Gambling, Deprivation and Class: Reflections from a UK Case Study

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Click here to listen to Dr. Emma Casey discussing this research on the BBC Programme *Thinking Allowed.*

In 2013 the British Conservative Member of Parliament John Redwood, denounced gambling as an unappealing affliction of the idle, feckless and work-shy poor remarking that:

> Poor people believe there's one shot to get rich. They put getting rich down to luck and think they can take a gamble. They also have time on their hands. My voters are too busy working hard to earn a reasonable income.

Redwood's remarks tap into a long history of social attitudes towards gambling among lower income and working-class people where critiques of gambling are often tied to wider judgements of the everyday spending and consumption practices of working-class and lower income people. In 1923 the British Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald described gambling as a 'disease which spreads downwards to the industrious poor from the idle rich', and famously, the Conservative British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was reluctant to endorse a UK National Lottery under her leadership. Gambling, after all, was counter to Thatcher's Methodist principles of thrift and industriousness and also to the ideals of aspiration and entrepreneurship that became pillars of her ideological political stance. Commentators across the political spectrum have condemned the exploitation of the poor perceived to be intrinsic to the popular appeal of gambling. Following the contentious launch of the UK National Lottery in 1994, the social realist playwright Alan Bleasdale described National Lottery players as 'sad, lonely and desperate'.

Recent research findings in the UK and beyond have demonstrated a clear link between gambling and income inequalities, showing that those on lower incomes are more likely to be 'problem' or 'at risk' gamblers than higher income groups, spending a higher percentage of their income when they gamble (Orford et al., 2010; Freund and Morris, 2006). Tu et al. (2014) found a direct correlation between socio-economic deprivation and gambling related harms in advanced capitalist economies. Similarly, Walker et al. (2012) found that gambling-related harm is statistically more likely for those experiencing social deprivation. The British journalist Helen Pidd recently described gambling as 'an industry that feasts on the poor and vulnerable' (2017), while Tom Watson, erstwhile Deputy Leader of the UK Labour Party, used part of his 2017 conference speech to make direct links between gambling and poverty. Arguing

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that 'some gambling firms, driven by greed, are deliberately targeting our poorest communities', Watson's speech echoed wider concerns emerging in current gambling research that individual decisions around gambling are always bound to social inequalities, context and structure. Other research has reinforced the notion of gambling, particularly on lotteries as a 'voluntary tax' that is disproportionately funded by lower income gamblers. Worthington (2001) for example, notes the 'economic burden or incidence' of implicit gambling taxes, while other research notes that lower income groups contribute more to state revenue via lottery sales than higher income groups (Beckert and Lutter, 2013). Thus, many commentators have described gambling and state-run lotteries as a 'tax on the poor' (Volberg and Wray, 2007) with the British sociologist Gerda Reith describing the UK National Lottery as a 'particularly regressive form of taxation, with those on the lowest incomes paying far more than their wealthier neighbours' (1999, p. 102).

Throughout my academic career, I have sought answers to the broad question; 'why do people choose to spend their scarce resources on gambling games when they receive so little in return?'. In answering this question, my research has explored the meanings and experiences of gambling as it is situated within wider social, economic and cultural contexts, moving away from a sole focus on individual responsibility. In other words, I look to address the emphasis in gambling research that has tended to focus on the gambler as pathological, deviant and other by offering a deeper focus on the ordinary, everyday, 'taken-for-granted' forms of gambling that are often overlooked in gambling research. The social theorist Patricia Hill Collins calls this the difference between 'seeing' and 'knowing' (1997). By complementing existing accounts that have recorded the practices and processes of gambling with rich, qualitative detail of the meanings and experiences of gambling, exploring for example, how gambling experience might be connected to feelings, emotions, personal biographies and experiences of class, race and gender, we can offer new insights into what motivates people to gamble.

In order to develop accounts of the subjective meanings underpinning gambling practices and processes, I collaborated with the British Mass Observation Archive to establish a major new Directive entitled *Gambling and Households* that was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Mass Observation was established in the UK in 1937 by a group of literary intellectuals and anthropologists with the intention of bringing the everyday lives of the 'masses' into the public domain, and to record the subjective detail of social life that was not easily reduced to statistics. Interestingly, I was not the first researcher to use Mass Observation to elicit data about the everyday study of gambling. In 1947, the National Anti-Gambling League (NAGL) commissioned Mass Observation to conduct a qualitative study on the topic of everyday gambling; indeed, the opening chapter to Rowntree and Lavers' classic study of poverty in York was entitled 'Mass Gambling' but revealingly included no reference to the 1947 data. In the course of my research, I uncovered correspondence between Rowntree (who had formed and financed NAGL) and Tom Harrisson at Mass Observation revealing that Rowntree and Lavers had found the data too detailed, messy and lacking in 'objective argument' (Casey, 2014). For me, this made the Mass Observation methodological approach even more appealing, offering a route towards further exploring the connections between gambling practice and the subjective experiences of class. I received 214 detailed written responses and a sub-sample of 24 was chosen. I selected accounts which most directly addressed the aims of the research particularly around gambling and shifting class positions over time, and also those that provided detailed autobiographical accounts.

One of the key themes to emerge from the research was childhood experiences of gambling with the Observers devoting a good deal of their time to writing about this. Some of these experiences were

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nostalgic, sensory, even humorous, with, for example, some Observers talking fondly about memories of trips to the seaside, of 'my father taking a few coins out of his purse and showing me how the (gambling) machine worked'; of going with a grandfather to visit 'Uncle Len' which was a euphemism for the betting shop; and of 'Charlie our milkman taking bets on horses for us'. In some ways, gambling memories offered a route to thinking about the past and recalling family relations and activities of long ago. Frequently though, Observers recalled difficult and traumatic experiences of gambling that were regularly connected to experiences of growing up poor. It is important to note that the majority of Mass Observers today tend to be middle class and to fall into 'white collar' categories of occupation, but that many were not middle class from birth – rather they had experienced upward social mobility. The Observers often consciously distanced themselves from those early childhood memories which they identified with family poverty and unhappiness. One Observer for example, directly distinguishes his own measured approach to gambling today from the reckless spending of his father; 'I have never gambled if I haven't got the money to waste; this did not apply to my father; he'd bet his last penny as he didn't think he'd lose'.

These stories of upward trajectories of class acted as 'parables of mobility', mirroring wider discourses and stories of social mobility which are interwoven into the British popular cultural imagination. In his book *The Moral Significance of Class*, the British sociologist Andrew Sayer describes these discourses as 'heroic narratives' of 'bootstrapping' ('pulling yourself up by your bootstraps'). This also taps into recent studies such as the cultural theorist Jo Littler's account of the popularization of the meritocracy myth or the popular 'rage to riches' fable (2017). The difficult origins of the Observers are thus presented as a shedding or a distancing of an old self from which 'I have escaped'. These classed trajectories and illuminations of humble beginnings were a very self-conscious expression of upward social mobility and helped to illustrate 'how far I have come'. For example, 'My father did the football pools every week during the 1960s … I think my dad may have had a system for completing his coupon probably based on birthdays and house numbers (because) he could not read or write but he could check his coupon'.

The Observers' accounts represented an attempt to distinguish themselves from the popular representations of the addicted, pathological and reckless gambler, but moreover, they represented a struggle over *taste* and *value* and an insistence that although they gambled regularly, they would not drift into any 'undesirable' selfhoods that were associated with the 'irresponsible' gambler. These findings echo wider sociological research examining the complex subjectivities of class. In particular, they chime with the work of the French cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu who points to class as a dynamic rather than a 'fixed' and homogenous category and advocates analyses that examine how class is lived, produced, reproduced and struggled over. For Bourdieu (1984), via a process of 'distinction', the 'right' to a middle-class identity is tightened via the appropriation of expressions of disgust, judgement and disapproval of the everyday cultural practices of those in other classes. The Observers echoed this recognition of the value judgements of others, particularly of those who are deemed to be 'culturally lacking' and who might be seen to engage in 'flashy' or 'conspicuous' consumption often synonymous with the 'jet-set' lottery winner stereotype. For example, one Observer describes her disgust at a relative who refuses to 'cover up' the gambling that is the source of her wealth; 'a young man whose family have made their money from gambling: in an amusement arcade in a seaside resort … *its perfectly clear where the money has come from.* Their arcade is stuffed with fruit machines and other tacky paraphernalia … *Talk about getting your money for nothing*' (italics mine).

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Other research offers support to these findings, for example Larsson's (2011) study of how working-class lottery winners in Sweden adopted strategies to 'tame' and 'domesticate' their winnings, striving to ensure that their sudden economic wealth didn't disrupt or change their identities and that they were able to 'stay the same' culturally. Thus, Observers were careful to resist what they saw as 'ostentatious' displays of wealth. One Observer describes a daydream of winning the National Lottery where he would seize the opportunity to refuse the identity of the 'flashy' and crass conspicuously consuming fabled lottery winner:

> If we did win a large sum of money on the lottery, what I would love to do is wait until all the press was at my door. A large bottle of champagne would be produced. They would ask us to shake the bottle and squirt it round so they could take the normal boring photographs. I would politely accept the bottle with thanks explaining that we would drink it later.

Rapid research findings following the recent COVID-19 pandemic and 'lockdown' in the UK have demonstrated a disproportionate impact on lower-income groups (ONS, 2021) who have often borne the brunt of the economic and health consequences of the pandemic. Although overall gambling participation has decreased since the beginning of the UK 'lockdown' in March 2020, in the UK we have also witnessed significant changes in the ways in which people gamble including an increase in online gambling. With the subsequent removal of opportunities to gamble socially, wide speculation of a global economic recession, combined with the increased vulnerabilities among lower income groups to gambling related harms, including debt and mental health issues, the current social situation in the UK is a perfect storm of increased risk of gambling related harms and problem gambling among lower income gamblers (see also van Schalkwyk et al., 2020). It is therefore, more important than ever, that social scientists seek to examine the experiences and consequences of gambling among lower-income groups, and that in doing so, these understandings are underpinned by accounts of the cultural as well as the economic experiences of class.

My previous work on gambling, undertaken in the UK during the beginning of an earlier period of economic downturn and austerity policies, described the impact of the looming uncertainty, anxieties and everyday stresses underpinning the everyday lives of a group of working-class, low-income women (Casey, 2008). I argued that for women, tasked with managing the wellbeing, health and care of the family on a limited and precarious budget, gambling had become engrained into weekly household spending practices and offered a small hope and daydream of security, calm and predictability. As Lady Florence Bell discovered a century before me in her study of everyday life and poverty in a manufacturing town in the north of England, 'systematic betting of women ... is in many cases ... a quite deliberate effort to add to the income' (1911, p. 354). Today, as Gerda Reith notes, in times of economic austerity, neo-liberal discourses, particularly of personal choice and the judgement and surveillance of others, become heightened (2018) and narratives of selfhood abound with vocabularies of autonomy and individual 'choice', personal pleasure and consumerism. Within such a structure, the individual is seen to be responsible for their own successes and failures. This is important for gambling scholars not only in terms of making sense of working-class gambling practice as a 'personal' and individual choice made within the context of wider socio-economic structures, but also in terms of developing gambling policy that moves beyond an over-reliance on 'individual' and 'personal' social responsibility and instead considers the wider economic, cultural and social contexts within which gambling exists.

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