

The Chase: Career Of The Compulsive Gambler

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The Compulsive Gambler's Spiral of Options and Involvement

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INTEREST in compulsive gambling has been chiefly restricted to psychoanalytically oriented researchers (Freud, 1961; Bergler, 1970; Halliday and Fuller, 1974). The model of anal fixated neurosis that is presented in various guises is alien to the gamblers it deals with. The gamblers I have known have been amazed at the lack of understanding of gambling and the gambling world that this model implies. However, this tends to be less true with Bergler's summary of symptoms (p. 7), which rings true to the gamblers I interviewed: (1) Gambling is a typical, chronic, and repetitive experience in his life. (2) Gambling absorbs all his other interests like a sponge. (3) The gambler is pathologically optimistic about winning and never "learns his lesson" when he loses. (4) The gambler cannot stop when he is winning. (5) No matter how great his initial caution, the true gambler eventually risks more than he can afford. (6) The gambler seeks and enjoys an enigmatic thrill which cannot be logically explained, since it is compounded of as much pain as pleasure. While the gamblers state that the pleasurable and painful aspects of gambling excite them, they concentrate on money and *getting even*; the psychoanalysts underplay the latter aspect.

Other researchers have focused on the personality factors common among compulsive gamblers (Koston, 1961; Livingston, 1974). They show that gamblers are more narcissistic and power oriented than nongamblers. Because these studies, like the bulk of personality studies, are based on personality inventories there is no way of telling whether the gamblers are power oriented and narcissistic before they become compulsive or after. A third group of researchers mentions the compulsive gambler only briefly (Scott, 1968; Bloch, 1961), in connection with studies of gambling culture. The compulsive gambler is seen as an unstudied deviant in the social world of gambling.

The material presented in this report is not intended as an explanation of compulsive gambling. I do not pretend to be refuting the psychoanalytic or the personality theorists. Rather, I describe the changes that take place in the career of the person turned compulsive gambler. Some of what is described here adds to the already existing knowledge of the compulsion.

In many barrooms, poolrooms, bowling alleys, golf courses, and race tracks there are groups of men who engage in seemingly illogical behavior. They "chase." That is, they gamble and lose yet continue to gamble in order to "get even." The more money that is lost, the more intense the "chase." Another name for the chase is compulsive gambling.

The chase occurs in a definite sequential pattern. The author would like to thank Peter Park, Rob Faulkner, Tony Harris, Prue Raina, and Malcolm Spector for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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79

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