspectives of late modernity. Finally, their pertinence for a consideration of the contemporary stigmas of “problem” and “pathological” gambling is developed. Here, Goffman’s analyses of stigma, moral career, labeling processes, and the institutional shaping of selves (e.g., *Asylums* (1961)) are drawn upon as resources for understanding gambling stigmas as *sociological-dramaturgical* phenomena. From a Goffmanian perspective, “normal” and problematic gambling orientations are to be accounted for in relation to moral careers and social processes of evaluation and classification. Goffman thus contributes to the sociological understanding of the “processes of becoming a pathological gambler” (Castellani 2000). With respect to the changing definitions of gambling as a social activity, I conclude that the processes of normalization and classification are related to changing social-organizational, cultural, and institutional conditions, which generate new definitions of character.

Where the Action Was

Published in 1967, Goffman’s essay was commissioned as a study on criminality, and appeared in *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. Goffman based many of his observations and insights concerning “action” on his ethnographic study of casino gambling, as well as his experience as a blackjack dealer in a Las Vegas casino.² His formulation of the criminal’s “prior commitment” to risky activities—akin in certain respects to the gambler’s

commitment where it is not only the payoff that counts, but the orientation to action and risk involved (Goffman 1967: 182)—is not a formulation typically found in deviance and criminology studies or text books. Goffman's contribution to the study of deviance has for the most part been represented through his analysis of stigma (Goffman 1993), the idea of moral career (Goffman 1959a; Rubington and Weinberg 1996) and his dramaturgical theory (Deutschmann 2002; Goffman, 1959b), but his discussion in *Where the Action Is* presents a novel interpretation of deviance and criminality, anticipating the current sociological interest in voluntary risk-taking (Lyng 1990; 2005).

When Goffman wrote *Where the Action Is* in the mid 1960s, Las Vegas was the sole location of legal casino gambling in North America, and the spread of state-run lotteries was only beginning to develop. Gambling was still viewed culturally as an outsider activity, a deviant activity engaged in by members of particular subcultures. This view of gambling was reproduced in sociological analyses, from studies of horse race bettors (Herman 1967; Zola 1964) to poker players (Hayano 1977).

There have been earlier accounts of gambling activities and behaviors that have signaled the importance of Goffman's work for the sociological study of gambling (Downes et al. 1976; Frey 1984). Frey (1984: 114), for example, notes that "Goffman's work clearly demonstrates the potential of gambling activity for further sociological research, particularly at the interactional, phenomenological level." Downes et al. (1976) note the liberating effect of Goffman's analysis:

The force of Goffman's essay on gambling is that he lifts gambling out of the moral abyss into which successive generations of commentators and reformers have consigned it and renders possible a consideration of its meaning which is freed from a priori associations of a negative kind.³

Since the publication of these works—the latter focusing on gambling activities in the British context—the North American environment has become significantly more gambling-rich due to legalization and expansion. Since the 1960s, we can speak of three waves of gambling expansion: the first, occurring with the spread of state-sponsored lotteries in the 1960s and 1970s; the second: the spread of commercial and state-operated casinos primarily in the 1990s; and finally the appearance of internet gambling and its burgeoning popularity in the early 21st century. These types of gambling are still expanding, and certain forms have mutated, so that while state-run lotteries are still popular revenue-generators for governments, lotto products, such as scratch and win cards, are available in corner stores. In some jurisdictions, governments are involved in sports gambling, but the privately run internet sports sites are presently still illegal. There is also gambling hybridization, as evidenced by the transformation of race tracks into "racinos" (Eadington, 2003).

Goffman on Action and Character

Goffman saw "action" as a particular analytical object through which he could explore aspects of the self. The various forms of action, where risk, danger, and thrills are oriented to, are institutions for the accomplishment of desirable experiences, with possible consequences for the self. Action is thus theorized by Goffman as a method of self-constitution, having ontological significance, and being institutionalized through various activities that allow for its expression. While recognized primarily as a micro-sociological analyst, Goffman sought to connect the micro and institutional realms (Goffman 1961; Rawls 2003). He analytically linked the micro-sociological concern with the self to the institutional possibilities for its exploration.

By "action," Goffman meant "activities that are consequential, problematic, and undertaken for what is felt to be their own sake" (1967:185). Further, "Whoever participates in action does so in two quite distinct capacities: as someone who hazards or chances something

valuable, and as someone who must perform whatever activities are called for” (p. 186). While diverse institutions and activities could supply “action”—from high-risk jobs to criminal enterprises to arenas for thrills—Goffman’s main focus is gambling activities, since the term itself was developed in the gambling context (1967: 186).

While pointing out the consequentiality of many of our everyday actions and decisions, Goffman’s analysis was concerned with those actions which were problematic for the actor, and as such had “fateful” consequences. He writes, “the crux of the essay is the transition from consequentiality to fatefulness. Fatefulness is the mark of the threshold between retaining some control over the consequences of one’s actions and their going out of control” (Goffman 1967: 27). This notion of “control over consequences” is especially relevant with respect to the contemporary stigmas of “problem” and “pathological” gambling, and will be discussed in the last section of the paper. Goffman’s analysis of the consequentiality and fatefulness of various types of action demonstrates a phenomenological orientation that seeks to understand the gambling experience for the actor, and the importance of action for self-constitution.⁴ What is the significance of fatefulness for the actor?

For Goffman, action is an orientation, a desire on the part of the actor, which is undertaken for its own sake, and demands “prior commitment” (1967: 152). Like the criminal, the gambler acts in terms of prior commitment to problematic consequentiality, and orients him or herself to fatefulness. According to Goffman, “bets...have subjective values and ‘socially ratified’ values because of what winning or losing allows the gambler to do later...this is consequentiality and influences the later life of the bettor” (1967: 159). In the face of fatefulness, and aside from what the actual winning or losing means in material terms for the latter, the gambler orients to the unknown, where action is revealed as an investment in “character.” Character can be understood in a dual sense: first, in terms of “self-constitution” whereby the responses of the actor are not yet known because the outcome of the gamble itself is unknown; the gambler is open and mood and attitude are grounded in the activity (Kusyszyn 1977; Reith 2002). The gambler must orient to himself/herself in anticipation of the outcome and after the outcome is known. But this orienting is also performed as a *social* action, in a setting where one’s prior commitment to fatefulness is a public performance. How does the individual manage him/herself under fateful circumstances, where one is on the brink of losing control? This oriented performance calls for “maintenance properties,” such as courage, integrity, gallantry, and composure (Goffman 1967: 218-222). One’s character is performed, and as performance, is judged by others. Character is thus an individual project of self-constitution, situated in particular settings of action; it is also a socially ratified value, calling for self-control and proper performance. As an idealized trait, character is linked to the requirements of social organization:

Social organization everywhere has the problem of morale and continuity. Individuals must come to all their little situations with some enthusiasm and concern, for it is largely through such moments that social life occurs, and if a fresh effort were not put into each of them, society would surely suffer...To satisfy the fundamental requirements of morale and continuity, we are encouraged in a fundamental illusion. It is our character. (Goffman 1967: 238-239)

The link between micro and institutional realms, mentioned earlier, is a feature of the Durkheimian influence that undergirds Goffman’s micro-sociological perspective.⁵ From this perspective, the revelation of “character” should be viewed as a behavior that is highly valued in moral terms (Burns 1992). According to Goffman (1967: 229), “Because persons in all societies must transact much of their enterprise in social situations, we must expect that the capacity to maintain support of the social occasion under difficult circumstances will be universally approved.” Goffman scholar Tom Burns (1992: 129) points out the tension in Goffman’s work between, on the one hand, the Durkheimian emphasis on moral order, and on the other, the ethical

characteristics of character, where character cannot be understood, or reveal itself, as rule following. As such, action involves risk, not only in terms of one's material stake, but also sociologically, in terms of one's stake in character and identity.

Goffman defines character as "what is essential and unchanging about the individual—what is *characteristic* of him." However, he remarks that this concept also "refers to attributes that can be generated and destroyed during fateful moments...Thus a paradox. Character is both unchanging and changeable. And yet that is how we conceive it" (1967: 237). It is interesting to follow the line suggested by the notion of fatefulness, i.e., that not only does action offer the risk and opportunity to display conduct, but rather that "character is gambled" and as such, is made "problematic" through the encounter with fate (p. 237). In other words, fatefulness is a feature of self-constitution, whereby the self can be "voluntarily subjected to re-creation" (p. 238).

Gambling Rationalization, Action and Risk

The gambling environment has changed dramatically since the publication of *Where the Action Is*. In the essay, Goffman had romantic conceptions of action and character, lamenting the disappearance of real avenues for character tests in modern society. As he writes, "Although every society no doubt has scenes of action, it is our own society that has found a word for it. Interestingly enough, we have become alive to action at a time when—compared to other societies—we have sharply curtailed in civilian life the occurrence of fatefulness of the serious, heroic, and dutiful kind" (Goffman 1967: 192-193). Action had become commercialized in various sites (pp. 194-206) and the casino was one such site, albeit one where the consequences of action, or risks, were deemed to be manageable compared to the fatefulness of everyday life decisions (p. 262).

The present day colonization, rationalization, and commercialization of communal and informal forms of gambling by the state and commercial enterprises (Cosgrave and Klassen 2001; McMillen 1996), and the concomitant definition of gambling as "leisure activity" or form of entertainment, raises questions about the status and meaning of such notions as character and fatefulness. It is pertinent here to invoke recent sociological work that has sought to provide more micro-analytical formulations of risk, in which risk-taking is viewed in terms of its positive values for the actor. Deborah Lupton's book *Risk* for example, an overview of the various social scientific formulations of risk, contains a chapter specifically on extreme sports, "edgework," transgression, and other forms of risk-taking (Lupton 1999: 148-172). As she suggests, while most contemporary formulations present risk as something negative, "there also exists a counter discourse in which risk-taking is represented far more positively" (1999: 148-149):

Against the ideal of the highly controlled 'civilized body/self is the discourse which valorizes escape from the bonds of control and regulation...This (counter discourse) rejects the ideal of the disembodied rational actor for an ideal of the self that emphasizes sensual embodiment and the visceral and emotional flights produced by encounters with danger, of 'walking on the wild side'. (p. 149)

The themes Lupton presents above are addressed in specific ways in *Where the Action Is*. Curiously, while Lupton acknowledges aspects of Giddens' discussions of risk, she never mentions Goffman's work on action and risk in the whole book.⁶

Lyng (2005), developing the concept of "edgework," presents what appear to be contradictory ways to conceive risk-taking in relation to contemporary social order. On the one hand, risk can be theorized as an escape from the routines of everyday life in rationalized and disenchanting societal contexts (p.6). On the other, and "Framed in terms of the risk society model," risk-taking may be considered a "pure expression of the central institutional and cultural imperatives of the emerging social order" (p. 5). In this order "the pursuit of risk becomes more

than a response to the central imperatives of modern society. It is itself a key structural principle extending throughout the social system in institutional patterns of economic, political, cultural, and leisure activity” (p. 8). The first interpretation of risk-taking activities echoes the Goffmanian perspective. However, given the second formulation of the institutional openness to risk-taking characteristic of late modern society, and Lyng’s own emphasis on the significance of “edgework” practices, Goffman’s notion of the curtailing of fatefulness in the modern social order might be debated. Nevertheless, the present-day commercialization of gambling demonstrates a form of “McDonaldization,” exhibiting rationalizing and standardizing processes (Hannigan 1998; Ritzer 1993). This rationalization is concretized, in the first instance, in the environmental organization of the casino’s orientation to chance and contingency. In the casino, the calculation of probabilities is the rule, the house has the edge and, as much as possible, nothing is left to chance. This rationalization is reinforced by the extent of surveillance therein.⁷ In some settings, casinos are situated alongside opportunities for shopping and for access to concerts and other forms of entertainment, such that gambling activity is located spatially as just another shopping and entertainment experience.

In his analysis of the postmodern “fantasy city,” Hannigan (1998: 84) notes that “one of the leading principles of UED (urban entertainment destination) development is the minimization of risk...leisure merchants must be able to roll out new entertainment concepts...in a standardized, predictable form...and many of the elements of predictability of control...can be seen in the design of and operation of Fantasy City.” These urban entertainment destinations, of which casinos are often an important component, seek to offer the opportunity for consumers to “take chances that are not really chances” (p. 71). Goffman (1967: 267-270) foresaw these developments:

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 customer 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 his world, but there at the end is action and character. Nevertheless, while one can orient oneself to gambling itself as a vehicle for entertainment or “riskless risk” (Hannigan 1998; Nye 1981), where consequences are slight to non-existent, one can also interpret it as an opportunity for action and fatefulness. This, of course, depends on the type of gambling, the stakes involved, and the participant’s orientation and “character.”

In his analysis of gambling action, Goffman was no doubt interested in those individuals who gambled in such a way that character was on the line, and where the gambling activity itself was fateful. These action seekers demonstrated and oriented to the previously mentioned “maintenance properties.” The games these types of gamblers participated in—poker, black jack, horse racing—require skill rather than entail pure chance. The ideal type here might be the legendary gambler, Nick the Greek who, as lore would have it, went from rags to riches seventy-three times, won and lost millions of dollars in his gambling career, and considered money primarily as a means to gambling action (Thackrey 1968). According to Nick the Greek, “Money...has been made a substitute in our society for almost anything you can name. Even for character. I’m just sorry we have to use it for gambling. It’s only a stake!” (Thackrey 1968:11).

The emphasis on action and character continues to be found in high stakes poker, which is currently enjoying an upsurge in popularity, thanks in part to television coverage of poker tournaments and availability of opportunities to play on the internet. While the notion of character is present when winning or losing at roulette (e.g. maintaining composure and integrity), it cannot be said that slot machine players are engaged in demonstrations of character in Goffman’s sense. Although a large jackpot win in slot machine or lottery play could be fateful,

the probabilities are against the player, and the purposeful risks they take are inconsequential. Further, the cost of playing such games is typically low, although, with increasingly sophisticated electronic machines, the costs (both in monetary and behavioral terms) may escalate (Dickerson 2004). While slot players may desire to be “in action” for as long as possible, this form of action does not involve the gambling of character that Goffman discussed.

The colonization and commercialization of gambling may be viewed in terms of the ways it diminishes the possibilities for action and the performance of character. Most individuals who gamble in the various legalized settings are not the seekers of action that Goffman discussed—a trend that is revealed by the extent of public participation in lottery play compared to more skilled forms of gambling, and the extent to which casino gambling is oriented to mechanical and electronic games of chance. Large-scale commercial casinos have been characterized disparagingly as “slot warehouses,” and this type of gambling is the economic “bread and butter” of such enterprises. It is indeed telling that race-tracks in North America are increasingly relying on slot machines to draw and retain customers. The action and character aspects of horse betting (Herman 1967; Zola 1964) are being engulfed by the characterless and mindless forms of machine gambling—the race track becomes the “racino” (Eadington 2003). Further, advertisements of commercialized gambling depict it as a form of entertainment or excitement consumption, but the latter should not be fateful for the participant. A non-fateful orientation—one which precludes the risk of real loss and its consequentialities—is emphasized in the official messages of state-sponsored gambling agencies that advocate “responsible gambling” (RCGO 2003).

The social organization of commercialized and state-sponsored gambling then appears to shape the gambling experience away from the orientation to action and the demonstration of character. The more popular forms of gambling—lottery, slot machine, and video lottery play—are not conducive to or oriented toward the possibility of character tests, and the type of action these games entail is not agonistic. Here luck, rather than risk, appears to be a reigning orientation. It encourages passivity and does not require one to put anything on the line. If fatefulness occurs, it is bestowed by chance rather than being actively courted or sought out (Goffman 1967: 201). Orientations to action thus signal the character of the participant and the agonistic or aleatory framings of the particular type of gambling activity.

Late Modernity, Consumption and Risk

Goffman’s analysis of action pertains not only to the present-day culture of legalized gambling, but also to the contemporary sociological formulations of risk advanced by Giddens (1990, 1991), Beck (1992, 1994, 2003), Lyng (1990, 2005), Lupton (1999) and others. One of the central themes of Beck’s “reflexive modernization” thesis, as well as Giddens’ work on risk, concerns not only the issue of the uncertainties of late modernity, but the ways institutions respond to these.⁸ The move by states into gambling enterprises has been viewed as a response to risks in a globalizing world of social, political, and economic uncertainty (Cosgrave and Klassen 2001; Della Salla 2004; Neary and Taylor 1998).

Beck develops one aspect of uncertainty in terms of the breakdown in the access to, and significance of, gainful employment: “risk societies” are no longer “gainful employment societies” (Beck 2003: 6). For Beck and other commentators, the uncertainties generated by globalization have also produced a diminished welfare-state, where state provision of forms of social insurance is cut back, and risks are increasingly downloaded onto individuals (Baker and Simon, 2002; Beck, 1996; Neary and Taylor, 1998). The relation of hard work to merit and reward has less power to shape actors’ orientations if access to, and stability of gainful employment, and the rewards derived from it, are more difficult. As such, the role of chance and risk-taking, dissociated from a hard work orientation, becomes a more legitimate social orientation in risk societies.

The state-promotion of gambling, especially lotteries, deserves consideration in relation to these themes. Not only is the idea of getting “something for nothing” promoted (Lears 2003), but also that one’s life chances will be affected by chance, rather than by gainful employment. Governments themselves, in their quest for new forms of non-tax revenues are significant players in the ongoing assault on the Protestant work ethic. One of the slogans for Canada’s “Super 7” lottery is “Earning money is great; winning it is even better.” As many scholars of the emerging consumer society have remarked (Bell 1975; Campbell 1987; Riesman 1953), this assault has been some time in the making. It is intriguing to think of those governments and states that promote and expand gambling as analogous, on a macro-level, to a Goffmanian risk-taker who can no longer be understood in terms of “providential” coping (Goffman, 1967).⁹

Although Giddens’ work on the place of risk in late modernity (1990, 1991, 1994) shares certain thematic similarities with Beck’s analyses, and offers a largely macro-perspective (Lupton 1999: 81), it nevertheless formulates a conception of the positive values of risk-taking for self-identity. Giddens draws upon Goffman’s notions of fatefulness and consequentiality.¹⁰ He situates actor orientations to consequential action in relation to the late modern societal environment of uncertainties, where safety and the removal of risks become valorized. While risk may be undesirable from the perspective of experts and expert systems, uncertainties also represent an opportunity for self-exploration (Giddens 1991). In this environment, “cultivated risk” comes to have value for the self. As Giddens (1991:133) suggests:

Cultivated risk here converges with some of the most basic operations of modernity. The capability to disturb the fixity of things, open up new pathways, and thereby colonise a segment of a novel future, is integral to modernity’s unsettling character. We could say, I think, that cultivated risk represents an ‘experiment with trust’...which consequently has implications for an individual’s self-identity.

For Giddens, fateful moments apply to individuals and collectivities and challenge or shatter our “ontological security” (1991: 35-69). Where Goffman is concerned with the “threshold between retaining some control over the consequences of one’s actions and their going out of control” (1967: 27), Giddens sees the issue of control from a macro-perspective by asking about the role of fate and destiny in a late modern world of uncertainties, where humans nevertheless seek control of the natural and social environments.

Both Goffman and Giddens formulate positive conceptions of risk-taking, linking it in their particular ways to the project of self-constitution. Goffman’s formulation of action preserves risk as something to be embraced, linking risk-taking itself to the display and formation of character. Giddens sees the positive emphasis on risk-taking in relation to the more psychological objective of “self-actualization” (1991: 70-80).

As discussed in the previous section, Lyng (1990, 2005) develops a conception of the relation of self to larger macro-processes, viewing “edgework” as a cultural expression and orientation to action in the context of late modern society. Edgework also reveals character (although Lyng does not use the term) through the demonstration of skill and mastery in one’s activity, and is a form of self-actualization. Lyng thus bridges the formulations of Goffman and Giddens, as well as the sociological discourses on consumption and risk, by articulating the changing social context within which orientations to risk-taking take place, showing that particular forms of experience consumption are grounded on orientations to risk, and demonstrating the positive values of risk-taking for the self (Lyng, 1990, 2005). While Lyng does not view gambling as a form of edgework, it is reasonable to suggest that high-stakes poker games or even forms of illegal gambling (where risk of detection or danger may be involved) demonstrate edgework characteristics.¹¹

In relation to the uncertainties generated by late modern or “risk societies,” contemporary gambling as a social activity is a form of consumption, an embodiment of

orientations—risky, playful, or “pathological”—to uncertainty in the larger culture (Kingma 1997).

Modern Identity, Character and Gambling Stigmas

Goffman’s concerns with action, character, and fatefulness, and his dynamic conception of labeling processes provide the basis for a sociological consideration of the current designations “problem” and “pathological” gambling, and the institutional basis of their development. In *Where the Action Is*, Goffman discusses the existence of “adaptations,” those strategies actors use for controlling fatefulness. Ritualistic superstitions—expressions of what Reith (2002) refers to as a “magical-religious worldview”—are a particular strategy of gamblers, and the very notion of fate is formulated by Goffman (1967: 179-180) as a defensive determinism:

It is not surprising then, that when a causal basis is not readily found for discounting the determinativeness of the current situation, it may be sought out, and where it can’t be found imagined...A version of this ‘defensive determinism’ is found in the belief in fate, predestination, and kismet—the notion that the major outcomes regarding oneself are already writ down, and one is helpless to improve or worsen one’s chances.

Other analysts of gambling behavior and those who study in the clinical world of gambling addictions, point out the irrationality of some gamblers’ beliefs, for example, concerning such things as probabilities, belief in luck, etc. (Delfabbro 2004; Elster 2003; Lesieur 1984). For Goffman however, “action need not be perceived, in the first instance as an expression of impulsiveness or irrationality...Loss, to be sure, is chanced through action, but a real gain of character can occur. It is in these terms that action can be seen as a calculated risk” (1967b: 238). If gambling activities, in their risk-taking and action-oriented forms, are to be understood in relation to the notion of fatefulness, then we might speak of the institutionalizing of legal gambling in terms of the opportunities, for better or worse, for encounters with fate. Notwithstanding the issue of whether most forms of commercialized gambling constitute authentic avenues for the pursuit of action and fatefulness, it is nevertheless much easier to access “action” if one wishes. As Goffman is interested in the institutional settings and possibilities for action (p. 211), and the analysis of action itself as an institutionalized method for the revelation of character, the changing social and institutional basis for the evaluation of character must be addressed.

Historically, gambling, as a collective representation (Durkheim 1982), has signified the problem of moral excess in various ways, whether in earlier versions as sin or vice, or today, pathology (a medical term with moral connotations) (Castellani 2000; Collins 1996; Reith 2002). The legalization and expansion of gambling reveals a culture where a particular type of risk-taking activity is no longer constructed in negative moral terms. Unlike earlier representations, gambling activity itself is no longer viewed as morally problematic, but “out of control” orientations are. Gambling activity has moved from a moral to a medical framework that, within a legalized gambling environment, traces a continuum ranging from non-problematic gambling activities (entertainment, excitement, thrills, etc.) to “pathological gambling.” This shift in framework is related to changes that are visible in the representation of gambling in the psychology literature. For example, France (1902), Freud (1928) and Bergler (1957) saw gambling as a problematic activity. Drawing upon Freud, Bergler viewed the gambler as a “misunderstood neurotic” (1943), and gambling itself as a form of “psychic masochism” (1957). Bergler, however, had a profound influence on the development of the medical model of gambling behavior (Bergler 1957; Castellani 2000). As Castellani notes, Bergler was writing within a social context where gambling was illegal, and often associated with deviants and “racketeer-gamblers.” This illegitimacy of gambling, Castellani argues, “had a major discursive

effect on the construction of Bergler's text, as well as the position and authority of the medical model for the next 22 years" (Castellani 2000: 27). A consequence of Bergler's work was a discursive transformation of the gambling criminal into someone with a "mental illness" (28).

In the more contemporary literature, gambling does not represent a psychological deficit, but "excessive" gambling does (Castellani 2000). It should be noted that the *specific* terms "problem" and "pathological" gambler did not exist in the 1960s when most forms of gambling outside Las Vegas were illegal, and gambling liberalization was only just beginning. Although compulsive gambling was referred to in the medical terminology, and problematic forms of gambling have been the object of concern in institutions such as Gamblers Anonymous (Castellani 2000), the full medicalization of gambling in terms of the "pathological" did not occur until the 1980s. The definition of excessive gambling as "Pathological Gambling" was *officially announced* with the publication of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III (DSM III) in 1980 (Castellani 2000).

The medicalization of gambling problems has coincided with the legalization and expansion of gambling (Castellani, 2000; Collins 1996). This medicalization however also tends to treat gambling problems as a form of individual pathology (Castellani 2000). While the gambler has been depicted historically as a problematic actor in religious discourse (particularly Protestantism), and acknowledged as a burgeoning "social problem" through the discourse of Gamblers Anonymous beginning in the 1950s (Castellani 2000), with the spread of commercialized gambling, the "problem gambler" has attained a broad level of recognizability as a social type and a social problem. This process has occurred through the making visible of the "problem" in the psychology literature (Bergler 1957; Castellani 2000; Collins 1996; Hacking 2004; Lesieur 1977; Lesieur and Blume 1987) and through greater recognition of the "problem" (and type) by the lay public.

The terminological shifts are significant: the gambling "sucker" and "loser" of the past, whom Bergler (1957) called the "neurotic sucker- gambler" might now be characterized or labeled as a "problem" or "pathological" gambler. Further, the gambling "loser" did not have the same kind of access to medical treatment that we find today for individuals who want to seek help for their behavior. The terminological and interpretive shifts must be thus understood in relation to changes in the social organization of gambling.

Brian Castellani (2000) has provided a sociologically-informed analysis of the links between societal developments around gambling legalization and the rise of the term and medical problem "pathological gambling." Drawing upon the works of Anselm Strauss and Michel Foucault, Castellani refers to his theory as "discursive interactionism," and his method as "assemblage" (2000: 15). There are similarities between Castellani's discussion of the "process of becoming a pathological gambler" (59) and Goffman's interest in the interplay between interaction and forms of moral attribution that we find in his analysis of moral careers (1959a) and stigma (1963). Castellani analyzes the "making of a medical problem" in relation to the development of the medical-psychological institution that has been built up around the particular construct "pathological gambling." Goffman would no doubt be interested in the story of the development and rise of this institution of normalization, and the ways in which it has generated, and depends upon, labeling processes (Goffman 1959a, 1961, 1963).

For Goffman, labeling is a dynamic, interactional process, and Ian Hacking has recently provided insight into the social classification of individuals through his analysis of processes of "making up people" (Hacking 2002, 2004). Drawing upon the work of Goffman and Foucault, he further develops the notion of "dynamic nominalism" to refer to the social processes through which selves interact with institutional classifications and categories (Hacking 2004). The actors' acceptance of classifications in turn has dynamic effects on the classifiers' knowledges. The institutional and expert interpretations of behavior provide discursive frameworks individuals use to "understand" their own behaviors (Collins 1996; Hacking 2002, 2004). Accordingly, gamblers may use the discourse of gambling addiction, advertisements for "responsible gambling," etc., as

a way of representing their own gambling behaviors to themselves and others. The medicalization of gambling problems then raises the question of how individuals interact with the classifications, whether they will accept, and internalize labels or stigmas such as “problem” gambler, and whether they will seek help after internalizing the stigma (Goffman 1963; Hacking 2004).

The medicalized discourse of problem gambling has brought with it “agents” and “mediators” who claim expertise in the definition of gambling problems (Castellani 2000; Goffman, 1959a, 1961) and who contribute to the labeling of individuals as problematic gamblers. In *Asylums*, Goffman analyzed the institutional process of classification and the practices that follow from classifications in terms of their consequences for actors’ self-conceptions. Goffman referred to the process of “looping” to characterize the institutional dynamics that press upon identity and produce the kind of identity required by the institution (1961). In light of the broad cultural processes that have generated the legalization and expansion of commercialized gambling, the changing cultural and social-structural frameworks have given rise to new institutions and new definitions of character (Collins 1996; Hacking 2004; Sumner 1994).

With easy access to gambling opportunities, and no longer constrained by negative social, moral, and legal valuations of the activity, modern gamblers must discover their own behavioral limits, and assume the risks for their own choices and involvement in this activity (Lash 2003: 53-54). While in broad terms gambling activities may appear to be *morally unconstrained*, this does not mean that morality disappears; the social organizational requirements of continuity and morale persist. In a climate of ubiquitous gambling opportunities then, the gambler must face the consequentiality of gambling, and one option is to become, in the official terminology, a “responsible” gambler (Kelly 2003; Responsible Gambling Council Ontario 2003). In *late modern* consumer societies, where new consumer objects are produced and desires liberated (Baumann 2001), the risk of moral stigmatization arises, not in terms of the involvement in the activity itself (e.g. gambling), but in terms of the consequences of excessive involvement.

Problematic or Responsible Performance

The idea of the individual’s character, and the maintenance properties that are demonstrated through it is, from a dramaturgical perspective, a performance or form of self-presentation (Goffman 1959b). The active orientation and prior commitment to risk-taking has social and ontological significance for the actor. Orienting to the notion of the “fragility of the interactional order” (Rawls 2003), Goffman’s work is a sociological account of the risks involved at the micro or interactional level. In “On Face-Work,” *The Presentation of Self and Everyday Life*, and elsewhere, Goffman formulates the risks of interaction, characterized by such interactional problems as loss of face, faux pas, gaffes, communications out of character, embarrassments, and audiences not taking performances seriously (1959b, 1967a). However, the analysis in *Where the Action Is* presents a stronger formulation of risk for the actor. While in the latter, he constructs the actor as seeking—and “carving out”—action and testing character, in the former works the actor is theorized as orienting to the need to prevent and manage interactional risks, and largely desires a positive response from others through “impression management” (Goffman 1959b: 208-237). This actor does not seek out risk, or risk character.

Goffman’s formulation of character, not to mention his own interactionist formulation of the grounds of *self-hood*, rests on an underlying conception of its performativity: character (and the self) is a public performance—it implies the “social” and requires an audience in order to reveal itself and be what it will be (Goffman 1959b). The evaluation of performances however takes place in relation to the broader cultural and social organizational frameworks that provide the interpretive understandings of, and for, selves. Following this logic, one can understand “pathological” gambling and other addictions as certain types of self-performance or presentation,

where the addicted self is conceived or interpreted as non-social and hence, is stigmatized within the moral order (Goffman 1963). Such a self might be said to be lacking in self-discipline and other of the “maintenance properties”—courage, integrity, gallantry, and composure, described by Goffman (1967: 218-219). The pathological gambler can neither orient to action nor character in Goffman’s sense. Since such gamblers are labeled as “out of control” or not in control of their actions, their presentation of self is lost. They are nevertheless stigmatized, i.e., evaluated in terms of their social being, as being out of control or having a “problem,” etc. (Goffman 1963). As the label “addict” represents a form of discredited identity (Goffman 1963), the label signifies a bad performance. The issue of “addiction” nevertheless raises the question of whether the addict can be conceived as an *actor* in the sociological sense. In any case the addict (pathological gambler, etc.), like the “mental patient” (Goffman 1959a), gives a performance that receives a negative social evaluation.

A possible consequence or outcome of the actor’s orientation to action can be the phenomenon, not only psychological, but dramaturgical, of “chasing losses” (Lesieur 1984). Here we find an oriented action—“chasing”—but also the implication that one cannot resist doing otherwise. The “chase” is a feature of the “career of the compulsive gambler” (Lesieur 1984). The ideas of “career” and stigma (“compulsive gambler”), are to be noted, concepts which Goffman conceived as interrelated dramaturgical phenomena in his study of “the moral career of mental patients” (1959a). Dramaturgical issues regarding the performance of character are also raised in relation to the availability of forms of internet gambling which are increasingly popular (e.g., sports betting, poker and simulated casino games), since this form of gambling is typically carried out in isolation, where there are no public constraints and no present, face-to-face audience to orient one’s performance to.¹² The subtitle of Goffman’s *Interaction Ritual* is *Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior*; the ubiquity of gambling thus raises the issue of the performative aspects of character and the moral-evaluative contexts of interactions and rituals, especially in individualized contexts (internet gambling) and anonymous settings (large-scale casinos).

In a broad cultural context where gambling has been legalized, rationalized, and marketed as entertainment, “responsibility” vis-à-vis gambling activity is one way in which social or moral character is discursively constructed now. From a Goffmanian perspective, and indeed from a romantic-heroic perspective, the idea of “responsible” gambling is an odd notion, since one of the features of gambling, according to his analysis, is that it involves the risking of character. As Goffman writes, “Character is gambled” (1967: 237); for him, insofar as it is a vehicle for action and the demonstration of character, gambling is valued positively. With the medicalized discourse of problem, pathological, or compulsive gambling, orientations to action and character—where actors are guided by choice and decision, and the embracing of risk, are foreclosed.

The fatefulness generated by an interest in action is a method through which the self can be “voluntarily subjected to re-creation.” However, the potential fatefulness of gambling may not only be understood in terms of character gain through action and risk-taking, but also now in terms of the medicalized discourse of the risks of becoming a problematic gambler. If “Fatefulness is the mark of the threshold between retaining some control over the consequences of one’s actions and their going out of control” (Goffman 1967: 27), one’s fate in the gambling encounter could be to become an “out of control” or addicted gambler. An important feature of Goffman’s dramaturgy, however, is the way in which processes of social classification wrest definitional control from the actor. Fatefulness then can be the loss of control over self-definition—through processes of stigmatization (1963)—and more dramatically and consequentially in institutions of normalization (1961).

A dramatic orientation to fate and the possibility of radical change, with the possibility of “a real gain of character” (1967: 238) in Goffman’s sense however, is also foreclosed by the notion of responsibility. Perhaps then, “character” has been rationalized; the maintenance properties described by Goffman have been replaced by the more regulative notion of responsible gambling. Where gambling activity itself is no longer stigmatized and indeed is promoted by the

state, the social organizational requirements of morale and continuity (Goffman 1967: 238-239) come to represent “character” through the discursive concerns with problem and pathological gambling. In other words, character is presented and demonstrated through the *prevention* of these orientations to gambling, and the traits of responsibility and self-regulation are idealized.

While the expansion of gambling provides more (rationalized) opportunities for action and encounters with fate, these opportunities are located within particular social organizational forms (e.g., neo-liberal regimes of social, moral and economic deregulation) and in contexts where the activities are discursively constructed in particular ways—in neo-liberal societies through discourses of medicalization, responsibility, and self-governing (Castellani 2000; Collins 1996; Rose 1993, 1996). If the notion of “character gain” is threatened by the present social organization and discursive formulations of gambling, we can nevertheless speak of “character loss,” particularly in relation to the concerns with problem and pathological gambling, or indeed with other activities where addiction is discursively represented as a risk related to particular forms of consumption. In terms of character loss, Hacking notes, “Goffman spoke of mortification of the self, which severs the normal relation between people and their acts. Not so much a case of making a person, as of unmaking a person” (2004: 298). In relation to the stigmas of problem and pathological gambling, the institutional and cultural frameworks that have given rise to these terms must be noted. That one gambles or is even a “gambler” no longer represents a stigma; problem and pathological gambling however are. This shift in classification has developed alongside the broader cultural changes that have not only destigmatized gambling, but which have made visible the psychology of the problematic gambler (Collins 1996). In Goffman’s Durkheimian idiom, the social organizational requirements of continuity and morale have changed. These broad changes have been accompanied by the development of new institutional classifications and categories of the self, which constitute selves in particular ways, and through which selves come to understand and interpret their own actions in the world.

Conclusion

The present-day environment of legalized gambling is evidence, not only of the changing institutional basis of gambling activities, but of broader social organizational and cultural changes. Consumption and risk have become central sociological concepts for understanding these changes. In the social context Goffman was writing, the topics of action and character retained a particular aura, related at the time to the not-as-yet mainstream conceptions of gambling activity. While the spread of commercialized gambling enterprises has provided individuals (consumers) with increased access to forms of action, the analytic value of the terms “action” and “character” has been reconsidered here in terms of the changed gambling environment. Gambling is now mass-marketed as entertainment and often represented as “leisure” activity. The place and significance of character displays in relation to these sanitized representations of gambling activity is diminished, and the depictions of gambling activities by official agencies emphasize the socially desirable trait of “responsibility.” The latter form of self-comportment does however, relate to gambling as a form of risk-taking.

Despite the transformations in the gambling environment, the concepts and themes presented in *Where the Action Is*, and other pertinent aspects of Goffman’s oeuvre discussed here, provide a framework for interrogating this environment and the micro-social aspects of gambling activities and identities. Goffman’s work is a contribution to the sociological understanding of risk-taking, and deserves more credit in this regard. His work is also a valuable resource for the sociological understanding of processes of normalization and the social classification of selves. In his formulation, the interpretation and evaluation of character and the changing classifications of the self relate to the demands of social organization for “continuity and morale.” Goffman’s dynamic conception of labeling processes contributes to the sociological understanding of how

current labels such as “problem,” “pathological,” and “responsible” gambling are institutional responses to the social organizational demands of a ubiquitous gambling environment.

In terms of the links between character and social organization, the discursive relationship between self, social classifications and institutions provokes a final thought: in the 1960s, when legal, state-sponsored gambling was not widespread, one could still analyze such phenomena as “action” and “character,” perhaps romanticizing their sociological significance. With the present-day expansion and rationalization of gambling, largely under the auspices of the state and revenue-hungry governments, where the governing of gambling behaviours enables legitimation, the fate of character is being reconstituted: problem and pathological gambling research is “where the action is.”

Endnotes

¹ There have thus far been few analyses linking the cultural phenomenon of gambling expansion to the sociological framework and themes of the “risk society” (Cosgrave 2006; Gephart 2001; Kingma 2004).

² Goffman was promoted to pit boss, and also played blackjack for his ethnographic work (See Fine et al. 2000: xii; Treviano 2003: 31).

³ Downes et al. 1976: 17. The first chapter of the Downes book, “Gambling as a Sociological Problem”, remains one of the best sociological analyses of gambling to date.

⁴ It is sociologically interesting to situate Goffman’s analysis of action in relation to Simmel’s (1971) phenomenology of adventure. Goffman refers to Simmel’s essay in a footnote on p.162 (1967). Gerhardt (2003) explores the analytical similarities between Simmel and Goffman, and provides as an example a discussion of the “style of presentation” of “Where the Action Is” (153-154). Interestingly, while the piece is treated as a demonstration of Goffman’s interest in “forms of sociation,” there is no analytical connection between his formulation of action and risk and Simmel’s formulation of adventure.

⁵ For a discussion of the Durkheimian influence on Goffman, see Burns’ (1992) excellent study of Goffman’s corpus of work. See also Collins 1980; Chriss 1993; Rawls 2003. For a reading of Goffman’s anxiety vis-à-vis Durkheim, see Travers 1999.

⁶ On p.78, Lupton (1999) discusses Giddens’ notion of “fateful moments”, but there is no mention of Giddens’ borrowing of the notion of “fatefulness” from “Where the Action Is.” See Goffman, 1967: 161-170.

⁷ In terms of risk management, casinos were the first to use biometric systems for surveillance, far ahead of law-enforcement agencies, airport security, and mainstream business (Schwartz 2003: 216-217).

⁸ Beck has been pessimistic on this point: “The overarching feature of this epoch (of risk societies) is not a physical one, the looming destruction, but a social one, the fundamental, almost universal, and scandalous failure of institutions in the face of destruction” (1995: 85). See also Beck 2003.

⁹ The rational calculation of probabilities that provides certain profits (revenues) through the long odds of large-scale lotteries and the guaranteed “house edge” of various casino games (blackjack, roulette, etc.), demonstrates government-run gambling to be a form of providential coping.

¹⁰ See, “Fate, Risk and Security” in Giddens, 1991: 109-143. Giddens also draws upon Goffman’s concept of “Umwelt” (“accomplished ‘normalcy’”), p.127.

¹¹ In a footnote to her piece “On the Edge: Drugs and the Consumption of Risk in Late Modernity,” Gerda Reith (2005, p.243) provides a rebuttal to Lyng’s position, making a case for viewing gambling as edgework.

¹² The Goffmanian interest in “encounter” could be used as a resource to consider the stimulation derived from interactions with forms of internet and electronic gambling (Frey, 1984; Goffman, 1967).

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