

# Information technologies and gambling: A Durkheimian perspective.

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***Abstract: Gambling has a long history as a social practice, through which bonds can be created and maintained, and as a part of creative and reenacted social habits and celebrations. Problem gambling runs counter to such orientations, in breaking down relationships, and being practiced obsessively and compulsively. A Durkheimian perspective offers insights into the phenomenon of gambling, by focusing on the social basis to practice in analysing the ways in which economic, political and social conditions and changes affect society. New information technologies can be part of such conditions and changes, both generally occurring, and, those specifically concerning gambling. Durkheim viewed society as an entity in itself, such that alterations in one part of it can impact on others, and was concerned about rapid changes and their impact on society. Not unlike an individual's sickness, negative forms of excitement and morbidity that can be acute and chronic can infect the social body. This presentation will outline Durkheim's significant concepts and relate them to information technologies and gambling.***

The Internet has been publicly accessible since the mid-1990s, perhaps appropriately heralded by the well-established 'old media' publication *Time*, in its July 1994 cover story 'The strange new world of the Internet'. The prefix 'www.' became of great interest, and the growth of people getting access to the Internet in the following years was a phenomenon in itself. Whilst in July of 1995 there were 6.6 million computers connected, by 1997 19.6 million were connected (MERIT statistical data 1997, as cited in Ryan, 2010). To make a brief comparison, as of June 30, 2012 one estimation for the world total for Internet use was 2,405,518,376 (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2001-2014). Cisco systems have released the 'Internet of everything' (IoE) connections counter – a real time counter of the 'people, processes, data and things connected to the Internet'. An approximate count in a point in a day leading up to this presentation was 895 million connections (Cisco, 2013). Furthermore, it is expected that 6 billion Internet capable computer, tablet, and cell phone devices will be produced in 2014 (IHS, 2014). There is no doubting that the Internet is a 'total social phenonen[a]' (Mauss, 1950/1966, p. 76).

Gambling on the Internet is on the rise and has been of great interest in the media. On week days The Problem Gambling Foundation of New Zealand distributes an email message containing summaries of media pieces available nationally and internationally on the Internet and provides links to the published items. As an indication of the interest in Internet gambling, a count of approximately 40 was made of the number of stories distributed over the period of 21 November to 20 December, 2013 concerned with the topic (Problem Gambling Foundation of New Zealand, 2013). Whilst unscientific, the counts are indicative of media attention to Internet gambling.

But the media interest is not simply speculative or news-making activity on the part of journalists or agencies, as Internet gambling is a socially growing phenomenon. Of 849 Internet gamblers studied in Australia, 54.9% had first taken up the practice since 2009. They were more likely to be male, young people, gamble in multiple activities, have domestic Internet access, and spend more money on gambling (Gainsbury et al., 2013).

Where mental health challenges are concerned the issue of Internet gambling is where two impulse control matters meet. Firstly there is the matter of what the American Psychological Association in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5* (DSM-5) has called 'gambling disorder' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The second matter concerns excessive use of the Internet. Section III of the DSM-5 has called this behaviour 'Internet gaming disorder' – which is not formally accepted into the DSM-V, due the requirement for further research on the disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), but which by inclusion in the DSM-5, even in the unendorsed form indicates that the matter is one that is recognised.

When the two phenomena are combined there is the potential for a harmful tendency to quite serious problems from Internet gambling. The matter of children and young people's online activity is a significant issue in terms of preparation, sometimes colloquially called 'grooming' for Internet gambling. Alongside this issue of online gaming being a 'gateway' activity to gambling-like activities, there has been concern over some Internet gambling sites offering consumers virtual money to play with. Such free-to-play games avoid restrictions on age. As there is no money involved, it is claimed there is no harm that results (Bloom, 2014). The South Australian state government has been considering making it illegal for young people under the age of 15 years to get access to software available online that operates in gaming machine-like or card machine-like ways (Government of South Australia, n.d.).

There is a generation of young people who have grown up with the Internet as a part of their milieu and it has the power to cause problems to some people. In 2004 Johansson and Gøtestam studying in Norway found that by using Young's Diagnostic Questionnaire (Young, 1998, as cited in Johansson & Gøtestam, 2004) that of 3,237 young people aged 12-18 years 10.6% could be categorised as addicted. There has also been some inconclusive research into the topical online activity of social networking site (SNS) addiction by young people. Young people who may have a tendency to SNS addiction are those who feature: seeking a sense of belonging; spending long periods of time on SNSs; having low conscientiousness and high extroversion; and; excessive daily use to the point of insomnia and anxiety (Pelling & White, 2010; Wilson, Fornasier & White, 2010; Karaikos, Tzavellas, Balta & Paparrigopoulos, 2010, as cited in Kuss & Griffiths, 2011).

There is nothing historically new about gambling in many cultures, although Binde (2005, see Figure 1) has pointed out that gambling has not been a cultural or historical universal, claiming that prior to the colonial era, defined as beginning sometime after 1500 AD, there was some gambling in northern most parts of North America, Eastern Europe and North East Africa. Most of Central America, and southern America apart from some most westerly areas, Southern Africa, New Guinea and all of Australia and New Zealand, apart from dispersed practice in northeast Australia were free of gambling. Where gambling did exist in precolonial times and as it has emerged subsequently, a range of different materials have been wagered. However, Binde endorsed Pryor's (1976, as cited in Binde, 2005) view that in societies where money is used as an agreed value, gambling is more concentrated.

Internet gambling can be studied sociologically – where rather than looking for disordered individuals we can view disordered individuals as products of disordered society and diagnose society, just as mental health practitioners seek to diagnose individuals' mental states. Society can be studied as having features that create sickness in its members. A Durkheimian perspective is one way to undertake that diagnosis through adopting the orientation that society is not simply made up of individuals and representations in the consciousness of individuals. Society is made of collective representations and collective consciousness, and "... the states of the collective consciousness are of a different nature from the states of the individual consciousness; they are representations of another kind." (Durkheim, 1895/1982, p. 40). When representations of a social nature circulate thoroughly through society, they crystallise as facts – social facts, and for Durkheim "[t]he first and most basic rule is to *consider social facts as things*." (Durkheim, 1895/1982, p. 60, emphasis in original). Social facts have the power of constraint – people are forced to 'conform to them' (Durkheim, 1895/1984, p. 45).

But social facts and their force are not always in sync with the society itself. Society can be affected by negative influences, resulting in the modern maladies of egoism and anomie, each of which Durkheim referred to as: "... the disease of the infinite. But the disease does not assume the same form in both cases. In one, reflective intelligence is affected and immoderately overnourished; in the other, emotion is over-excited and freed from all restraint. In one, thought by dint of falling back upon itself, has no object left; in the other, passion, no longer recognizing bound, has no goal left. The former is lost in the infinity of dreams, the second in the infinity of desires." (Durkheim, 1897/1951, p. 287).

Anomie was of great concern to Durkheim, who saw it as affecting various spheres of society (particularly through economic anomie, political anomie, and intellectual anomie). Economic anomie will be the focus of this presentation.

Durkheim adopted the concept of *homo duplex* - the view that we have a two-poled human nature: "Man is double because two worlds meet in him: that of non - intelligent and amoral matter, on the one hand, and that of ideas, the spirit, and the good, on the other. Because these two worlds are naturally opposed, they struggle within us; and because we are part of both, we are necessarily in conflict with ourselves" (Durkheim 1914/1973, p. 157).

Functionalist sociology has often viewed gambling as being concerned with reinforcing the communal spirit (Devereux, 1949; Light, 1977; Newman, 1968 as cited in Bernhard, Futrell & Harper, 2009) and Durkheim has often been labelled as a functionalist arguing for integration, but both of these received views can be critiqued.

There is no doubt that gambling can be part of social bonding, but Putnam in *Bowling alone*, argued that amongst other things, mechanisation has led to the erosion of gambling as part of social bonds and diminishing face-to-face interactions, for instance in the of playing cards, in favour of online game playing (Putnam, 2000, as cited in Bernhard, Futrell & Harper, 2009, p. 621). Durkheim's functionalism and support for social integration has often been overstated. Mestrovic and Glassner (1983) argued that whilst Durkheim believed that modern societies feature interdependence of members and that maintaining a system of relationships is central to stable social change, social grouping can become too extreme as well, that Durkheim postulated that too much integration of people can become harmful, and it is one of the causes of suicide in traditional societies (Durkheim 1897/1951, p. 217 as cited in Mestrovic & Glassner, 1983).

In developed nations today it is too little integration that is more often the case, leading to what Durkheim called egoism – the infinity of dreams. Excessive individualism means the gambling group, even when it is formed by comrades is diminished, comprised of people affected by their increasingly atomised society. It can be asserted that this is moreso the case where Internet gambling is concerned. A quote from Durkheim highlights the nature of egoism and has relevance for considering addictions and problem gambling.

"The more weakened the groups to which he belongs, the less he depends on them, the more he consequently depends only on himself and recognizes no other rules of conduct other than what are founded on his private interests" (Durkheim, 1897/1968, p. 209).

Durkheim is perhaps best known for his concept of anomie and in the Anglo-Saxon world the received view is that linguistically and etymologically, the term *dereglement* denotes deregulation and normlessness/lawlessness. This view has been critiqued by looking at what the term denotes in French – the language that Durkheim wrote in. The *Little* (1863/1963, as cited in Mestrovic & Brown, 1983), the French dictionary comparable to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, defines *deregle*, firstly, as no longer regular, secondly as an intestinal disorder (which Mestrovic and Brown saw as unrelated to anomie), thirdly as corrupt, 'dissolute conduct', and fourthly, as a 'violation against the poetic rules'. Mestrovic and Brown believed that these meanings of *deregle* denote the concept of derangement. Using that translation of *dereglement* a famous quote by Durkheim which criticised the lauding of infinite desires and economics has a different meaning than normlessness or deregulation with regard to suicide:

"The passion for infinity is commonly presented as a mark of moral distinction, even though it cannot so appear except in deranged consciences which establish as a rule the derangement from which they suffer. Since this disorder is at its apex in the economic world, it has most victims there" (Durkheim, 1897/1983, p. 283, as cited, in translating, in Mestrovic & Brown, 1983, p. 86).

Durkheim was concerned about excessively liberal economics leading to an unleashing of the lower pole of *homo duplex*. What Durkheim referred to as 'economic anomie' was the result of economics being at the fore of human life.

"The functions of this order to-day absorb the energies of the greater part of the nation. The lives of a host of individuals are passed in the industrial and commercial sphere. Hence it follows that, as those in his *milieu* have only a faint impress of morality, the greater part of their existence is passed divorced of any moral influence. How could such a state of affairs fail to be a source of demoralization? ... Let us see, then, how the unleashing of economic interests has been accompanied by a debasing of public morality" (Durkheim, 1950/1957, p. 12).

What has occurred in the last three decades has been the dominance of a form of economics and economics itself, seen as the centre of society. From a Durkheimian perspective this represents a chronic state of anomie. Neoliberalism is embedded. Neoliberalism goes by a range of names, such as neo-classical economics, laissez-faire economics, free market economics, economic rationalism, or, with regard to namesakes of various historically political figures advocating the approach, such as Reaganomics, Thatcheromics, or in New Zealand, Rogernomics. Neoliberalism claims it is human nature to maximise realising individual preferences through choice and that the market is the source of understanding society, and for organising society. If people are allowed to choose and the market is allowed to run free with as few government restrictions as possible, individual preferences can be met and goods can be distributed to society in the most fair and equitable way (Buchanan, 1975).

Whilst, as Aalbers (2013) put it neoliberalism as an ideology has been questioned following the 'Great Recession' 2007-2009, and some very Keynesian economic theory has been drawn on in terms of governments intervening in the business and financial sectors, it is not intervention to encourage investment, it encourages deleveraging. Other seemingly Keynesian activity such as increased government debt and practicing 'fiscal easing' by printing money and selling government bonds does not extend to investment in public services or labour. In practice neoliberalism continues as governments undertake privatisation and regulation in ways that favour capital, and business profit is pitched as an aim of society (Harvey, 2005; Crouch, 2011, as cited in Aalbers, 2013). Some go further and allege that neoliberal ideology is actually still very powerful. This is the claim of Hall and O'Shea (2013) who argue that neoliberal ideas are presented as natural and common-sense, as part of the battle of ideas (Gramsci, 1971, as cited in Hall & O'Shea, 2013). But Gramscian neo-Marxist theory is not the only way to make sense of the enduring influence of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism can be seen as a chronic form of economic anomie. The ideas of neoliberalism draw on some significant collective representations. People want to get 'value for money', be empowered to choose, and able to express preferences in a market that provides choice. Privatisation, choice and markets do these things. But in the absence of clear restrictions on the three, desires can become excessive, as if the market can really solve society's problems. In such circumstances, society can tend towards the infinite, derangement and self-destruction, in a word – anomie. Furthermore, neoliberal practice and representations are adopted by leading international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Whilst the perilous state the world was thrust into by the Great Recession might be ameliorated or overcome in time, the economic anomie of neoliberalism has been globalised.

The global spread of gambling is a good example of the failure of the millennial optimism in globalisation, in most of its forms. Internet gambling might be the example *par excellence*. Rather than cultural or political globalisation ascending, neoliberalism has triumphed through economic globalisation, subjecting culture and politics to the power of the market and capital. Luke (2010) used the term 'casinopolitization' to refer to the way in which a few gambling business owners have transformed cities like Las Vegas and Macau into places where culture is shipped to different political environments for profit, not unlike the way in which other play and fun activities are. Luke claimed it was akin to what Adorno (1991, as cited in Luke, 2010) called the 'culture industry' providing experiences through exporting "... Disneyland to Japan, Europe, and Hong Kong; the Guggenheim to Spain, Romania, and Abu Dhabi; or Vegas to Atlantic City, Sun City, and Macau" (Luke 2010, p. 404).

Luke's analysis is reminiscent of that of sociologist Stjepan Mestrovic, who offers a perspective partly drawing on Durkheim, called 'postemotionalism' (1997) – where 'post' denotes 'against'. This is very relevant to Internet gambling. Mestrovic has argued that contemporary society has reached a point where life has, amongst other things, become so rationalised that people learn how to experience through pre-packaged cognitively filtered emotions presented for consumption by the media, corporations and education systems. Everything is a matter of spin and emotions are similarly reshaped and represented for consumption. Sentimentally people seek a 'sense' of real emotions, but cannot really experience them. Also echoing Adorno, Mestrovic propounds that an 'authenticity industry' has sprouted up. To draw on Luke's examples, consumers can go to Disneyland in Japan and consume a package of emotional experiences, as if they were in Anaheim, California and feel like they have met the real Mickey Mouse or Walt Disney. Gamblers can go to Sun City, South Africa and have emotional experiences, as if they were in Los Vegas, Nevada, U.S. Essentially Mestrovic argues that postemotional society is egoistic and anomie – over rational and inwardly dreaming, unrestrained and excessively desirous.

This concept can be applied to the Internet gambling context. Gamblers can 'jump' online, have quadraphonic amplified sound systems integrated with wide screen or projection viewing and get a 'real Vegas' experience. Being economically based – a commercial undertaking, Internet gambling products and experiences provide a good example of economic anomie on a globalised scale. Unlike more often discussed forms of economic globalisation where large sums of financial capital are moved about the globe instantaneously, where Internet gambling is concerned, transactions are more likely to concern comparatively smaller sums, but the principle is the same, as gamblers wager on various games of chance, largely unchallenged by regulatory policy.

Internet gambling is facing possible barriers to development from regulation (as well as from competition, other forms of gambling, less expendable income due to recessionary pressures, and a poorly organised market) and this might lead to decreased activity, but the Internet is also spreading into a range of jurisdictions through broadband infrastructural development (Church-Sanders, 2010, as cited in Gainsbury, 2012). This expansion opens up more markets for the internet gambling industry.

Mestrovic (1993) argued that industry tries to market products increasingly to more and more distinctive populations and their identities in particular geographical settings. That was at a point prior to the Internet being a worldwide public phenomenon. Today, identity is dispersed and multifarious. Identity is no longer a matter of place. Identity is a matter of experience. Online gambling communities are not geographically sited, they are globalised. Internet gambling products are designed and marketed to particular identities so that consumers with shared identities can participate in gambling activities from all around the world. From a Durkheimian perspective, this can be an anomic *dereglement* and egoistic experience when addiction (or dysfunction) are considered.

There may also potential further expansion of Internet gambling through increased neoliberal economics. The proposed Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal under discussion and possibly to be finalised in 2014 includes online services. Bertram and Terry (2014) have noted that most of the information referred to by senior New Zealand government politicians in support of the proposals draw on analyses that only count for the benefits of the deal, which is far reaching in its possible impact. One of Bertram and Terry's (2014) key points is that the analyses ignore the costs of the TTP, such as "... reductions in national sovereignty and regulatory autonomy that are actually central to the TTP" (p. i), and "which might create; "... significant restraints on a nation's right to self-determination and the ability to regulate locally to achieve that ..." (p. iii). It can be conjectured that one of the costs may be the erosion of the New Zealand government's ability to restrict players' access to Internet gambling from within the jurisdiction, under threat of prosecution by gambling activity providers internationally. Another possible cost could be restricted ability of government to establish its own sole provision of Internet gambling through, for instance, the New Zealand Lotteries Commission, as a foreign provider could claim that move to be anticompetitive, or even a breach of copyright. As one of the reports supporting the TPP notes the "[p]roposed provisions go well beyond the WTO Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) on copyright, patent, and data exclusivity terms and on enforcement" (Petri, Plummer & Zhai, 2012, Issue 9 in Table 2.2, p. 17 [the column heading: 'content'], as cited in Bertram & Terry, 2014, p. 14). It would seem that this globalising of economic anomie will continue to have dominion over the possibilities of cultural and political globalisation. Should agreement be reached, people of countries whose governments sign the TPP will be able to view the agreement and see what their representatives have agreed to for them – after the TTP is signed. The TTP is regulation that favours investment and capital and is part of global neoliberalism.

In conclusion, Durkheimian sociological theory has a lot to offer to the study of Internet gambling. Durkheimian concepts, here, particularly that of anomie can be applied to understand emerging and developing technologies in context. Sociologically considering Internet gambling as a social fact in a globalised economic context raises matters of societal tendencies: to excess that impact on individuals, and; government activities that promote a privatised and consumerist life. Neither of these tendencies is likely to avoid the further *dereglement* of society.

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