Book Review/Compte rendu

Lorne Tepperman, *Betting Their Lives: The Close Relations of Problem Gamblers*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2009, 346 pages $48.00 hardcover (978-0-19-543059-2)

There is no shortage of concern with the "problem gambler" in contemporary gambling studies, but the bulk of this work is dominated by psychologists, for whom the gambler appears as a carrier of cognitive distortions or a statistic of problem behaviors. In *Betting Their Lives*, Lorne Tepperman develops a sociological alternative focusing on problem gamblers' gambling activities and the effects of these activities on their relationships. What is it like to live with a problem gambler? What are the day to day concerns that family members must contend with? How do they interpret and construct gambling activities?

Tepperman wants to build a grounded theory approach to understanding (and treating) problem gamblers by examining their social networks and the influence of spouses. The actors are given a voice, and he seeks to show that sociological attention to social context can shed light on problem gambling. This emphasis on social context, including the learning about and exposure to gambling, the social networks of the gamblers, and the degrees of embeddedness they share with their spouses is the sociological contribution of *Betting Their Lives* .

The book provides accounts by the respondents of the life of problem gambling. These contrast, not only with psychological portrayals, but also with media images, advertisements, and promotions that represent gambling as fun and glamorous. Tepperman notes the "sizeable gap" between the promotional illusions and the harsh circumstances inflicted on families by gambling problems. The chapter "Gambling Beliefs of Respondents" presents some of the beliefs that ethnocultural groups hold about gambling and includes material from an earlier study. The respondents' comments also help the reader understand the lure of gambling, particularly the emotional experience. The power of the emotional states generated by gambling allows us to make sense of the ways in which knowing your gambling limit and "responsible gambling" can be an agonistic struggle for the self.

"The Downward Spiral," reports on the problems that follow from excessive gambling, including major relationship and family strain. Some of these are well known in the literature, but Tepperman wants

to add to this discussion the unique characteristics of each gambler's experience of the spiral, linking it to the particularities of their social network. Again, we hear the voices of those experiencing the descent into the gambling abyss. Chapters on "Weak Couple Embeddedness," "Inability to Promote Treatment and Change," and "Ability to Promote Treatment and Change," examine the ways in which social networks help or hinder the possibility of changing problematic gambling behaviors, or getting a spouse to seek help. We learn about successful and unsuccessful spousal strategies for dealing with problem gambling, and how embeddedness and social isolation are significant factors in increasing or inhibiting behavioural change. It emerges that problem gambling is a recalcitrant habit, producing both a downward spiral and centrifugal forces that generate couple alienation and isolation. The book concludes with some recommendations for treatment.

The book displays some research oversights. In discussing his research trajectory and an earlier study on the family's role in ethnic gambling, Tepperman discovers "two very remarkable facts about the field of gambling research": first, that "problem gambling has never been studied from a sociological perspective" and that he found "nothing that was recognizably sociological in the field of published gambling research" (p. 19). The second discovery is that there has been very little published on the relations between gamblers and their families. He points out that much of the available research concerns itself with the characteristics of individual gamblers, with little acknowledgement of social context. He is right on his second discovery, and this is a gap the book seeks to fill. But his first discovery turns out not to be one, as he overlooks sociological work on problem gambling, such as Lesieur's on the phenomenon of chasing losses and the career of the "compulsive gambler;" Rosecrance's on the social worlds of gamblers and gambling "degenerates" (today's problem gamblers), and Castellani's on the making of pathological gambling as a medical problem. He also ignores classics in the sociology of gambling, such as Goffman's rich analysis of action and character in "Where the Action Is," Zola's study of working-class horse bettors, Downes et al.'s "Gambling as a Sociological Problem," and Hayano's work on poker players. Goffman's absence is also conspicuous in the section "A Sociological Approach to Becoming," where Tepperman discusses the forerunners and developers of Symbolic Interaction and labeling theory. These omissions are a significant oversight for a book that wants to approach gambling sociologically and is, in part, about the moral careers of people who develop problem gambler identities.

That said, the book contributes to the sociology of problem gambling by drawing upon sociological work on the family and on social roles.

Tepperman offers insights for how therapy can move beyond individualized approaches, for example by considering the roles and behaviours of problem gamblers' spouses. The book concludes with a discussion of how regulation theory (stemming from Durkheimian insights) can aid in understanding the situatedness of the problem gambler in networks of regulation that influence their behaviours. Suggestions for further research and policy are also offered.

Although the research focus is on the "personal side" of problem gambling, problem gambling is presented as a "public issue" in the Introduction. The focus on the family and the therapeutic suggestions prompt comment on problem gambling as a public issue. Tepperman wants to focus on family regulation as way of dealing with the problem of problem gambling, but he also says, "to prevent problem gambling … we must address the larger environment in which gambling is structured and marketed by an aggressive global gambling industry" (pp. 9-10). The book is peppered with comments about the environment, seeing gambling in relation to social structure, the lures of gambling advertisements, and the roles of governments and the gambling industry. The problems that gambling can lead to, including the strains it produces in families, are certainly the consequence of struggles with the ubiquitous gambling environment: the gambling-friendly advertising, the depictions of "excitement," and the easy access to gambling itself. More pointedly however, in Canada provincial governments have actively and directly created the gambling environment, and have no moral problem presenting gambling illusions to the public. Moreover, governments profit greatly from the most habituated players.

Betting Their Lives can be criticized for its omissions, but is to be valued for its sociological contribution to the understanding of the difficult personal side of this public issue. The desire to provide sociological insight into problem gambling and offer treatment recommendations is commendable. At the same time however, while the problems faced by these families appear on the personal level, a bolder sociological public issues orientation would require approaching these issues, not just in relation to social structure, but more critically in relation to the ways in which government policies affect families and contribute to their "personal troubles."

Trent University Jim Cosgrave

Jim Cosgrave's research interests include examination of the state's role in the development of gambling markets in Canada. He edited *The Sociology of Risk and Gambling Reader,* which collects much of the sociological work on gambling. He has recently published *Casino State: Legalized Gambling in Canada*, co-edited with Thomas Klassen (University of Toronto Press, 2009). He is pres-

ently working on a manuscript with Patricia Cormack that examines state-culture dynamics and the implications of the state in the everyday lives of Canadians.
jimcosgrave@trentu.ca