

On the Shoulders of Merton

Potentially Sobering Consequences of Problem Gambling Policy

BO J. BERNHARD
FREDERICK W. PRESTON

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Robert Merton's theoretical formulations of unintended consequences provide a useful framework for understanding the potential consequences of problem gambling policy. More generally, a sociological perspective on mental illness perspective brings a particular insight to the field of gambling studies. Based on the current understanding of problem gamblers' careers, one can speculate on a number of instances in which policies intended to help this population can actually exacerbate matters. Because of this potentiality, the field of problem gambling should both (a) engage the concept of unintended consequences in the sociological, Mertonian sense and (b) attempt to incorporate theory and research whenever possible to better understand the potential for such consequences.

Keywords: *gambling; problem gambling; unintended consequences; gambling policy; Merton; latent functions; manifest functions*

INTRODUCTION

As the contributions in this volume attest, it is clear that things go awry in social settings and that even the most conscientious planning cannot always prevent such occurrences. If the social world itself is beset with perverse and unintended consequences of our actions, the often peculiar challenges posed by gambling behavior and policy qualify as an especially illuminating illustration.

The consequences—however intended—of *gaming* (the euphemism used in policy contexts) are no longer insignificant. To say that gambling is “sweeping the nation” (wherever the “nation” may be located geographically) is perhaps understating the case. As of this writing, no less than 48 American states have legalized gambling somewhere within their borders, and a similar proportion of international locales offers some form of gambling to their playing populaces as well. What is more, the rapid (if largely unregulated and perhaps largely

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unregulatable) development of Internet gambling effectively transforms any computer in the world into a gambling device.

The modest goal of this article is to contribute a potentially useful (but sociologically familiar) theoretical tool to the relatively undeveloped theory tool chest used in gambling studies. Merton's conceptualizations of unintended consequences can bring to light the ways in which policy decisions uninformed by empirical study can and do have problematic consequences for those whom these policies directly or indirectly address. For its part, the field of gambling studies, which has relied almost exclusively on clinical and empirical observations, can benefit by adding (sociological) theory to its figurative toolbox.

ON THE COMPELLING AND ABLE SHOULDERS OF MERTON

For Robert King Merton, theoretical engagements with "social functions" comprised the core of his long and distinguished career. Initially, he refined the early functionalist treatises of Malinowski (1926), Radcliffe-Brown (1935), and Kluckhohn (1944) to a point of significantly increased clarity. Later, he tackled the growing body of criticisms of functionalist theory. To Merton, the legitimate critiques of functionalist theory resulted from a number of ambiguities inherent in articulations of the theory, and he spent a good deal of theoretical time attempting to clarify these ambiguities.

For instance, Merton (1967) found that the concept of *function* itself was used to connote a wide variety of meanings, including purpose, motive, aim, concern, design, secondary consideration, and a variety of other "muddied" thoughts (p. 78). These terms were often conflated in functionalist theory, and Merton felt that this hindered its development and application. What was more, these uncertainties often hid the potentially valuable insights of this theoretical tradition. In a memorable critique of Willard Waller's (as cited in Merton, 1967) discussion of the family, Merton quipped that a particular passage represents "an interesting medley of small islets of clarity in the midst of vast confusion" (p. 78), and indeed much of functional analysis at the time could have been similarly characterized.

To address these ambiguities, Merton (1967) developed a more nuanced theory that distinguished between subjective motives of action and objective results of those actions. Any study of function, he argued, must strive to distinguish between the reasons advanced for particular behaviors and the observed consequences of those behaviors.

The subjective disposition (reasons) may coincide with the objective consequence, but again, it may not. The two vary independently. When, however, it is said that people are motivated to engage in behavior which may give rise to (not necessarily intended) functions, there is offered escape from the troubled sea of confusion. (p. 79)

Toward this end, the clarifying element that rescues functionalism from some of its own ambiguities is the distinction between functions that are manifest (intended) and those that are latent (or unintended). Furthermore, Merton (1967) deemed it important to note that latent consequences can be functional, dysfunctional, or irrelevant (Merton termed the latter *nonfunctional*) and that these consequences can be understood at individual levels all the way up to what we now think of as global levels.

Merton's specifications did what they intended. They improved on a theoretical perspective that lacked specificity and applicability. The effects of these Mertonian distinctions are quite impressive. Indeed, as Ritzer (2000) noted, prominent sociologists such as Peter Berger have since claimed that the entire field of sociology is methodologically and theoretically inclined to embrace a "debunking motif" that tends toward the exploration of "real" effects hidden behind "stated" ones.

There is a debunking motif inherent in sociological consciousness. The sociologist will be driven time and again, by the very logic of his discipline, to debunk the social systems he is studying. . . . The roots of the debunking motif in sociology are not psychological but methodological. The sociological frame or reference, with its built-in procedure of looking for levels of reality other than those given in the official interpretations of society, carries with it a logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and the propaganda by which men cloak their actions with each other. (Berger, 1963, p. 38)

The foundations of this motif have inspired generations of sociologists to engage in theoretical and empirical work that debunks. Merton certainly served as a founding figure for this tradition as he sought to separate the stated motivations behind policy decisions from the unintended consequences that resulted. This distinction—between the subjective thinking of those making decisions and the more or less objective functions that follow—can provide a useful theoretical lens for an enhanced understanding of problem gambling policy.

PROBLEM GAMBLING POLICY

Because much of the moral disdain for the gambling act has dissipated, proponents of gaming expansion are no longer attacked on as many fronts as they once were. One debate that pro-gaming interests must still regularly engage however pertains to problem gambling and the impact that this complex phenomenon has on individuals, families, organizations, and communities.

In most relatively new gaming jurisdictions, gaming operators have been asked by policy makers to address problem gambling as a "ticket to the game," as an entry test of sorts to prove that these are responsible community enterprises. Reflecting the diversity of regions that now allow gambling, problem gambling policy has developed in an often scattered fashion, with gaming

operators in different jurisdictions encountering very different problem gambling policy demands. The field of problem gambling studies meanwhile remains a young and hence relatively undeveloped one—despite an increase in recent research devoted to the topic. As a result, government entities—very interested in gaming benefits and frustrated by the relative dearth of research on the negative impacts of gambling on individuals, families, businesses, and communities—have often implemented policy without the benefit of substantial research guideposts.

Given this environment, it was perhaps predictable that noble-intentioned but poorly supported policies emerged. In many jurisdictions, “empirical support” has been provided in the form of testimony from local clinicians who suggest that certain mechanisms in the gambling environment would help intervene on the gambling careers of problem gamblers or those who are “at risk.” There have been some notable research contributions (most prominently Blaszczynski, Sharpe, and Walker’s [2001] work, which was summarized in a research report, and Focal Research Consultants’ [2002] work on machine gambling mechanisms, conducted for the Nova Scotia Gaming Corporation), but this kind of research has not yet been published in the peer-reviewed literature or conducted on diverse gambling locations and with diverse gambling populations. In any case, the purpose of this article is to not to summarize the existing literature but to propose speculations on the potential applications of Merton’s theoretical contributions in the future.

Hence, although the motives of policy makers may appear noble, the effects of these policies could fall well outside of the parameters that they intended. In fact, when accompanied by a lack of a thorough understanding of problem gambling careers (Goffman, 1961), some of these policies could actually exacerbate a gambling problem despite debate participants’ intentions to assist this very population. In sum, it seems that problem gamblers themselves are often (if unintentionally) neglected in the policy debates designed to address their troubles.

SOCIOLOGY OF MENTAL ILLNESS AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

Although professionals and academics with psychological training have dominated the literature on mental illness studies (including that which addresses problem gambling), sociologists have begun to contribute a substantial theoretical and empirical literature to our understanding of those who engage in excessive behaviors currently categorized as mental illnesses (for overviews, see Cockerham, 2000; Gallagher, 1995; Gupta, 1993). Without disputing the utility of a sociological perspective on any number of behaviors classified as mental illnesses, it would seem that sociology can provide a particularly useful lens for

interpreting the lives of problem gamblers. This usefulness is apparent on a number of levels.

For one thing, access to gambling is a variable with substantial range; that is, “going gambling” in different communities can entail a very different act, incorporating anything from pull tabs and charitable bingo to electronic gambling machines and table games to craps and animal racing—or any combination of these games. By comparison, if one were to “go drinking” in a vast array of locales, drinkers (and hence problem drinkers) would encounter a relatively uniform access to beer, wine, and spirits.

This community range is also obvious with other macro-level variables such as community acceptance, size of the local gaming industry, and community stigmas attached to gambling behavior and businesses. Because of these factors, a community level of analysis is essential to understanding the lives of those who gamble—as well as those who gamble problematically.

It is important to note here that a community level of analysis can be obscured by the ongoing medicalization of the field of problem gambling studies. Too often, problem gambling research proceeds as if findings in diverse locales can be immediately understood as applicable in other locales. In the same way that the vital characteristics of say a heart attack or hemophilia are assumed to be similar regardless of whether the afflicted happens to be in Las Vegas or Lisbon, problem gambling research often assumes a degree of universality that does not fit the diverse cultures and gaming jurisdictions found in the world today. Hence, a mechanism that serves as an effective intervention with say Korean problem gamblers may not work with problem gamblers at a Midwestern U.S. horse track.

Another benefit of the sociological perspective is the field’s burgeoning focus on discourse, or the ways in which language frames debates and understandings of public issues, provides a useful framework for understanding problem gambling policy (see Castellani, 2000). For many years, the “training” and “expertise” of those who were allowed to define, diagnose, and prescribe treatments for excessive gamblers was moral, not psychological. These historical experts spoke from pulpits rather than podiums and contributed a definitive moral discourse on those who gambled “too much.” This historical discourse was delivered with a degree of certitude and authority similar to that of the medical-psychological discourse on the topic today.

Although medical understandings have since achieved a certain degree of hegemony over moral ones, it is not as if these former understandings have been completely displaced. In fact, yesterday’s moral understandings continue to haunt the lives of excessive gamblers today, as “problem gamblers” encounter social receptions that remain largely moral in tone. As a result, the “problems” that the problem gambler encounters come from places large as well as small, historical as well as current—and our analyses of this population should ideally reflect these complexities.

Today, medical, psychological, and government/policy experts represent the most powerful contributors to discourses on problem gambling, but the macro winds that shape these discourses remain potent. It is our belief then that a “sociology of mental illness” can and should contribute a valuable theoretical and empirical tool to our understanding of problem gambling as a mental illness and as a community problem.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF PROBLEM GAMBLING POLICY

In response to demands that operators offer a safer locale to those who choose to participate in gambling activities, a number of specific mechanisms have been suggested as potential “safety devices” in and around gambling spaces. Problematically however, very few of these mechanisms have been subjected to rigorous empirical study. In this section, we will embrace a Mertonian spirit by examining some policies that have been suggested and/or implemented to address problem gambling and discuss how they may actually exacerbate gambling problems (a decidedly unintended consequence—and potentially dysfunctional from the perspective of the problem gambler).

WON-LOST DISPLAYS

Some have suggested that a video screen that displays the amount a gambler has lost or won—rather than the number of “credits” they have available to them—would help gamblers better understand the real monetary impact of their gambling behaviors. This thinking, although well intentioned, is fundamentally flawed if it leads to some of the very behaviors that clinicians encourage problem gamblers to avoid.

To illustrate, many problem gamblers report that when they contemplate the amount of money they have lost in a given episode, they seek to win back those losses by wagering more money. This process is known as *chasing* behavior, which according to the most recent literature is diagnostic of a gambling problem (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Some have even suggested that the chase represents the central phenomenon for most problem gambling careers (Lesieur, 1984). At the very least, the chase differentiates problem gamblers from problem drinkers, who at least understand that more drinking is not the only thing that will rescue them from their troubles. Whatever the case, it seems clear that the on-screen win/loss display may actually tip problem gamblers into some of the very behaviors that this policy was designed to avoid. On the shoulders of Merton then, the motives of the policy makers appear noble, but the consequences of these decisions are unintended and potentially most regrettable.

SLOWING REEL SPEED

Another oft-suggested mechanism involves slowing down the rate of play of machines. This is achieved by programming reels on gambling machines to spin slower than the normal rates of speed. The subjective thinking supporting this mechanism is practical. Gamblers playing these machines would not be able to play as rapidly or as often, hence rendering their gambling less destructive.

Once more, this idea is one in which policy makers' hearts may be in the right place, but given what is commonly observed among problem gambling populations, the wisdom of such a policy must be questioned. For one thing, this is one mechanism that has actually been subjected to empirical research, and the early results have a decidedly Mertonian flavor. Blaszczynski et al. (2001) found that problem gamblers actually played longer when this mechanism was implemented. Hence, the thinking that slower games will lead to less destructive gambling can lead to an unintended function of more (and presumably more destructive) gambling among those who gamble too much.

MANDATORY CLOSING PERIODS

Another suggestion has involved the closing down of casinos and other gambling locales for a few hours each day rather than allowing them to operate for 24 hours. The thinking behind this approach is that this policy will force an interruption that will perhaps provide clarity (or merely some time off) for the gambler.

One potentially adverse and unintended consequence of this policy is that problem gamblers who are aware that closing time is fast approaching might well gamble in a more frenzied fashion in the minutes preceding the hour that the property closes. These kinds of binge gambling periods are reminiscent of binge drinking behaviors prior to a bar's final call. In this instance, once more it seems that a well-intentioned policy might well encourage some of the very destructive behavior that it generally attempts to discourage.

LIGHTING AND ERGONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

Some policy makers, buoyed by popular mythologies suggesting that casinos are generally poorly lit facilities, have decided that casinos need to be well lit to provide a healthier setting for the gambling act. These considerations have also informed a movement toward more ergonomically correct casino settings. As a result, the thinking goes, the casino would no longer be the claustrophobic or timeless locale that it once was and gamblers everywhere would benefit from the change.

Unfortunately, one ironic consequence of this policy may well be that gamblers of all stripes—including those who gamble beyond their means—would suddenly be able to gamble longer than they did before. Unmolested by the

carpal pangs of an uncomfortable setting, problem gamblers could settle in for long hours upon hours of play—a function that those wishing to see a kinder, gentler, safer gambling location would presumably attempt to avoid.

RIVERBOAT “TRIPS”

One of the most curious developments of gaming policy in Midwestern and Southern United States settings is the insistence that all gambling take place on the high seas—or at very least on a river of some sort. This act “takes gambling away” in a geographic sense, allowing it to proceed in a manner that presumably does not disturb nearby communities and neighborhoods (hence “exporting” social costs to some degree).

The problem with this thinking is that those who gamble too much might well find themselves unable to escape a ship that is forced to sail along for a few hours at a time. If problem gamblers wish to physically remove themselves from gambling environments, they will not be able to do so. Trapped in an area filled with triggers that 12-step programs encourage them to avoid, it is easy to see how this might lead to a regrettable and unintended state.

SELF-EXCLUSION POLICIES

Increasingly, a number of gaming companies and gaming jurisdictions have embraced self-exclusion policies that allow problem gamblers to self-ban from targeted promotions and/or from the gambling ground itself. The thinking informing this kind of ban is clear. Those with gambling problems will have an opportunity to erect a barrier between them and their gambling.

This approach might in fact have the unintended consequence of subtly encouraging these individuals to place blame elsewhere. In treatment settings employing a 12-step approach, newly abstinent problem gamblers are encouraged to focus introspectively on their own contributions to their destructive behavior—leaving that which is outside of their control alone for the time being. Treatment professionals attempting to convince problem gamblers to accept personal responsibility for their actions can hence be frustrated by a mechanism that conceivably allows them to resist this approach.

More generally, it could well be that attempts to “get at” the problem gambler when they are in the midst of intensive gambling activity are altogether misguided. According to the literature, “escape” problem gamblers often describe a dissociative state, or a sensation of being inaccessible or “in the zone” when they are out gambling (see Jacobs, 1987). These descriptions might well frustrate those who attempt to access the potentially inaccessible through on-screen problem gambling intervention mechanisms. If it is true that problem gamblers suffer from substantial and irrational cognitive distortions during their gambling

activities, it follows that this is not the most opportune time to intervene upon them by introducing rational mechanisms.

It should be noted that these problem gambling policies are often articulated as an attempt to reach those who are “at risk” for developing problems, recognizing that those who are entrenched in a full-blown addiction may be unreachable. Although this thinking at least overcomes the naïve belief that relatively straightforward mechanisms might somehow overwhelm a complex urge to gamble (an urge that problem gamblers themselves have often engaged in substantial efforts to counter), it remains problematic. After all, if a given mechanism helped intervene upon an at-risk gambler but in doing so created an exacerbation effect for those with the most severe problems, this would appear to represent an excessive price to pay.

One final unintended consequence pertains to the viability and sustainability of gambling businesses. It could be that some of these mechanisms could so frustrate the majority of “normal” gamblers that they decide to quit playing entirely, leading potentially to an unintended and damaging effect on gaming locales’ abilities to stay in business. Alternatively, establishing stringent problem gambling policies in one jurisdiction could have the unintended consequence of chasing gamblers into nearby jurisdictions to gamble (e.g., Iowa’s problem gambling policies sent local gamblers to neighboring Illinois). Because we are now in an era in which many governmental entities are very much reliant on gambling revenues, these policies could have far-reaching unintended consequences.

And the list of latent potentialities goes on.

CONCLUDING SPECULATIONS

Merton’s distinctions have inspired countless sociologists to contemplate the potential applications of the theoretical potential of functionalism. In our instance, we believe the following questions are central to any attempt to use Mertonian concepts to illuminate problem gambling studies:

1. To what extent are we capable of anticipating negative consequences? More specifically, how much can we depend on science, medicine, or intuition to anticipate outcomes of policy?
2. To what extent are the aggregate consequences of intended acts either functional or dysfunctional? As Ritzer (2000) noted, an accurate calculation of these aggregate consequences is practically impossible; Merton’s contribution however was that he introduced a tool that helps us frame this debate.
3. From whose perspective are those judgments made? Here is another area where Merton’s discussions of intended and unintended consequences provide illumination. It may well be that on many policy issues, there are both real and perceived differences in the perspectives of those with various interests in given public policy. That is, the key question may be “Functional for whom?” We must be

cognizant of these interests—and their influence on points of view for any given analysis.

4. How is the *system* defined? Put another way, which system? This point is significantly related to the preceding one. Is the system's function to ameliorate gambling problems? Or is the system a more classically capitalistic one that seeks to maximize profit for an industry? How are these (and other) systems interrelated?

In the field of gambling studies, some might reasonably contend that problem gambling itself represents an unintended consequence of allowing gambling to flourish in the first place. According to this reasoning, gambling is legalized to promote economic development, tourism, and job development, and lo and behold, problem gamblers emerged as an unanticipated consequence. Although this explanation is no longer a valid one, this was certainly the case in Nevada, where the 1931 legalization legislation long predated current understandings of problem gambling. Not coincidentally perhaps, Nevada has been slower to adopt problem gambling policies at the government level.

Whatever the case, the examples discussed in this article illustrate that the potential for unintended consequences lurks whenever policy makers attempt to develop problem gambling policies. Of course, none of this is to say that finding mechanisms that do work is impossible or even that the mechanisms mentioned have little value simply because they may be associated with dysfunctional consequences. Nor do we wish to suggest that the implementation of these sorts of mechanisms should not be pursued; on the contrary, we hope that this discussion helps frame their development in a more appropriate fashion.

We do believe however that because of the potential for exacerbation, any safety devices that are implemented need to be informed, ideally by carefully crafted theory and research. As is the case when contemplating the safety of any product, a key question revolves around our collective considerations of how much harm we are willing to tolerate and what price we are willing to pay for safety.

As a final consideration, it is important to note that the scientific research process, despite the optimism of some of its practitioners, does not necessarily ensure the disappearance of either perverse effects or unintended consequences. Nor, as Merton (himself a noted scholar of science in society) would readily point out, does it lead to a necessarily progressive state. In the relatively new field of gambling studies, scientific research is generally hailed as an objective and productive methodology; more important, it promises to deliver the entire field to a more productive and responsible state. These are certainly praiseworthy goals—and understandable in a young field struggling to achieve respectability. But if we have learned anything from the preceding discussion, we might wish to reserve the right to question whether (or when) the stated motivations of science are at odds with the consequences of a science-informed agenda. These considerations are important in all policy fields, but the field of gambling studies, in which powerful government and private entities have a great deal invested in the financial windfalls of gambling, we would be well advised to keep a Mertonian model in mind.

To embrace a line of thinking borrowed from Churchill then, we might suggest that research provides the worst possible approach to gambling studies—with the notable exception of every other approach that has been conceived to address it. We should proceed “armed with research,” but in doing so, we should be cognizant that we are so armed—and hence positioned to inflict unintentional damage.

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BO J. BERNHARD received his B.A. from Harvard and his Ph.D. from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), where he is an assistant professor of sociology and hotel administration. He has been instrumental in designing public policy in Canada, Australia, Korea, Russia, and many parts of the United States.

FREDERICK W. PRESTON, Ph.D., is a professor of sociology at UNLV. He is also the director of research at the Problem Gambling Center (PGC) in Las Vegas. His research interests include deviance, gambling-related issues, addictions, sport and society, men's issues, and the application of social theory. He coached the UNLV rodeo team to the national championship in 1999.