

Addiction & the Humanities, Vol. 8(9) - By grinders, for grinders: Professional poker players' depictions of gambling

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By many accounts, the Poker Boom started during 2003 when then-amateur Chris Moneymaker won the Main Event of the World Series of Poker and the \$2.5 million prize. During the next few years, various signs pointed to steady popularity increases for poker. The number of entrants into the \$10,000-buy-in Main Event grew each year, from 839 during 2003 to 8773 during 2006. Attendance has decreased since then, but since 2008 more than 6,400 competitors have entered the Main Event each year. Also starting in 2003, several television channels began airing seasons of poker programming (The Travel Channel, World Poker Tour, 2003; Bravo, Celebrity Poker Showdown, 2003; NBC, National Heads-Up Poker Championship, 2005; GSN, High Stakes Poker, 2006). In the meantime, online poker grew from being just a concept during the mid-1990's to the global industry it is today. According to the research firm Christiansen Capital Advisors, online poker revenues were already \$82.7 million during 2001. During 2004, they were up to \$2.4 billion. This growth in revenue and action — both in live and online poker — produced a new crop of poker superstars and millionaires. Many of these players earned enough money to produce reality shows and documentaries highlighting their lifestyles and those of their peers. They shot footage of both structured gambling settings like poker games and more informal gatherings with spontaneous prop bets and challenges. Today's BASIS explores some professional players' views about gambling and problem gambling, as reflected in G4TV's *2 Months, 2 Million*.

The Show

The 2010 reality television show, *2 Months, 2 Million* followed the lives of four professional online poker players. They shared a house in Las Vegas, played and watched each other play high stakes poker, and tried collectively to make \$2 million. Some segments of the series highlighted poker, including several sessions

that ended in hundreds of thousands of dollars in gains and losses. Other segments showed the pros playing and betting on recreational sports, interacting with and making proposition bets with other players, and enjoying the city's nightlife.

Through the ten episodes, each of the players inserted gambling into various aspects of their lives. "In our world," one of them said, "Gambling on everything is basically standard." On a golf outing, they bet thousands of dollars on single strokes. After a casual table tennis game between two housemates, the loser paid the winner another \$1000 - another 4-digit bet. In addition, alcohol use appeared to be a prominent component of their daily life. In an extreme example, one of them quipped to the camera "I just lost \$30,000 today, so I started drinking."

Most of the footage of the actual poker play involved large all-in bets and pots worth tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars. At various times, the housemates lose money, borrow from each other, and then use that cash to play even more.

Signs of Pathological Gambling

Reality television is rarely reality, and this show is no exception. The producers created drama as they reduced roughly 800 hours of footage to ten 21-minute episodes. However, the four poker players arguably might have showed some tendencies and associated traits described in the DSM-IV's diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling. For example, they were preoccupied with gambling, handicapping, and planning their next sessions. On the golf course, for example, part of the fun appeared to be negotiating the odds for and estimating the probabilities of them hitting fairways and making putts. In addition, their competitive natures led them to chase both past losses and perceived potential gains. Even in the midst of demoralizing downswings and mounting losses, they maintained that with more time and more hands of poker, they could win their money back.

It is worth noting that people might classify much of the gambling on the show as social gambling or professional gambling, rather than problem gambling. Usually, social gambling takes place between friends, and the stakes usually are low enough to avoid serious financial harm for any participant. Random draws to determine which of the four would pay the dinner bill on a night out, for example, would qualify. With professional gambling, discipline is essential and vigilant examination of past games and bets is mandatory. In one episode, before a one-

hour heads-up match against a famous pro, one of them delved into his database of poker hands, taking mental notes and teasing out his opponent's patterns and tendencies. It might be problematic behavior, or it might be preparation. There simply is not evidence from the show to draw a conclusion.

Analysis

In *2 Months, 2 Million*, the character traits the cast associates with pathological gambling are a source of humor and a component of what is supposed to make the show entertaining. For the most part, during the duration of the show, the four housemates' behavior came with no serious consequences. In part, this was because of their wealth, bankrolls, and perhaps skills as poker players. It was also due to their ages (from 22 to 26) and lack of responsibilities (single, no children). In fairness, the housemates did provide tips on relieving stress, maintaining control, and staying healthy. However, these strategies were not the primary focus of the show and the main storyline easily obscured such insights. Nevertheless, to some casual viewers, the housemates' behavior might seem like harmful pathological gambling.

Casual viewers, especially those not familiar with the poker culture, might come away from the show with a diminished impression of the adverse consequences associated with problem gambling. For example, after losing over \$200,000 to one particular opponent, the housemates have an epiphany about their adversary's playing style and turn the catastrophic loss into a \$300,000 gain. For many others, especially those who play slot machines or buy lottery and scratch tickets, there is no epiphany and the upswing never comes. For many, pathological gambling is a real issue that causes both financial and emotional distress to themselves and their families. In the future, perhaps through documentaries and other media, successful poker players can outline the survival techniques they use and educate the public on how to avoid the pitfalls of problem gambling.

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