

An Empirical Analysis of the Film, *The Gambler*

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Pathological gambling has been portrayed by a number of movie-makers around the world, although many of these film representations tend to cast gambling in an innocuous light, often portraying gamblers, largely male, as hero figures (Griffiths, 1989). On the other hand, *The Gambler* (1974) has dealt entirely with the downside of gambling, and is likely the most in-depth fictional film about the life of a pathological gambler. Consequently, it is appropriate to ask whether the film accurately portrays the “typical” compulsive gambler. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Third Edition (DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1980), DSM-III-R (APA, 1987) and DSM-IV (Lesieur & Rosenthal, 1990) criteria for pathological gambling were used to assess the gambling pathology of the film’s main character. In addition, further examination of other parts of the film’s text and scenarios will be used to examine the film’s theoretical perspective and its relevance to contemporary representations of pathological gambling.

Keywords: Film; *The Gambler*; Media.

Introduction

The media undoubtedly has a large impact on how we perceive the world in which we live, especially on matters we know little or nothing about. Pathological gambling is one social concern that has been portrayed by a number of movie-makers around the world, although the depth to which each film explores the issue differs greatly. The world of gambling and gamblers has been portrayed in many films throughout the years (e.g., *The Sting*, *The Cincinnati Kid*, *Rain Man*). However, many of these film representations tend to cast gambling in an innocuous light, and often portray gamblers, largely male, as hero figures (Griffiths, 1989). One film that has dealt entirely with the downside of gambling is *The Gambler*, produced in 1974 (111 minutes, directed by Karel Reisz), and starring James Caan in the lead role as Professor Alex Freed, a university lecturer in literature and a compulsive gambler.

The film is probably the most in-depth fictional film about the life of a pathological gambler, and is proba-

bly one of the few films that the general public may have seen regarding this particular issue. If this is the case, it is only appropriate to ask whether the film accurately portrays the “typical” compulsive gambler. To attempt such a task, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Third Edition (DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1980), DSM-III-R (APA, 1987), and DSM-IV (Lesieur & Rosenthal, 1991) criteria for pathological gambling were used to assess the gambling pathology of the film’s main character. In addition, further examination of other parts of the film’s text and scenarios will be used to examine the film’s theoretical perspective and its relevance to contemporary representations of pathological gambling.

Story Overview of *The Gambler*

The Gambler (1974) is the fictional account of a few days in the life of a compulsive gambler called Alex Freed, a New York City university professor in literature. The start of the film sees Freed go into \$44,000 debt after gambling and losing at blackjack, craps and roulette in a casino. The film’s main story revolves around Alex’s attempt to pay back his debt to the mobsters. His mother, a doctor, gives him the money that he then gambles away almost immediately through

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sports betting. Faced with no money to pay the mobsters, and no family to bail him out, he cancels his debt by illegally fixing a basketball game for the mobsters with the help of one of his students who is on the basketball team. The film's main theme, aside from pathological gambling, is Freed's masochistic tendency that is highlighted in the final scene. Here, Freed walks into a white "no-go" area of New York, walks into a bar, hires a prostitute, refuses to pay her and is then confronted by her knife-wielding pimp who he dares to kill him. Freed then batters the pimp, but is cut across the face by the prostitute using her pimp's knife. The film ends with Freed leaving the room with a heavily-bleeding face.

The Film's Theoretical Perspective

When Freed is asked by his girlfriend why he gambles to excess, he responds:

It's just something I like to do. I like the uncertainty of it ... I like the threat of losing...the idea that...uh...I could lose but that somehow I won't because I don't want to...that's what I like... and I love winning even though it never lasts.

This reply by Freed, to some extent, hints at the film's outlook on pathological gambling. However, the film's basic premise is that gamblers gamble because they want to lose, thereby partially adhering to Bergler's (1957) psychodynamic account of gambling. Bergler extended Freud's ideas about guilt-relief in losing, and argued that gambling is a rebellious act, an aggression against logic, intelligence, moderation and morality. Ultimately, gambling is the denial of parental authority; a denial of the reality principle (i.e., even the gambler's parents-who symbolize logic, intelligence and morality-cannot predict a chance outcome). According to Bergler, the unconscious desire to lose arises when gambling activates forbidden unconscious desires (e.g., parricidal feelings); the financial loss provides the punishment to maintain the gambler's psychological equilibrium. According to this view, gambling is, in essence, masochistic. While the psychodynamic perspective highlights the fact that reasons for gambling may involve unconscious desires, there is very sparse in contemporary research literature that supports Bergler's theoretical perspective on gambling.

In the course of the film, the viewpoint that gambling is masochistic and motivated by a desire to lose is forwarded only once in a conversation by Freed and Hips, one of the mobsters who is also one of Freed's friends:

Hips: "Listen, I'm gonna tell you something I've never told a customer before. Personally I've never made a bet in my life. You know why? Because I've

observed first hand what we see in the different kinds of people that are addicted to gambling, what we would call degenerates. I've noticed there's one thing that makes all of them the same. You know what that is?"

Freed: "Yes. They're all looking to lose"

Hips: "You mean you knew that?"

Freed: "I could have wiped the floor with your ass"

Hips: "Yeah? How?"

Freed: "By playing just the games I knew I'd win"

Hips: "Then why didn't you?"

Freed: "Listen, if all my bets were safe there just wouldn't be any juice"

The masochistic tendencies run throughout the film until the very final scene, although another interpretation has been put forth by Rosenthal and Rugle (1994). These authors believe that there is a group of gamblers for whom it is not winning that is all-important, but

Table 1

Number of criteria fulfilled by The Gambler on the DSM-III criteria for pathological gambling (American Psychiatric Association, 1980)

Criterion	Criterion Fulfilled?
(A) The individual is chronically and progressively unable to resist impulses to gamble	Yes – throughout film
(B) Gambling compromises, disrupts or damages familial, personal, and vocational pursuits, as indicated by at least three of the following:	
(1) arrest for forgery, fraud, embezzlement or income tax evasion due to attempts to obtain money for gambling	No
(2) default on debts or other financial responsibilities	Yes – throughout film
(3) disrupted family or spouse relationships due to gambling	Yes – throughout film
(4) borrowing money from illegal sources	Yes – throughout film
(5) inability to account for loss of money or to produce evidence of winning money if this is claimed	Yes
(6) loss of work due to absenteeism in order to pursue gambling activity	Possibly
(7) necessity for another person to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation	Yes – one scene only
(C) The gambling is not due to Anti-Social Personality Disorder	Yes

Note. Criteria (A), (B) and (C) are fulfilled; thus, this person is a pathological gambler, as defined by the DSM-III.

losing. According to Rosenthal (1986), it is the risk of getting hurt and losing everything that is exciting for them (i.e., “living on the edge”), which he described as *omnipotent provocation* (Rosenthal, 1986). Such omnipotent provocation is akin to a deliberate flirting with fate (and danger) to prove one is in control. Rosenthal and Rugle (1994) argue this thesis on the basis of the final scene from *The Gambler*:

In the climactic scene, the compulsive gambler-protagonist...walks the streets of Harlem, alone and at night, fully aware of the taunts and the threats that follow him. He enters a bar and provokes a fight with a prostitute and her knife-wielding pimp. After getting slashed, he staggers out, blood pouring from his face. In the final frame, he has stopped to look in the mirror, and while examining what will soon be a huge scar, he smiles. His expression says it all. He has gone to the edge, escaped with his life, and that, for him, is a big win. (Rosenthal & Rugle, 1994, p. 27)

From the synopsis of the film presented above, it could be argued that, for Alex Freed, life in itself was one big gamble.

Although the theme of desired losing is the film’s message, the desire to lose is suppressed when Freed talks to most people. To his students, Freed intellectualizes his gambling using the work of Dostoevsky (who was indeed a pathological gambler himself). For instance, quoting from *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky, 1864), Freed lectures his students on reason and rationality. Although not alluding to gambling, he quotes Dostoevsky’s assertion:

Reason only satisfies man’s rational requirements, desire on the other hand accompanies everything, and desire is life.

To others around him (i.e., his family, girlfriend, fellow gamblers, and bookmakers), much of Freed’s gambling talk is bravado. For instance, just as he is about to pay his debt to the mobsters with the money his mother had given him, he takes an impulse trip to Las Vegas with his girlfriend. The following short exchange then takes place between them:

Girlfriend: “Don’t you think you oughta pay back the money before you go and lose it?”
Freed: “I’m not gonna lose it, I’m gonna gamble it.”

This kind of rhetorical optimism and self-belief resurfaces a number of times during the film. Returning from the trip to Las Vegas, he rings up his bookmaker to place a \$45,000 sports bet. The bookmaker asks him why he has made this particular bet. Freed says:

Table 2
Number of criteria fulfilled by The Gambler on the DSM-III-R criteria for pathological gambling (American Psychiatric Association, 1987)

Criterion	Criterion Fulfilled?
(1) Frequent preoccupation with gambling or obtaining money to gamble	Yes – throughout film
(2) Often gambling larger amounts of money over a longer period than intended	Yes – implicit in film
(3) Need to increase the size and frequency of the bets to achieve the desired excitement	Possibly (implicit)
(4) Restlessness or irritability if unable to gamble	Yes – one scene only
(5) Repeated efforts to cut down or stop gambling	No
(6) Often gambling when expected to fulfill social or occupational obligations	Possibly
(7) Some important social, occupational or recreational activity given up in order to gamble	Possibly
(8) Continuation of gambling despite inability to pay mounting debts, or despite other significant social, occupational, or legal problems that the individual knows to be exacerbated by gambling	Yes – throughout film
(9) Repeated loss of money gambling and re-turning another day to win back losses (“chasing”)	Yes – throughout film

Note. Since five of the nine criteria are definitely fulfilled, this person is a pathological gambler, as defined by the DSM-III-R.

“I can’t lose. Why? Because I’m betting on them, that’s why. I’ve got magic powers. I’m scorching. I’m as hot as a pistol.”

A similar example occurs while Freed is in Las Vegas playing blackjack. Freed has cards totaling eighteen, and then asks the dealer to give him another card, knowing that any card over a value of three will cause him to lose his money. A short interchange between Freed and his girlfriend confirms his optimism and bravado:

Girlfriend: “You’re crazy.”
Freed: “I’m blessed.”

Throughout the film Freed is seen gambling on anything and everything, including his own life in the final scene. Empirical reviews of the gambling literature (e.g., Walker, 1992) show that most pathological gam-

blers have a preference for one form of gambling. Thus, if “typical” pathological gamblers are those who usually engage themselves in only one particular form of gambling, it can be concluded that, at one level, Alex Freed is untypical. However, a more empirical way to test such an assertion is to measure the gambling behaviour using diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling. This is attempted in the following section.

Gambling Pathology

When the film *The Gambler* first premiered in 1974, there were no official diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling developed by the American Psychiatric Association. Established criteria for pathological gambling were not introduced until the DSM-III was published in 1980, six years after the film’s premiere.

Even though the filmmakers had no official diagnostic criteria on which to base the character of Alex Freed (only the Reisz’ personal insight from his own

pathological gambling experiences), the fictional gambler portrayed would be diagnosed as a pathological gambler on all three of the DSM’s incarnations to date (see Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3). The three sets of criteria, although all different, do have similar dimensions running through all of them (e.g., pre-occupation, chasing, family disruption, illegal acts, etc.). However, it must be noted that the DSM-III is quite different from the two subsequent sets of criteria (in DSM-III-R and DSM-IV), as the latter two sets of criteria are based more on an addictive model of gambling.

Since the film’s basic premise is that a gambler gambles because of his or her masochistic desire to lose, rather than because of an addiction to the activity itself, it is perhaps unsurprising that almost all of the DSM-III criteria are fulfilled by Alex Freed, whereas “addictive” criteria (e.g., excitement, tolerance and withdrawal) included in the later revisions of the DSM are not. The “excitement” of gambling is never explicitly discussed in the film, except for Freed’s assertion that, “if all [his] bets were safe, there just wouldn’t be any juice.” This contention assumes, of course, that “juice” is excitement. However, it should be further noted that, even if the film does not explicitly examine excitement, it does to some extent convey it. It may be argued that Freed’s escalating need for greater and greater risks is explicit, and that those watching the film may even feel their own arousal levels escalating, even if they feel somewhat uncomfortable watching it.

Table 3
Number of criteria fulfilled by The Gambler on the DSM-IV criteria for pathological gambling (Lesieur & Rosenthal, 1990)

Criterion	Criterion Fulfilled?
(1) Progression and preoccupation: reliving past gambling experiences, studying a system, planning the next gambling venture, or thinking of ways to get money	Yes – throughout film
(2) Tolerance: need to gamble with more and more money to achieve the desired excitement	Not explicitly
(3) Withdrawal: became restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling	No
(4) Escape: gamble in order to escape from personal problems	Not Explicitly
(5) Chasing: after losing money gambling, often returned another day in order to get even	Yes – throughout film
(6) Denial: denied losing money through gambling	Possibly
(7) Illegal activity: committed an illegal act to obtain money for gambling	Yes – one scene
(8) Jeopardizing family or career: jeopardizing or loss of a significant relationship, marriage, education, job or career	Yes – throughout film
(9) Bail out: needed another individual to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation produced by gambling	Yes – one scene

Note. Since five of the nine criteria are definitely fulfilled, this person is a pathological gambler, as defined by the DSM-IV.

Concluding comments

An analysis of the film *The Gambler* (1974) reveals that the character of Alex Freed is a fairly accurate representation of a pathological gambler and of what is known about pathological gambling. There is anecdotal evidence that pathological gamblers identify with the film and that it is an accurate portrayal—at least of the typical male gambler seen in treatment. The actions of Alex Freed (e.g., pre-occupation with gambling, deterioration of relationships due to gambling, gambling to win back losses, and illegal acts performed to solve problems) are (a) familiar to anyone who encounters pathological gamblers in either a professional or personal capacity, and (b) would be similar to any pathological gambler, regardless of the rhetorical justifications and subjective motivations (i.e., excessive gamblers will display the same observable behaviour despite different etiological roots or theoretical perspectives). If *The Gambler* is the only film regarding pathological gambling that the general public ever sees, then it is fair to say they would go away with a good perspective on what pathological gambling is and what it can do to people. What the film does not adequately do is explain that there is more than one reason as to why people might gamble excessively.

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