

Alcohol Consumption and Problem Gambling as Forms of Resistance

J. Borrell

Borderlands Cooperative, Australia

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the idea of problem or pathological gambling as a form of resistance. The intention is to discover in what ways and to what extent problem gambling might be conceptualized as a form of resistance, without negating other and related aspects of etiology.

Keywords: Resistance; Gambling; Alcoholism; Cultural theory.

Introduction

The following discussion is an exploration rather than a thesis; I will be exploring the idea of problem or pathological gambling as a form of resistance. I highlight that this is an exploration, as my intention is not to reduce the phenomena of problem gambling to a form of resistance. What I do intend, is to see in what ways and to what extent problem gambling might be conceptualized as a form of resistance, without negating other and related aspects of etiology.

After first discussing the possible scales and sites of resistance as lying on a continuum, I will focus on a study of heavy drinkers in Finland, and thereafter discuss the relationships that female problem gamblers have with Electronic Gaming Machines, specifically as described in a U.S. and in a local Australian (i.e., Victorian) study. The Finland project, being the most highly-theorized, provides inspiration and an intellectual basis for exploration of the following two studies, with reference to resistance-related constructs in the given contexts. These constructs include the twin concepts of *desire* and *control*, and, most importantly, the socially-constitutive nature of the cultural structures of everyday life.

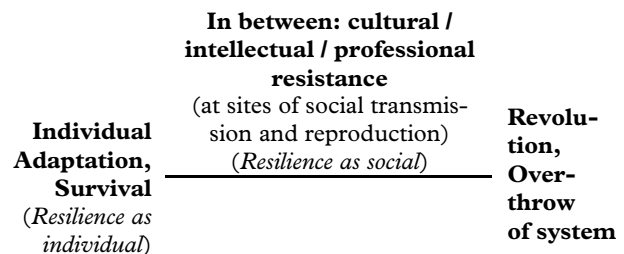


Figure 1. The continuum of resistance. At the left end of the continuum are instances of individual adaptation and survival. At the right end of the continuum are revolution and overthrow of the system.

Scales and Sites of Resistance: A Continuum

At the left end of the continuum of *resistance* (see [Figure 1](#)) are instances of individual adaptation, resistance, and survival. In many cases, such instances and modes of operating are pathologized within professional discourse, for example, as non-compliance with therapeutic regimes or other imposed behavioural obligations. In these circumstances, the very word *resistance* is used in the negative sense of resistance to support or to treatment as prescribed by support professionals, or resistance to the world view of the same. Such forms of resistance may include addictive or apparently dysfunctional behaviours. However, resistance at this end of

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jennifer Borrell, Borderlands Cooperative, Melbourne, Australia, jborrell@vtown.com.au.

the continuum may cover a wide range of situations, including concentration and detention camps and the colonization experience.

At the other end of the continuum are revolution or complete overthrow of the system, with the associated problem that the established order tends to live on in the minds, hearts, habits and bodies of the people. For example, the Algerian revolutionary Frantz Fanon thought that there would be a clean slate with the violent overthrow of the existing oppressive order in the late 1950s; however, according to Stuart Hall, he underestimated the power of culture in the generation of the new order (or continuation of old ways). There is also the related issue of domination by groups within the society; specifically, a cataclysmic overthrow of the system does not prevent a new group from emerging to become the new dominant oppressor. This is obviously the central point of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Many, such as Edward Said, have also argued that the formation of nationhood as a legacy of colonization worked as a force for postcolonial oppression.

The central part of the continuum refers to resistance at a cultural level: At the sites of everyday living, social interactions, and meaning formation and transmission. According to Duncombe (2002), in his *Cultural Resistance Reader*:

The word 'culture' is elastic... Here I'm referring to culture as a thing, there as a set of norms, behaviours and ways to make sense of the world, and, in still other places, I'm describing culture as a process. This is because the word culture ... means all these things.

The term, 'cultural resistance' is no firmer ... I use it to describe culture that is used consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure. But cultural resistance, too, can mean many things and take on many forms. (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5)

Hence, we have appropriately loose and broad-based definitions of both culture and cultural resistance to provide a conceptual backdrop for the following discussion.

I highlight professional and intellectual resistance on the diagram because of my own interest and my own feeling of responsibility as a professional and a person who makes her living from intellectual activity. (More discussion of this, in relation to gambling policy and research, may be found in Borrell, 2003.)

Adaptation, Survival, Resistance, and Resilience

For the rest of this presentation, I will largely focus on the left end of the continuum—on adaptation, survival, resistance and resilience. Adam (1978) notes various strategies for adaptation or resistance adopted by oppressed or marginalized people, including: Adoption of dominant values; flight from imposed identity; acceptance of commonality with others who are subordinated; assumption of a low profile; psychological withdrawal; and passive resistance. I will be speaking of forms of resistance that have both active and passive aspects: Case studies of alcohol consumption amongst working class men in Finland, and female "machine" gamblers in both the US and Australia.

Different types of individual acts of resistance may hold potentialities for "meaningful" social change to varying degrees. At the same time, these acts of resistance may be meaningful themselves for their agents (rather than for the specific purpose of political change per se). The concept of resistance at an individual level, in terms of organization, may entail the deliberate abandonment of control, the creation of some psychic space that a person can call her own, or the appropriation or "stealing" of a sense of autonomy through socially "errant" means. There may be an inversion of the rules—about how to present and how to behave. Furthermore, resistance may take the form of rebellion, the potency of which is felt inwardly, though not intelligibly to others.

Using a broader political analysis, it could be argued that resistance arises from the contradictions that people experience in their life circumstances through the multitude of cracks and crevices that appear in society's ideology, hegemony, or dominant culture.

Studies and Instances of Resistance and Adaptation

A Cultural Theory of Alcoholism

The question of whether alcoholism is rational or irrational emerges in *A Cultural Theory of Alcoholism* by Alasuutari (1992). Alasuutari uses two interpretive frameworks—the everyday-life frame and the alcoholism frame¹—to study the cultural meaning of alcohol consumption in various social contexts:

¹ Frames can be understood as clusters of rules, which help to define and constitute specific activities (Alasuutari, 1992). Whereas the concept was originally developed by Goffmann as applicable to sub-cultures, the central idea of this framework is that we need to begin with the overall picture in examining society, only thereafter studying the details. The usage here is that defined by Giddens, who emphasizes cognitive dimensions (1984, 1987; as cited in Alasuutari, 1992).

- in two case studies of local working-class taverns (wherein the desire to drink at the tavern is rooted in working-class culture, and wherein the alcoholism frame structures behaviour to some degree);
- in an analysis of the cultural grammar of Finnish working-class drinking through the life stories of alcoholic and non-alcoholic men (wherein the men's drinking habits were guided by a distinct notion of freedom; i.e., "They believe that total personal freedom is achieved, paradoxically, only when every kind of self-control and self-discipline is delegated to other people or externalized to outer constraints," Alasuutari, 1992, p. 5);
- in the study of a Finnish alcoholism treatment institution (wherein there is an examination of different explanatory models of alcoholism used by both clients and therapists and their grounding in specific social conditions. In particular, a case analysis of a family treatment group "shows how insistently a medical model of alcoholism suggests itself, even if not offered by the therapists," Alasuutari, 1992, p. 6); and
- in the study of a self-help group, whose members "try to unthink the alcoholism frame and resolve their drinking problems by relating them to the meaning of drinking in working class culture" (Alasuutari, 1992, p. 6).

In the everyday-life frame, drinking is, to a large extent, taken for granted. The everyday-life frame focuses attention on the place and functions of drinking in social interactions and, thus, it serves as a basis for reflexive, taken-for-granted attitudes to social situations. In contrast, the alcoholism frame shifts attention from the *situation* to *individuals* and their drinking habits or styles and, as such, it is a more conscious, second-order, interpretive framework (Alasuutari, 1992).

While Alasuutari (1992) focused on the history and logic of the alcoholism frame, in particular, he concluded that there are three ways that this frame is linked with the modern notion of the person: (1) alcoholism is seen as a personal problem, and this presupposes an individualist world view; (2) alcoholism is seen as a disease of the will, and this presupposes the modern notion of a person as a desiring subject; and (3) the alcoholism frame presents an individual's heavy drinking pattern as a long-standing personal problem. "This is rooted in the way in which the modern individual is constructed as a personality with the help of 'autobiographical reasoning'" (Alasuutari, 1992, p. 6).

To elaborate briefly on the above, Alasuutari (1992) examines the ways we are constructed or constituted as modern, desiring subjects—by the notions of desire and self-control. He argues that the emergence of the idea of abnormal drinking as personal pathology coincided with alcohol regulation through legislation and the shift from collective control of alcohol to state control. Hence, responsibility for drinking habits shifted from the collective (rural, then state) to the individual.

The alcoholism frame is, in part, a self-fulfilling prophecy. As with all frames, when applied to a particular person, it structures social relations and situations, thus giving them new meanings (Alasuutari, 1992). In Alasuutari's (1992) case studies, this frame adopts the function of an external locus of control for the (male) workers, who only feel free when attributing control to another person (i.e., partner) or substance (i.e., alcohol). The resistance, in part, seems to be against self-surveillance and self-discipline, and is arguably a historically-driven component of contemporary, rational society. (Probably the most famous proponent of the latter point is Michel Foucault.)

In one of the case studies, the men shared the idea that a man is not really free unless he gets rid of self-control:

Indulgence in drinking is not only a subconscious means of self-destruction; it also has its own inherent logic. The defiance we have identified in the drinking of the storytellers' club (or *tavern frequenters*) is obviously aimed not only at the men themselves, but in fact against all the necessities and coercions of everyday life, which require of them a certain degree of self-discipline. A man would not be free if he continuously controlled his own drinking only in order to be able to meet his social obligations. Taking to drink is an expression of freedom. (Alasuutari, 1992, p. 43)

In general, the state of drunkenness is a realm of freedom for the Finnish man, a realm that offers bleak prospects but, perhaps for this very reason, is considered to possess an almost religious sanctity. The gates to the most sacrosanct places in this realm are open only to those blessed people who are prepared to sacrifice everything, including their self-discipline, for that freedom. Paradoxically, the state of complete freedom is reached only by those who are slaves to the drink.

Hence, a loss of self-control may be conceived as a form of meaningful rebellion, resistance, and autonomy in a world in which the men otherwise feel coerced and constricted.

While the taverns act as a realm of male freedom, we might ask where and how female partners fit into this world? The answer is that they, along with alcohol, become part of the male world's external locus of power to which the men submit to obtain true freedom:

... the wife rarely acts as a controller of her husband's drinking, but she does often serve as a 'caretaker'. For the man there is nothing shameful or submissive in being the target of a woman's caring. On the contrary, it is a tribute to the nature of man; indeed it is so valuable that it is worth accepting even if it leads to a regression in the relationship, to the woman/man relationship being reduced to a women/child relationship. Women and liquor be-

come homologous as objects of pleasurable submission. They have the power and security to control the man, but at the same time they afford him a sense of complete freedom (Alasuutari, 1992, p. 47).

Most notably, one man in the study saw the obtaining of a “very bitchy wife” as a solution to the excesses of youthful drinking:

My drinking had become excessive. I noticed that the only way (to get it under control) was to get a very bitchy wife, otherwise I was just as good as dead. It was the only possibility (Alasuutari, 1992, p. 65).

According to Alasuutari (1992), the *alcoholism frame* can be used by the men to resolve a cognitive (and life-practical) dissonance, whereby they want to attain freedom, but also preserve their relationship, which is threatened by their favoured form of freedom:

... when they interpret their drinking as expressing the desire to be personally free, it contradicts their will to preserve good relations with significant others. To solve this contradiction, the men redefine their drinking within the alcoholism frame as proof of their uncontrolled craving for alcohol (Alasuutari, 1992, pp. 5-6).

And, furthermore:

In such a case drinking may be redefined as a symptom of a senseless craving for alcohol. In such a case the alcoholism frame works as a self-fulfilling prophecy. When it is generally applied to a person, it structures social relations and situations, and gives them a new meaning (Alasuutari, 1992, p. 162).

Escape Mechanism: Women, Caretaking, and Compulsive Machine Gambling

This provides a logical link with a paper by Dow Schull (2002) that explores the links between caretaking responsibilities, video poker machines, and female compulsive gambling, drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews with problem gamblers in Las Vegas. Dow Schull suggests that women video-poker addicts in Las Vegas “have discovered a highly addictive mechanism of escape from what they experience as an excess of relational demands at home and at work.” Thus, the gendered role of caring, either domestically or professionally, serves as a motivation for escape from the excessive demands made by others on the emotional and psychic lives of women. Further-

more, Dow Schull argues that the desire for such an escape is symptomatic of unresolved anxieties and tensions surrounding the place of care in our discursively and, increasingly, individualist society.

However, rather than reducing problem gambling to one of restrictive and oppressive gender roles, Dow Schull (2002) brings into her analysis of problem gambling etiology the regulative context of neo-liberal, free-market discourse in which the concept of consumer choice provides a drive for policy. She also highlights the “addictive” properties of the machines themselves, arguing that the gaming industry, by engineering consumer technologies that capitalize on the female desire to escape from the burden of caring responsibilities, is implicated in the phenomenon of machine addiction among women.

The recognition of the addictive propensities built into the design of the machines is important—after all, following a business profit model, they are designed and marketed to extract the maximum money possible. This point has been raised quite forcefully by a member of the Gambling Issues Network (A Canadian-based email network), who is a reformed poker machine addict as well as a nurse and a mother. After years of therapy and the associated inducement of “enlightened biographical reasoning,” she learned about the power of reinforcement as delivered by poker machines and, thus, is quite appalled by the excessive and overly emphatic pathologizing of poker machine addicts by the experts. (N.B.: I was also struck by her double-caring role as nurse and mother, which might also be viewed as some reinforcement of Dow Schull’s, 2002, central thesis). As a general point, she highlights the danger of assuming that the most *interesting* areas of etiology have the greatest *explanatory* power.

Importantly, Alasuutari (1992), in his cultural analysis of alcohol consumption among working-class men in Finland, does not reject that alcohol has pharmacological properties; however, he does state that people’s “need for a drink” can and must be understood in terms of their living conditions and cultural traditions. He elaborates on this, noting that:

One’s relation to alcoholic beverages cannot be reduced to, or even properly understood as, the relation of an organism to a chemical substance. Alcohol does generate effects within the human metabolism, but it does not convey meanings to the human consciousness. The pharmacological effects of alcohol—like disturbances in the functioning of the central nervous system—are always experienced, interpreted and responded to by an individual human being, and it is this totality that we call drunkenness. Unlike a causal effect studied by natural sciences, meaning is a product of the human mind (Alasuutari, 1992, p. 49).

Playing for Time: Exploring the Impacts of Gambling on Women

The final study for discussion, involving female problem gamblers in Victoria, entailed four focus groups of people who have experienced problem gambling: Human service workers, women who gamble alone, women who gamble in the company of others, and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Surgey & Seibert, 2000). Surgey and Seibert's (2000) study is unique for a government-funded study, as it is focused on the social meaning and social etiology of (excessive) gambling for the gamblers, rather than engaging in more typical functionalist explorations of impact and causation. Perhaps it is for this reason that it is rarely referred to and, perhaps, largely forgotten; that is, its implications for gambling policy are a little more diffuse than those emerging from other studies. (Also, as social context is broadened in social analyses, solutions arguably become more fundamental to our social and economic structure, and more wide ranging, and, thus, less amenable to linear types of managerialist problem-solving).

Another point of divergence in the study by Surgey and Seibert (2000) is its exploration of women's need for *time out*. This term was apparently translated into an experience of timelessness or a timeless "zone." Though this is exploration is similar to the study by Dow Schull (2002), other studies of women problem gamblers tend to focus more on the *time in* aspect; that is, women's wish to be accepted by others in a public social space (although this study includes that aspiration and need as well). However, it should also be highlighted that the binary distinction between time out and time in does not form a conceptual contradiction; instead, different social spaces are assumed with women wishing themselves out of one and into another, at least for part of the time. In fact, time in and time out can be usefully applied in categorizing different aspects of the same existential (time/space) terrain.

Female gambling used and construed as an escape from the dictums of adult gender-role expectations is highlighted in both the Surgey and Seibert (2000) and the Dow Schull (2002) studies. Points of the former include: (1) women focused on the inability to meet gender role expectations; (2) many women have reasons to be attracted to the sense of timelessness; (3) women often feel guilty about their gambling; and (4) time out from being good.

Women focused on the inability to meet gender role expectations. For many, time spent in caregiving was perceived as relentless. Some women experienced the rewards from providing and accounting for others as insufficient.

Many women have reasons to be attracted to the sense of timelessness, ritual, or even distortion of thinking that may arise from engagement during long episodes of

play. It gives an opportunity for respite—a chance to change the present by replacing it with oblivion. (Elsewhere this has been referred to as zoning out.)

Women often feel guilty about their gambling: Lindgren (1987; as cited in Surgey & Seibert, 2000) believed that this is connected to a social norm that perceives women as "guardians of the hearth," which results in a double standard for men and women, with women being expected to abide by higher moral standards (Surgey & Seibert, 2000, pp. 9-10). (This forms an interesting juxtaposition and consistency with Alasuutari's, 1992, study, in which women's caring role provided the basis for male freedom through alcohol consumption.)

Time out from being good: Women spoke about their gambling behaviour in the context of their desire to be active in breaking through and stepping outside of expectations placed on them that they find confining, demeaning, and unrelenting. Several quotes would seem to express this most vividly:

I've always been super responsible, with a big R, and I think gambling for me is about being a bad girl, which I hadn't done much of in my life.

You know ... some of us, sort of, like with gambling, we're going against character, against time...

Sometimes women go to gambling places to do ... something naughty, be rebellious. Sometimes that's the reason why. I've always been good in my life, now I do something bad ... There's this naughty part in us that's screaming to get out. I think that's what's happening. Naughty, naughty girl...

When I go to the casino I am anonymous and I can be "abandoned." I like the company of others who too are "on the edge" so to speak. It's a non-sensible activity and this too appeals, as I've honed being "sensible" to an outer persona, I'd say from the age of eight.

In line with the evident wish for escape from oppressive and confining adult gender roles, some of the above quotes are notable for the infantilization of language and imagery.

Finally, I would like to present a quote that epitomizes the idea of gambling by women as an act of resistance against gendered role expectations that is based on contradictions presenting to them in their daily lives:

There's something about that need for 'out' that's really huge these days, for women. It's like a by-product of our times. Because of the level of expectations on women that conflict with the reality of what's happening, so many of us are saying: "I would be the last person that people would pick as doing gambling" and there's something about that contradiction between what's expected of me and

what I feel like doing that causes me, and I think time at the pokies, even if having a good time is costing them a lot in terms of self-esteem—or even if they don't have a good time at the pokies! It seems to be like some sort of acting out (Surgey & Seibert, 2000, p. 34).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope that I have provided some food for thought in my exploration of how and in what ways alcohol consumption and gambling might be constituted as acts of resistance within varying social contexts, with attention given to both local specificity and holistic social issues. In particular, the studies discussed have in common excessive consumption as a means toward freedom from the perceived and experienced constraints of gendered work roles and identities. At the same time, the focus of all three studies is on the "grey twilight area," where certain behaviours can be both socially sanctioned and socially errant (and the former may even act as a catalyst or enabler for the latter). In this "twilight area" resistance can evidently occur within legal and socially-legitimized worlds of commodity provision and consumption.

The twin notions of desire and control, as raised in this paper, are also important and deserve much greater and deeper exploration—not only because they may be crucial to a full understanding of pathological gambling, in particular, but for the very reason that *loss of control* is commonly used in conjunction with other behavioural markers to identify and diagnose pathological gambling. Some obvious questions arise in this context; for example, what is the social meaning of loss of control for the gambler? Further, what if loss of control is the gambler's goal—a vehicle for resistance rather than the (immediate) problem per se? Certainly, evidence for the latter contention can be found in the

other women, to try and go out and have a good studies discussed here. Thus, it is suggested that, before we study and analyze loss of control as a diagnostic marker of pathological or problem gambling, we need to examine its more fundamental counterpoints; that is, the social construction of the modern self as a desiring subject as well as the gender and other types of social restrictions and oppressions that problem gamblers may be resisting or to which they may be responding.

Finally, and most broadly, greater focus is needed in future research (1) on the ways in which resistance is transformed into self-destructive and other personal-pathological acts and behaviours; and (2) to properly understand the forces at work (socially, institutionally, interactionally, and psychologically) that contribute to this transformation.

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