

Social Reward, Conflict, and Commitment: A Theoretical Model of Gambling Behavior

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A theoretical model of gambling behavior is introduced which examines the linkage between regular gamblers, the gambling institution, and outside society. This model is based on participant observation in an urban casino and a review of the related literature. The intention is to explore the structural and cultural factors operating both in society at large and in a gambling institution and to connect them with the personal characteristics of avid regular gamblers to explain their gambling behavior and its consequences. The main conclusion is that the gambling institution with its social rewards and the perceived threatening nature of the wider social structure are the dominant forces in attracting gamblers and in shaping their subsequent gambling entanglement.

INTRODUCTION

Why do people gamble? What are the consequences of this behavior? Students of human behavior have attempted to answer these questions mainly by focusing on idiosyncratic or psychopathological motivations for gambling behavior (Dickerson & Adcock, 1987; Knowles, 1976; Kogan & Wallach, 1964; Kusyszyn, 1978; Lesieur, 1984; Livingston, 1974a; Sanders, 1978; Snyder, 1978; Wagenaar,

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1988). Other researchers (Hayano, 1982; Martinez, 1983; Rosecrance, 1985, 1988) have concentrated on the social relationships and amenities found in gambling settings.

Hayano (1982) found that professional and regular poker players, as well as cardroom employees formed a subcultural core which fostered friendly social interaction. The cardroom also offered a range of goods and services for the convenience of its regulars. Martinez (1983) also viewed the gambling scene as a subculture whose formal and informal norms served to reduce the tension level in the game and contribute to a smooth flow of action. Whether players conformed to or violated these norms affected their acceptance or rejection in the subculture. Rosecrance's researches (1985, 1988) on inveterate horse players showed that they persisted in the activity because the rewards of horse race gambling exceeded the costs. The rewards of social interaction, sensory stimulation, potential economic gain, decision making opportunities, and demonstration of character were the magnets that drew and kept players in the gambling scene.

This study presents a theoretical model that further explores the social rewards and social arrangements available in a gambling institution with a view toward determining their impact on the sustained involvement of regular casino gamblers. Moreover, an important social structural factor overlooked in previous studies is added to the mix; namely, the bearing outside societal forces have on the gambler. Finally, this study incorporates key demographic variables in an attempt to explain the behavior of regular casino gamblers.

In addition to being concerned with the constraining power of social structures on the persistence of regular casino gambling, the model takes into account the subjective experience of individuals in determining whether or not they will initially participate in casino gambling and whether or not they will continue to play.

Setting

The casino observed for this study was one of three operating regularly in the Edmonton area. It is open to the adult public (over 18 years of age) 12 hours a day, from midday to midnight, and six days a week with the exception of a two-week Christmas break. Six different games (Blackjack, Roulette, Mini-Baccarat, Sic Bo, RedDog, and Wheel) with a total of 30 game tables are provided. Three-quarters of the tables

are for Blackjack. The betting limit for most of the Blackjack tables is \$2-50, for Roulette \$1-100, for Mini-Baccarat \$5-100, for Sic Bo \$1-100, for RedDog \$1-25, and for the Wheel \$.25-5. The house edge varies from game to game but the overall takeout rate for the casino is 21% (Alberta Government, 1990). The casino holds a maximum of 200 players, but the average attendance at any given time is about 110.

The casino has two TV sets (one in the lounge and one on the edge of the playing area), a stereo system playing continuous background music, a snack bar offering drinks and full meals, and a liquor outlet in the adjoining lounge. Lottery tickets can also be purchased from the security desk.

According to their participation frequency and degree of commitment to the gambling setting, players can be categorized as recreationals and regulars. Regulars are serious players who visit the casino at least three days a week; many of them play every single operating day. Regulars represent approximately 60 percent of the players on an average day, with a higher proportion being present during the "quiet" hours (between noon and 3 p.m.) and the "quiet" days (mainly during inclement weather). Evenings, weekends, and holidays draw more recreational casino goers.

The casino patrons are overrepresented by working class people and minority ethnic groups such as Asians, Arabs, Italians, Ukrainians, Blacks, and Native Indians, which is congruent with the observations of Campbell and Ponting (1984). Approximately 15 percent are female, while the elderly and middle-aged represent about 40 and 35 percent respectively of the casino regulars. Welfare recipients and physically disabled individuals are also overrepresented in the casino. According to police officials and casino executives, some of the regulars were also known or suspected criminals.

Methods

This paper is based on one and a half years of participant observation by one of the authors at an urban Alberta casino and an analysis of the pertinent literature. The data were collected mainly through first-hand observations while working as a blackjack dealer; informal talks with players and casino staff; and tuning in to the players' table conversations. The outcome of this investigation is an exploratory model that purports to explain the behavior of regular casino gamblers.

THE GAMBLING INSTITUTION

Viewing a gambling establishment as an institution may engender a different understanding of gamblers and their setting as opposed to treating it as a gambling scene or simply as a place to gamble. A gambling institution resembles an open institution if one only considers recreational players, whose visits may be just "one night out" to try their luck. However, when familiar with the setting, it soon becomes obvious that many faces are the same, day in and day out. This makes the casino in question similar to Goffman's (1961) total institution for these regular gamblers. It is comparable to other total institutions in the following ways.

Institutional completeness is an important feature of casinos that attracts the regular gambler. Goffman (1961) spoke of human needs being fulfilled in three major spheres of life—dwelling, playing, and working, while noting that individuals tend to dwell, play, and work in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an overall rational plan. For the hard-core regulars in most gambling institutions, however, nearly all these aspects of life can be discharged under the same roof.

A gambling institution is a place where players can "watch television, eat, make outside gambling bets, [meet friends], and find drinking buddies and sexual companions . . ." (Hayano, 1982, p. 137). The casino in this study offered similar amenities plus a recently obtained liquor license. One player exclaimed, after learning that the casino was going to serve liquor, "Wow, guys can stay here all day. They've got everything here!"

The gambling institution can also simultaneously be a place of work and leisure for the regulars. Many players in the casino consider gambling a form of work, and this attitude is reflected in comments such as "Playing cards is hard work," "I'm up, but I worked very hard to make this money," and "I just lost my job, so I figured maybe I could make some money here instead of making nothing by staying at home." As for the leisure part, the tingle of excitement caused by the uncertainty of gambling is satisfying enough to meet many players' entertainment needs. "One simply finds it unnecessary to become involved in any other activity—the need for a recreational world is fulfilled" (Abt, Smith, & McGurrin, 1985, p. 72). No gambling situation is ever quite the same; each new blackjack hand brings a

different combination of variables and renewed optimism, thus making the game alluring and stimulating for the regular players.

The more human needs met by an institution, the more complete the institution. The institutional completeness of a group reinforces solidarity (Breton, 1964), and contributes to segregation from the wider society (Driedger & Church, 1974).

Goffman (1961) describes encompassing tendency as follows: "Every institution captures something of the time and interest of its members and provides something of a world for them; in brief, every institution has encompassing tendencies" (p. 4). However, the encompassing tendency of the gambling institution is more apparent than most other institutions simply because gambling is more time-consuming, its activity more fascinating, and its world more complete. One consequence of gambling's encompassing tendency is to separate its participants from the outside world. As a result regular gamblers find it hard to leave the institution, both daily and permanently, because their isolation from the outside world produces strong feelings of group identification. For many regular gamblers, participation in the activities of the gambling institution becomes their daily reason for being. Disengagement from the institution is discomforting and anxiety producing for these regulars. It was observed that regulars would often stay in the casino even after losing all their money. They remained to watch others play, give advice to friends, or borrow money here and there to get back in action.

An antagonistic relationship and a gambling subculture are also characteristic institutional arrangements found in the gambling environment. The adversarial nature of the player versus the house leads to the formation of a gambling subculture with distinctive values, beliefs, and informal norms. The key values of the casino subculture are *beating the system* and *cooperation*. Beating the system refers to players wanting to outsmart and defeat the house by making money in casino games. Cooperation is valued by players because they think it is the best way to beat the system.

Casino regulars believe in the *flow of the cards*, the idea that cards are dealt in certain patterns or rhythms. A *good* pattern occurs when the majority of players are winning, the best scenario being when the dealer frequently exceeds 21. Conversely, a *bad* pattern is formed when the dealer is constantly winning, particularly by getting blackjacks, or by making uncanny hits to get 21. Maintaining the good pattern and

changing the bad pattern is the primary focus of the players' informal norms in the casino subculture. For example, when a player comes into the middle of a deal, he may be asked by other regulars to "wait till the end of the shoe" if "the cards are going good," or to "jump in" if "the cards are running bad" in the hope of changing the pattern. Some players even deviate from the optimal playing strategy in an attempt to change "the way the cards are coming out." Normally this radical move is made only after consulting other regulars at the table.

Of course, not every person is willing to cooperate, but if not, they can expect sanctions from the majority who espouse this value. These sanctions take the form of blaming the offender for their own loss, (e.g., "Hey, you made us lose by staying on that hand") or by belittling the offender with the comment "Let him play by himself; he won't have any friends here the way he plays." Generally, these rebukes effectively keep most players in line. These quotations illustrate how group norms constrain and shape gamblers' behavior in a group setting. Although the practice of maintaining a good pattern and changing a bad pattern does not improve their chances according to probability theory, it does, however, make sense to the casino regulars. The fact that regular gamblers often engage in irrational behavior has been raised by Coulombe, Ladouceur, Desharnais, and Jobin (1992) and Walker (1992). Regular gamblers often overestimate their chances of winning and hold erroneous perceptions about optimal betting and playing strategies. In this study, the subcultural values and norms at times were seen to actually reinforce this wrongheaded approach to gambling.

While casino regulars may be influenced to adopt faulty playing strategies, the gambling scene does offer offsetting rewards to its members. Because casino gambling takes place in a group setting, and given that gamblers like to associate with other gamblers, group affiliation is a likely social reward for casino regulars. Group solidarity is shown frequently by players who perceive themselves on the same side against their common enemy, the house. The following statements demonstrate this belief in action: "We shouldn't play against each other. We are here playing against the dealer." "I don't play for myself. I play for the table." These statements show how players develop a feeling of unity and belonging. Moreover, because the value of cooperating to beat the system is so strong, a "fate interdependence"

is fostered among the players which generates group affiliation and cohesion.

Emotional and moral support are other significant social rewards available to casino regulars. Technically, a gambling subculture is a *world of losers* (Livingston, 1974b), because the vast majority, if not all, will lose money in the long run. Unless they delude themselves, this is a situation that normally causes anxiety and depression for most people. Bonding with other regulars can help cushion the blow of losing money. This works in two ways: first, it can reduce anxiety, the presence of like-minded peers may provide comfort, consolation, and reassurance; second, seeing how others handle a similar circumstance provides information on how to aptly interpret one's emotions and feelings. The money lost can be rationalized as an entertainment fee for the pleasurable sensations players get in the casino. If the loss is substantial, players can be comforted by sympathetic friends who remind them their luck is sure to improve.

Regular gamblers who, based on statistical probability, will lose most of the time, empathetically seek out the company of others in similar situations. The best place to meet these similar others is in a gambling institution. Additionally, being with others who do not disapprove of one another's presence in a quasi-stigmatized environment is an added attraction of the casino.

With the development of industrial bureaucracies and with the more recent emergence of automation in modern society, lower and middle-income men and women are experiencing occupational deprivation and a separation from traditional sources of self-esteem. Individuals depend on the judgment and feedback of others as to how well they carry out their roles. This process, to a large degree, determines one's level of self-esteem. Participation in a gambling activity can help boost self-esteem because gamblers, most of whom are from a working class background (at least in Alberta casinos), are constantly evaluating one another's performance according to their subcultural values, beliefs, and informal norms. "High esteem is given to those whose activities affirm the informal norms of the group, and low esteem to those whose activities violate them" (Martinez, 1983, p. 28). In the casino subculture, players who cooperate to maintain the *appropriate* pattern of the cards are granted high esteem and respect by their fellow players.

Another possible source of self-esteem in the gambling institution is the development of a sense of personal achievement, a feeling that may well be denied in other spheres of the regular gambler's life. The casino provides an environment for gamblers to display their skill, knowledge, and bravado. For example, some casino regulars have mastered the *basic strategy* of play. This means knowing the odds of hitting their hand based on the dealer's up card. They have also learned how to adjust their bets based on their intuition and card counting, the rules of the games, the rules of the house, and various money management techniques. This wisdom is exhibited when a regular casino gambler explains to a novice how to play Blackjack:

"You hit until 16 against dealer's big cards, and you stay on 12 and up against dealer's small cards. But there are many variations. You have to look at the cards on the table and the way cards are coming out. It's too complicated for you to understand them now. It takes years to know all these things. You just ask us experienced players when you are not sure what to do."

Given the choice, humans tend to gravitate to social situations which place them in a higher status. However, for these regulars, situations that may improve their social status are either limited or simply unavailable. The casino, therefore, becomes a haven for many of its adherents; their needs for social status can be satisfied—especially those from lower economic classes or those otherwise disadvantaged.

It should be stressed that while regular gamblers do develop alliances with other players that allow for meaningful interaction in the casino their relationship can be described as comrades more than friends. Rosecrance (1985) made this distinction in his study of persistent horse players; they come together around their mutual interest in gambling but may not have any other common interests, nor may they be especially fond of one another. In most cases they do not socialize outside of the gambling scene.

Role dispossession is a common experience among participants in a gambling institution. Entering a casino, one passes through a "symbolic door" (Cavan, 1966) whereupon roles in outside society are no longer significant. "No one is supposed to care from which race, religion, or social class one comes, at least for the duration of the game" (Abt et al., 1985, p. 68). There is always the possibility that one can achieve a higher status in the casino, no matter what role or social

status he/she has in the outside society. This is conditional on adherence to the norms of the gambling subculture, longevity in the social scene, and willingness to risk substantial sums of money. The longer players attend a casino, the more knowledge about the game they are perceived to have and the more rapport with other players and the casino staff will be established. These relationships represent "instant status in the gambling fraternity" (Abt et al., 1985, p. 72). A gambler's status in the institution is achieved rather than ascribed. As a result, the gambling institution is perceived as a *just world* by those with lower ascribed statuses such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, the physically disabled, and elderly people. Here, they can all start the race from the same starting point. Rosecrance (1985) also noticed the potential for status leveling that is afforded gambling regulars. In his study of inveterate horse players Rosecrance comments on how gambling participation can garner respect that is usually unobtainable in the larger society. While in action with his gambling confreres, the gambler can "be a somebody and not a nobody" (p. 100).

Although social rewards are possible in the casino gambling environment, they are not absolute or assured outcomes. Their materialization depends in good part on the identity salience of the participants.

Identities . . . are conceived as being organized into a salience hierarchy. This hierarchical organization of identities is defined by the probabilities of each of the various identities within it being brought into play in a given situation. The location of an identity in this hierarchy is, by definition, its salience. (Stryker & Serpe, 1982, p. 206).

The more salient an identity, the more likely it will be brought into play in a given situation. For example, a regular gambler will have an identity within the casino as well as identities in outside society. Those regulars holding low prestige jobs are mindful that their outside identities are not as salient as their inside identities, which is the persona of a skilled and respected gambler. Outside identities are suppressed in the casino while the inside identities become paramount. As a result, these gamblers increase their self-esteem, sense of personal achievement, and social status within the gambling subculture. In contrast, a person with a prestigious job may experience a drop in social status in the casino. Thus the salient identity of a gambler is a probable social reward for casino regulars.

A salient identity is a combination of subjective feeling and social recognition. First, individuals must feel they have a salient identity within the gambling institution; second, this salient identity must be socially sustained by specific group affiliations. Those gamblers with inferior identities in outside society come to the casino at least in part to seek out appreciative others who will recognize and confirm their identity as competent gamblers. As Holtgraves (1988) states: "One of the attractions of gambling is the opportunity to present to oneself and to others a desired identity" (p. 78).

OUTSIDE SOCIETY

The casino provides an alternative reality for many regulars. Copious amounts of time and energy are devoted to gambling, and most of their monetary and emotional resources are invested in it. The act of gambling itself, and the gambling venue, become an integral part of their lives. Unfortunately for the gambler, this preoccupation may cause conflicts with outside society, the prime one being a loss of social networks. A heavy gambling involvement may erode the gambler's business connections, friendships, and interaction with significant others, mainly because of the long hours spent gambling. The lack of shared meaning systems and experiences isolate casino regulars from their nongambling friends. As a result, gamblers come to rely on casino friendships for social and emotional support, which further removes them from outside society. For example, when a regular came to the casino to visit and not play the games, he was asked, "Why come here now that you are not playing?" "I come here to visit my friends. I've got all my friends here," he replied.

Some privations caused by a commitment to casino gambling, such as the loss of outside relationships, are replaceable inasmuch as the friendships formed inside the casino eventually become more meaningful. But some losses are irrevocable—for example, the hours spent gambling dissipate time that could be used for educational or job advancement. This time-loss inevitably leads to another conflict with outside society—disculturation—which refers to the loss of or failure to acquire qualifications required to succeed in the wider society (Goffman, 1961). Many casino regulars are unemployed or repeatedly in and out of jobs. "Why don't you get a job? Then you won't be broke so

often," they were asked. A typical reaction was: "How can I get a job when I'm here all the time." Casino regulars who are marginalized from society face a dilemma when they start gambling; their commitment to the casino makes it harder to thrive in the outside society, which drives them even more urgently to the gambling institution to meet their needs for esteem, achievement, and status.

Regular casino attendance may also create value conflicts with outside society. The subcultural value of cooperation in the casino is in opposition to the value of competitive individualism stressed in the external world. Casino regulars are not only probable losers in the gambling games because of the overwhelming house odds, but they also become losers in the fierce competition for esteem, achievement, and status in the wider society. Because of their socioeconomic background, ascribed status, or lack of motivation, they may simply decide to abandon the "rat race" and withdraw into their cooperative gambling fraternity.

Casino regulars perceive the casino as being a just world where all members are treated equally, in part because gambling can be seen as "naked economic interest" by both players and management. In the casino, "where money is the stake and the reward we can find a form of ideal democratic encounter where nothing counts but money and the ability to make it" (Abt et al., 1985, p. 69). It is natural that gamblers, especially those discriminated against in the outside society, compare the intolerant outside world with the gambling subculture which they find more secure, comfortable, and attractive.

Whether casino regulars think of themselves as gamblers or members of the gambling subculture is dependent on the stigmatized perception of gamblers held by nongamblers. Thus group membership can be ascribed by outsiders to individuals who do not think of themselves as members of a group. For instance, some players may not abide by all of the central values and informal norms of the gambling subculture, and as a result would not consider themselves hard-core members of the subculture. But their frequent attendance in the casino is perceived by others as evidence of their being a member of a deviant group. The stereotyping and differential treatment derived from stigmatization may ultimately make membership in this subculture a very real fact of life. The labelled individual may well embrace the gambling institution in a rebellious reaction and become an inveterate gambler. In his book devoted to the notion of stigma, Goffman (1963) stated:

In most cases, [the stigmatized individual] will find that there are sympathetic others who are ready to adopt his standpoint in the world and to share with him the feeling that he is human and 'essentially' normal in spite of appearances and in spite of his own self-doubts. (pp. 19-20)

As a consequence, the stigmatization may contribute partly to the formation of this group of hard-core gamblers who accompany each other "for moral support and for the comfort of feeling at home, at ease, accepted as a person who really is like any other normal person" (Goffman, 1963, p. 20). Perhaps this is one reason why the regulars comment that people in the casino are "nice and friendly."

COMMITMENT AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

Individuals bond to certain social entities, such as a nation, an institution, a group, a family, a person, or an ideology. No matter what the social entity, these linkages exhibit certain common features. If we assume that regulars cohere around the gambling institution, the common features of involvement, attachment, and commitment will be found in this bond as well.

Being involved in the casino means participating in the games on a regular basis and taking an active interest in the happenings at the casino. For example, many casino regulars keep calendars indicating the days the casino will be open. They also tend to play in one particular casino, staying at that venue for years even though several casino locations exist in the city. Furthermore, they notice variations in the setting and make comments on them. They also keep informed about new games, rule changes, staff movements, and building renovations.

Regular gamblers show their appreciation for the gambling institution in the following ways; through making friends with other players, through cheerfully cooperating with other players, and through their willingness to learn basic game strategies. This attachment is the "warm" side of bonding to the entity. Individuals can feel a sense of belonging, identification, and emotional attachment (Goffman, 1961). This attachment is strengthened by the fact that players stand to elevate their esteem and status within the subculture.

A commitment to the social entity is the final and most important way to bond oneself to it. Commitment is displayed by investing money, time, and energy in pursuing a gambling life style. This

commitment is the “cold” side of cleaving to the entity. The regular gamblers risk losing more money than they can afford because of the intensity, frequency, and duration of their involvement. No matter how skilled the player, there is no way to succeed against the unfavorable house odds. The longer they play, the more certain they are to lose. They might also be sacrificing job advancement opportunities because of the time and energy spent gambling, and they might be relinquishing friendships and a previous identity because they are now stigmatized as marginal people. In spite of the obvious downside, a commitment to the gambling institution is the number one priority. Without the commitment, the involvement and the attachment are not attainable. “No pain, no gain.” Clearly, regular gamblers consider the social rewards they stand to gain in the casino as acceptable trade-offs that outweigh any suffering.

A commitment to a gambling institution is one of the symptoms of *problem gambling*. Rosecrance (1988) contends that problem gambling is a more accurate term than *compulsive* or *pathological* gambling, which connote psychological aberrations not found in the majority of troubled gamblers. He defines problem gambling as the loss of excessive amounts of money through gambling. Moreover, he identifies two elements contributing to problem gambling: commitment to gambling and faulty gambling strategy (included here are lack of knowledge of the game and the odds as well as poor money management). Of the two, commitment to gambling, as indicated by playing longer and betting higher stakes, is perhaps the more important. In fact, the amount of money lost gambling is often determined by the length of play and the size of stake. Cutting the duration of play and the bet size is probably the most effective playing and money management strategy for most regulars in the long run. Likewise, Martinez (1983) suggests that total commitment to and involvement in gambling may be related to compulsive gambling. Lesieur (1979) views pathological gamblers as being caught in a spiral of escalating commitment to gambling.

However, commitment to the gambling institution, as introduced in this paper, goes deeper than merely being a gambling regular. It includes an emotional attachment to the institution, being at ease with the new identity formed in the setting, and a faith and trust in the gambling subculture. Excessive losses affect the subsistence level of the player and his family and may mean that the player cannot afford to gamble anymore. The disastrous part of this scenario for regular

players is being cut off from the social rewards which ostensibly are only available to them in the casino. Worst of all, this insolvency problem forces them back into outside society with its many annoyances. This could be one reason why gamblers show symptoms of restlessness and irritability when unable to gamble. To avoid this discomfort gamblers will take drastic measures to escape the incompatible outside world and to return to the congenial atmosphere of the casino. These include borrowing money; ignoring social, occupational, or legal responsibilities; and giving up other recreational pursuits. Problem gambling, then, may not only be a loss of control but also an indication of being unable to cope with routines and realities in the outside world.

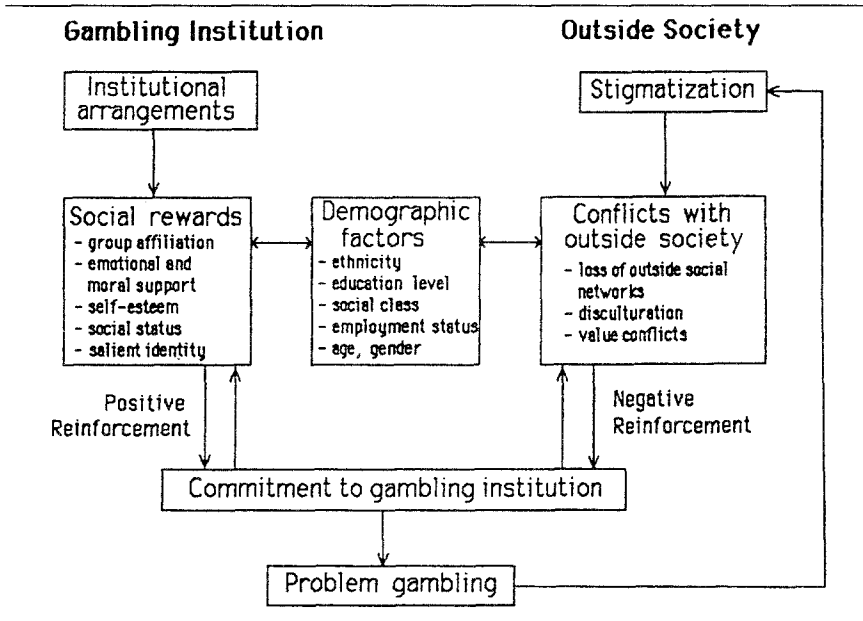
THEORETICAL MODEL

As seen in Figure 1, the proposed theoretical model has two major dimensions: social rewards and conflicts with outside society. These two dimensions determine to a large degree the commitment of gamblers to the gambling institution.

Social rewards include group affiliation, emotional and moral support, self-esteem, social status, and salient identity. It should be noted that apart from the social rewards emphasized in this model, there are other possible rewards such as sensory stimulation and the potential for economic gain (Rosecrance, 1985) which are present in most casinos no matter what the institutional arrangements are. The institutional conditions make social rewards possible for casino gamblers. These conditions are institutional completeness, encompassing tendency, antagonistic relationship, and gambling subculture. To illustrate, the adversarial relationship between players and the house, coupled with the cooperation among the players, helps facilitate group affiliation and elicits emotional support. Furthermore, an environment is created whereby self-esteem and social status can be enhanced.

Conflicts with outside society include loss of social networks, disculturation, and discordant values. In addition, the stigmatization of the gambler's role can magnify the gambler's discord with outside society.

Figure 1
Proposed Model to Explain the Relationships Between Gamblers,
the Gambling Institution, and Outside Society



The social rewards and the external conflicts influence one another. The loss of opportunity to advance in outside society makes the social rewards available in the gambling institution more enticing for the gamblers; as a result, their gambling identities become more salient. Conversely, the social rewards available in the gambling institution make the negative consequences of dealing with outside society harder to accept. As a result, regular gamblers conclude that their identities in outside society are less gratifying, thus making the gambling environment even more captivating.

A "double reinforcement" process thus occurs: social rewards are positive reinforcers that increase the degree of commitment to the gambling institution, whereas conflicts with the outside society are the negative reinforcers which are temporarily removed when the player reenters the gambling scene. In other words, gambling participation is compensated for by group affiliation and the possibility of achieving higher levels of esteem and status, whereas going back into outside society could be likened to being forced into a life of indenture.

Therefore, gamblers, repelled by thoughts of fitting into outside society, return to the gambling institution, their "social heaven" (Rosecrance, 1988), to regain their sense of pride and self-respect.

A commitment to the gambling scene is a probable consequence of participating in such an institutionalized environment. On the other hand, a commitment to the gambling institution begets social rewards and produces conflicts with outside society. This gambling commitment can lead to meaningful social rewards in the gambling setting but exacerbate the friction individuals may face in outside society. Moreover, a commitment to the gambling institution may result in problem gambling. Out of control gambling is likely to damage the gambler's reputation and thus aggravate the conflicts with outside society.

The demographic factors in the model are age, gender, immigration status, ethnicity, marital status, income, education, employment status, and social standing. These are the modifying factors that influence one's commitment to the gambling institution, which in turn can affect the social rewards one receives. Because role dispossession is possible in the gambling institution, it is perceived as an egalitarian world, especially to those with lower ascribed statuses in outside society (immigrants, ethnic minorities, the poorly educated, and the physically disabled, for example). Therefore, the available social rewards are more significant to them, resulting in more salient identities in the gambling institution than can be found in the outside society. Secondly, demographic characteristics can also modify these conflicts with outside society. Gamblers from disadvantaged groups face more hardships when operating in the outside world, partly because of their marginal status and partly because of being labelled gamblers. Consequently, a regular gambler from a disadvantaged background may be more committed to the gambling institution and more prone to problem gambling.

The proposed theoretical model presumes that a person's commitment to a gambling institution is dependent on the interaction of two key components: the social rewards available in the gambling institution and an inability or unwillingness to conform to outside society. The effect of these two components can in turn be mitigated or enhanced by an individual's socio-demographic profile. However, it should be pointed out that many regular gamblers go through cycles

of abstinence and relapse (Lesieur, 1984, 1992). When external conflicts worsen or when finances are constrained some gamblers are obliged to leave the gambling scene temporarily or even permanently.

DISCUSSION

There are two distinct spheres of existence for regular urban casino gamblers. One is the inside world—the casino—which is comforting and socially rewarding; the other is the perpetual whirl of conflict and crisis they face in the inhospitable outside world. These disparate worlds work in concert, drawing individuals into gambling venues and ultimately trapping them there. Researchers studying problem gambling have focused on the gambler's personality traits, familial background, and whether or not he/she suffers from associated mental or physical disorders. The proposed model suggests that in addition to these areas, researchers might also examine the conditions in the gambling institution itself and the degree to which individuals are alienated from society.

Improving the lot of the regular casino gambler is a monumental task. A first step could be to educate gamblers by teaching them optimal playing and betting strategies and showing them the consequences of their erroneous gambling perceptions. While only stopgap measures, regular gamblers' financial resources would at least not be drained so quickly if the casinos offered fairer odds and reduced their betting limits.

More important in the long run than tinkering with strategies and casino regulations are efforts to bring regular gamblers back into mainstream society. This could mean convincing them to discontinue gambling altogether or converting them into social or recreational gamblers (Rosecrance, 1989). This can be done, according to Peele and Brodsky (1992), through a holistic process of learning relevant life skills, developing alternative rewards, enlisting the support of family and friends, and re-establishing communal ties.

It should be noted that the proposed theoretical model is based on observations and reflections made in an urban Canadian casino. Consequently, the model is limited to explaining gambling behavior in that specific environment. The model may have applicability to

other forms of socially stigmatized gambling or other forms of gambling that occur in a group setting, but those issues are beyond the scope of this study.

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