



Gambling & Problem Gambling as Mechanisms of Social Domination: Some Considerations

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Compare the following two news accounts ...

- A young, Black woman is sentenced to prison for leaving her 10-day old baby in the car while she goes into a South Carolina casino to gamble
- An older, White man with a national reputation has lost more than \$8 million playing high-limit slot machines in Las Vegas; he admits he gambles but not that he has ended up behind
- These two accounts raise questions about the disparate social impacts of legal gambling & the ways in which the concept of “problem gambling” is differentially applied



Our argument ...

- Recent changes in attitudes & laws about gambling have combined with contemporary forms of wealth redistribution to produce a new mechanism of social domination
- Two key components
 - **Structural economic** – transfer of wealth from poor to rich
 - **Symbolic constructionist** – disproportionate labeling of certain vulnerable groups as “problem gamblers”
- Structural component is facilitated by constructivist component



A sociological perspective on the legalization of gambling

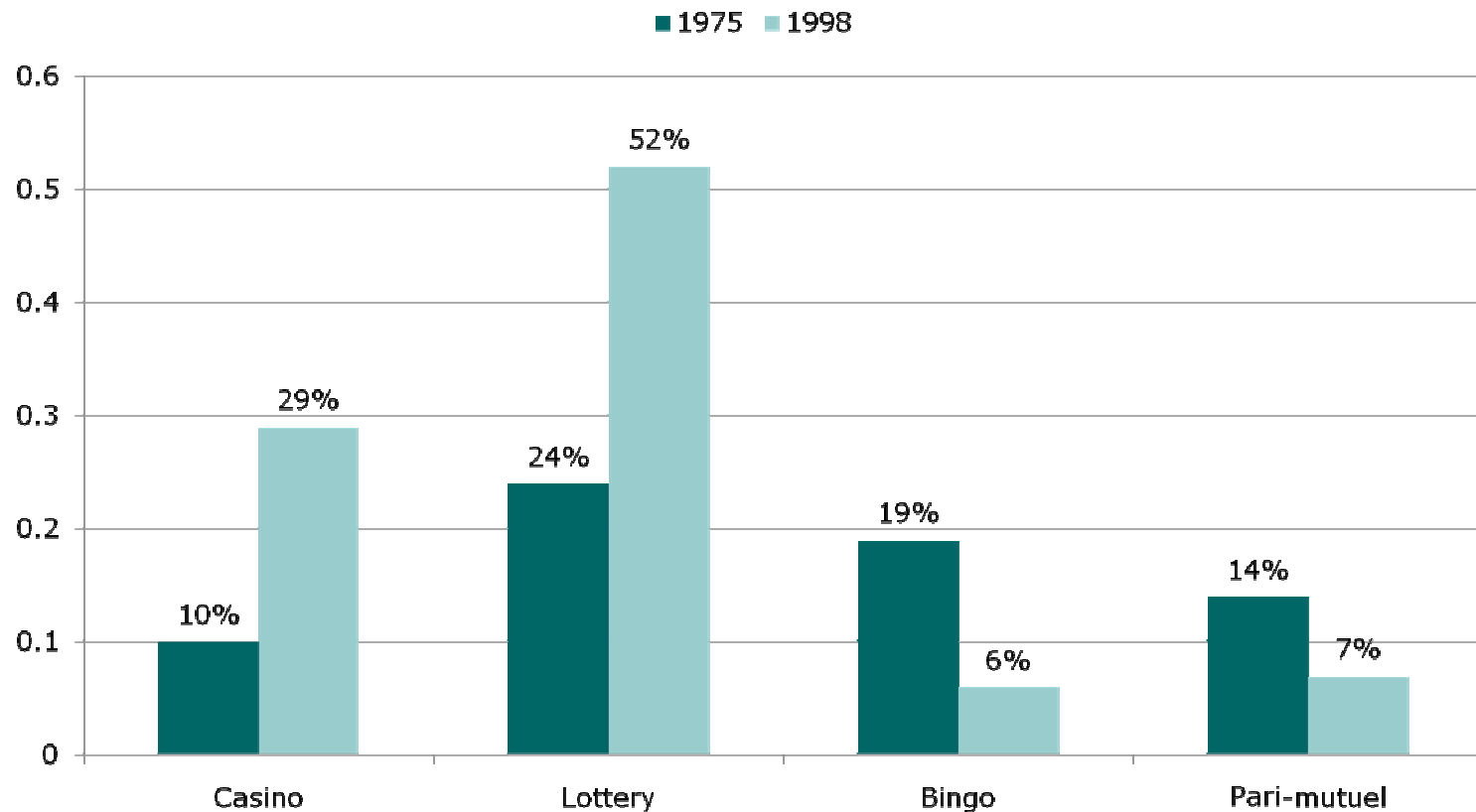
- Since 1980s, government policies of fiscal conservatism & welfare reform have resulted in tax cuts to the wealthy & budget cuts that starve states of funds needed to provide social services
- Result has been an ongoing transfer of wealth from the most vulnerable members of society to the least vulnerable
- Cuts to social services & reluctance to raise taxes have led state governments to favor gambling as a source of tax revenues



The normalization of gambling facilitates expansion

- Evolving access to capital by the gambling industry since the 1970s has led to shift in ownership & control of gambling operations
- Institutional shifts occur as gambling becomes a routine part of government, stakeholders & constituencies emerge
 - Growing involvement of gambling industry in political processes
 - Growing dependence of governments & other institutions on gambling revenues
 - Expansion in social settings where gambling takes place

The social impact of gambling expansion: Middle class participation grows



Gerstein et al., 1999; Kallick et al., 1975



Normalization is accompanied by changing conception of gambling problems

- Beginning in the 1950s, professionals began arguing that interventions for those with gambling problems should be based in medical science
- Transformation of PG into a medical problem was part of larger changes in how many social problems were managed
- Success was accompanied by efforts to detect problem gambling & measure prevalence
- Tools of detection & measurement reflected individualistic view of gambling problems



Conceptualization & measurement of gambling problems

- Rapid expansion of insurance coverage for psychotherapy beginning in 1970s
- Measuring problem gambling in the population grew out of government & “helping” professions’ goal to provide funding for services
- Despite growing focus on “harm” as the best measure of gambling impacts in communities in 21st century, PG detection continues to focus on individuals
- Little attention to cultural, economic & racial inequalities that influence & bias the processes of detection & measurement



Patterned inequality in PG

- PG is not randomly distributed throughout populations
- Bimodal pattern of gambling participation in many groups
- When gambling participation is statistically controlled, ethnicity & low SES (but not gender & age) continue to be significantly related to PG
- People with low SES may experience more problems at same intensity of gambling because of fewer financial resources to buffer adverse effects of losses

Comparing lower & higher income problem gamblers

Characteristics of Pathological Gamblers in the General Population

	Lower Income (n=36)	Higher Income (n=35)
	%	%
Demographics		
Male*	64	86
White**	44	77
HS graduate***	54	97
Under 30	36	43
Married	33	46
Unemployed	9	3
Borrowing		
Borrowed from relatives	61	31
Borrowed from household	47	29
Borrowed from banks/loan companies*	21	46
Cashed bad checks	18	13
Cashed stocks or bonds*	6	25
Note: * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001		



PG prevalence by ethnicity & gender

Problem Gambling Prevalence Among Past Year Players

	Lottery	Machines	Private	Bingo	Pari-mutuel
	%	%	%	%	%
White	(n=2810)	(n=1175)	(n=1468)	(n=432)	(n=344)
Male	4.1	6.2	6.0	9.7	7.7
Female	3.7	7.0	5.2	6.2	6.3
Non-White	(n=561)	(n=204)	(n=253)	(n=114)	(n=41)
Male	10.6	15.7	16.1	34.2	16.0
Female	9.8	16.2	13.0	12.5	20.0



Ethnicity & diagnostic indicators

Endorsement of NODS Items by Ethnicity

	White (n=1791) %	Black (n=273) %	Hispanic (n=220) %
Chasing**	6.6	11.7	7.3
Preoccupation***	3.8	9.9	8.2
Escape**	3.1	7.0	3.2
Lying***	2.0	6.6	0.9
Tolerance***	1.3	5.1	1.4
Bailout***	1.3	4.4	0.5
Withdrawal*	1.5	2.9	3.6
Loss of Control	1.2	2.9	1.4
Risked Relationships	1.3	2.9	1.4
Illegal Acts*	0.3	1.5	---
Note: * = p<.05, **=p<.01, ***=p<.001.			



Wealth/credit, race/class

- Since 1960s, the nature of social inequality has changed in the “post-discrimination” era
- Vigorous debate about the fundamental basis for social domination (race or class)
- In the post-civil rights era, inequalities of wealth explain many of the differences in social outcomes often attributed to race
- The upward diffusion of **wealth** is accompanied by the downward diffusion of **responsibility**



Conclusions

- **Structural** perspective focuses on changes that have resulted in the legalization, expansion & corporatization of gambling
- **Constructionist** perspective focuses on shifts in symbolic aspects of gambling that modified moral opposition to gambling
- Problem gambling is the crucial enabler of legal gambling
- As the wealth gap continues to grow, we will see legal gambling increasingly managed as a system for the extraction & upward distribution of wealth: a new mechanism of social domination



For More Information

Volberg, R. A., & Wray, M. (2007). Legal gambling and problem gambling as mechanisms of social domination? Some considerations for future research. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(1), 56-85.

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