Self-development and Problem Gambling

May 22, 2017

Editor's Note: This op-ed was prepared by Dr. Harold Wynne of Wynne Resources.

For the past four decades, I have been intrigued with self-development, both as an adult educator and social scientist interested in human behaviour, addiction and problem gambling. As an adult educator, I have experienced first-hand how success in education programs leads to the personal growth and development of adult students. I have participated in graduation ceremonies for adult students who have achieved high school diplomas and witnessed the pride these people and their families have in this later-in-life accomplishment. I have witnessed the same sense of accomplishment shown by inmates at a correctional facility when they completed their GED, learned about their aboriginal heritage, built sheds and picnic tables, and fixed old trucks in an autobody program. Similarly, as a social scientist, I have been heartened to witness the growth of addiction treatment programs that have focused on promoting self-development through teaching people coping skills and techniques to avoid rumination; introducing positive activities that include learning new skills; tasking clients in treatment with exploring new community opportunities; helping people identify and build on their inherent positive attributes; and exploring collective family goals in couples therapy, to name but a few examples.

The central concept in social psychology is that of "self." Students new to the discipline are taught that the "self" emerges and is formed through the process of "socialization." In earlier days, it was thought that this process essentially ended in childhood and the "self" that emerged at this early stage was more or less formed. Of course, we now know that "socialization" is a life-long process and that the "self" continues to be shaped and molded by many forces throughout one's life. This notion was popularized in 1976 through Gail Sheehy's influential book *Passages* and more recently, through her 2011 publication of *New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time.* While Sheehy's publications are often dismissed by academics, I would argue that they serve as a reminder that socialization and self-development continue throughout life and that there are temporal "passages" that one travels through that shape the outcome that is "self."

Theoretical Perspectives

So, what has self-development got to do with problem gambling? This question may be partially addressed through a brief look at some theories that have been used to guide conceptualizing and studying problem gambling. One of the first and, arguably, most important theoretical perspectives was posited by Dewey Jacobs through his development of the *General Theory of Addictions* (GTA). Dewey was a great friend and colleague and he influenced my early thinking and research in problem gambling. I heard him say many times that the "addiction" was not the problem but, rather, was the solution. The problem was that the addict[1] was experiencing serious life problems—a bad marriage, domestic abuse, financial problems, low self-esteem. The bottle, as Dewey would say, was the addict's best friend, as it helped him cope with his problems. The GTA holds that addicts have a sense of "self" that is chronically hypo- or hyper-aroused, so the addictive substance (drugs, alcohol, gambling) is used to mitigate these highs and lows and return the "self" to a homeostatic state. Dewey's approach to treatment, and that of his acolytes, was and still is focused on treating the underlying causes of the patient's problems, of which the addiction is merely the symptom. In this vein, efforts to promote self-development as a treatment solution for problem gamblers continue to have merit.

While the GTA was an influential early attempt to explain problem gambling, other important theoretical perspectives have since emerged. Alex Blaszczynski and Lia Nower provide a very good overview of these in their chapter *Research and Measurement Issues in Gambling Studies: Etiological Models* in the book *Research and Measurement Issues in Gambling Studies*. They describe various etiological models, including psychoanalytic, psychodynamic, public health, social reward, behavioral, cognitive, neurobiological, genetic and bio-behavioural approaches to explicate problem gambling. They also present integrated models, including the GTA, biopsychosocial, and pathways perspectives. The summary conclusions they arrive at are that, "no single theory can fully account for the etiology of disorder in all problem gamblers" and "it is imperative to pursue efforts to develop an integrated conceptual model of gambling and pathological gambling that acknowledges the heterogeneity of the gambling condition." While this quest for an "integrated conceptual model" has merit, I would argue that the central constructs of "self" and "self-development" deserve far more attention by the gambling research community, as understanding the forces that shape the

"problem gambling-self" and developing concomitant "self-development treatment" methods will make a new and different contribution to theory and practice.

Developing A Research Agenda

I challenged myself to come up with some ideas for a research agenda that might contribute to our understanding of the relationship between self-development and problem gambling. Two candidate agenda items I would advocate for are [meta-analyses](#) and the third is an exploratory study and these are briefly described below.

<u>Meta-Analysis of "Self-Language" in Problem Gambling Research</u>

In the social-psychological study of "self," a distinct language has developed and this includes labels for various related concepts, constructs and terms used to describe elements of this study. The following terms have specific meanings and, taken together, they form a collage that I refer to as "self-language": self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-worth, self-image, self-identity, self-actualization, self-awareness, self-consciousness, self-evaluation, self-knowledge, self-assurance, and self-deception. And the list goes on. I am interested in knowing how many of these terms, with their attendant concepts, have been researched in problem gambling populations and what the outcomes have been. For example, levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy in problem gamblers have been frequently measured; however, self-consciousness, self-assurance and self-deception less so. Through a meta-analysis of the findings, it may be possible to construct profiles of "problem gambling selfs" that have implications for further research, treatment and prevention.

<u>Meta-Analysis of "Self-Development Practices" in Problem Gambling Treatment</u>

I am very interested in knowing the extent to which problem gambling clinicians and therapists are using self-development strategies and activities as part of their treatment protocol. While cognitive-behavioural therapy is the main treatment approach used with problem gamblers, I would argue that it would also be beneficial to help clients engage in self-development activities aimed at improving their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. As an adult educator, I know the sense of pride and accomplishment adult students take from mastering a new skill or creating something and I suspect that providing opportunities for self-

achievement in a treatment setting would be an effective approach to helping problem gamblers increase their sense of self-worth, which may in turn, moderate their problematic gambling behaviour. In any event, as a first step, we need to know the outcomes from this meta-analysis in order to plan new strategies for treatment.

Exploring "Elements of Self" in Problem Gamblers

In his book *Psychological Dimensions of the Self*, Arnold Buss organizes the discussion based on a framework of nine "elements of the "self" and these include body focus; self-esteem; identity; self-consciousness; embarrassment; shame and guilt; Boundaries I:Privacy; Boundaries II-Empathy and Altruism; and self-concepts. In my view, examining each of these "elements of the self" in problem gambling population research would be most interesting and potentially contributory to the gambling studies field. Of course, some elements, notably self-esteem and problem gambling, have been widely studied since the early work of Volberg et al. as reported in The WAGER. However, other elements, such as boundary setting to protect the "self," have never been studied in problem gambling populations. Research questions here might include: "Is a PG more likely to set boundaries to protect the 'self'?" "Under what circumstances and conditions does the PG set self-protection boundaries?" "Does boundary-setting influence PG behavior?" "Is the adjustment of boundary-setting an effective PG treatment strategy?" Considering each of these nine "elements of self", in themselves, opens up some interesting research avenues within each. Taken as a collective group, findings may show that profiles of "problem gambling selfs" may be constructed and further examined along with data from the meta-analysis as suggested above.

Concluding Comment

 The field of gambling studies has come a very long way, especially in the past two decades. Where in the 70s, 80s, and 90s there were only a few academic researchers interested in examining problem gambling, today the literature abounds with studies conducted throughout the world, in many countries and languages. In the past, problem gambling research has been the private fiefdom of psychology; however, today, leading edge contributions to problem gambling etiology, treatment and prevention are being made through neurobiology, genetics, public health, epidemiology, cultural anthropology, indigenous studies

and other disciplines. While it is natural for researchers to remain in their familiar academic silos, there is evidence that presently, some are venturing forth to explore dimensions from other disciplines, which is most welcome. In this vein, I would encourage gambling studies researchers to explore the discipline of social psychology and, in particular, the concept of self-development and formation of "self" within problem gambling populations.

–Dr. Harold Wynne

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

[1] *Editor's note: Many of the terms we use when discussing addiction are stigmatizing and promote discriminatory behavior and policies. Consider the labels "addict," "dirty," "junkie," "stoner," and "crackhead." These labels might keep people from recognizing that they deserve acceptance, support, and care. In contrast to the term "addict," the term "a person with a substance use disorder" makes clear that addiction is something that people do, not who they are. Readers interested in the push for a less stigmatizing "addiction-ary" can [learn more here](.).*

References

Blaszczynski, A. & Nower, L. (2007). Research and measurement issues in gambling studies: Etiological models. In G. Smith, D. Hodgins, R. Williams (Eds.), *Research and Measurement Issues in Gambling Studies*. Burlington, MA: Academic Press.

Bus, A. (2001). *Psychological Dimensions of the Self.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Division on Addiction (1998). *[Self-esteem among gamblers](.). The WAGER, Vol. 3*(9).

Jacobs, D. (1986). A general theory of addictions: A new theoretical model. *Journal of gambling Behavior*, 2(1), 15-31.

Sheehy, G. (1976). *Passages*. New York: EP Dutton & Co.

Sheehy, G. (2011), *New passages: Mapping your life across time.* Ballantine Books.

Smith, G., Hodgins, D. & Williams, R. (2007). *Research and Measurement Issues*

in Gambling Studies. Burlington, MA: Academic Press.

Volberg, R., Reitzes, D., Boles, J. (1997). Exploring the links between gambling, problem gambling, and self-esteem. *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 18, 321-342.