



# Addiction to Gambling – A Matter of Will?

Thomas Amadiou

PhD Student

Sociology Department

University of Paris-Sorbonne (France)

## *Objectives of the research*

- Problem: how to explain that problem gamblers act against their own judgment by gambling despite the predictable negative consequences?
- Decisions are taken in a social context that shapes individuals perspectives
- Some contexts favor long-term planning (a supporting entourage, birth and positive familial event, etc.), some others favor short-term perspectives (divorces and breakups, professional problems, diseases, etc.)
- I propose a simplification: time preferences are shaped by living conditions and may favor relapses or cessations
- This assumption will be tested by observing how life-events trigger cessations and relapses

## *What is addiction to gambling?*

- **Common-sense** associates addiction to a defeat of the will: some people lose control of their consumption and maintain a habit in spite of the detrimental consequences
- Addicts are either considered as **morally weak**: they sacrifice their long-term well-being in favor of fleeting pleasures
- Or supposed to have lost their agency: they act under the influence of **uncontrollable forces**
- The disease model tend to impose itself in discourses about excessive consumptions (see Reith, 2004)
- Excessive gambling has encountered a similar process of 'pathologization'

## *The necessity to preserve reasons to explain addiction to gambling*

- Irrationality of addicts is inferred based on observation of behavior that seem incoherent and deviant to a non-user (for instance criminal acts to find money in order to gamble)
- Classical definition retains “(1) recurrent failure to control the behaviour (powerlessness) and (2) continuation of the behaviour despite significant negative consequences (unmanageability)” (Goodman, 1990)
- Alteration of conative (irresistible appetite due to craving and withdrawal) and cognitive (judgments altered by the high of playing) functions
- This position of addiction as a brain disease seems untenable : problem gamblers are not “irrational fools” driven by uncontrollable forces to involuntary actions
- Gambling requires to take a series of decisions that are grounded on reasons (pleasure of risk, dreams of fortune, chase of losses, etc.): find money, go to a betting place, bet, etc.
- Problem gamblers sometimes manage to quit by themselves, mostly because they found sufficient reasons to decide to stop

## *Can we explain by reasons the behavior of problem gamblers?*

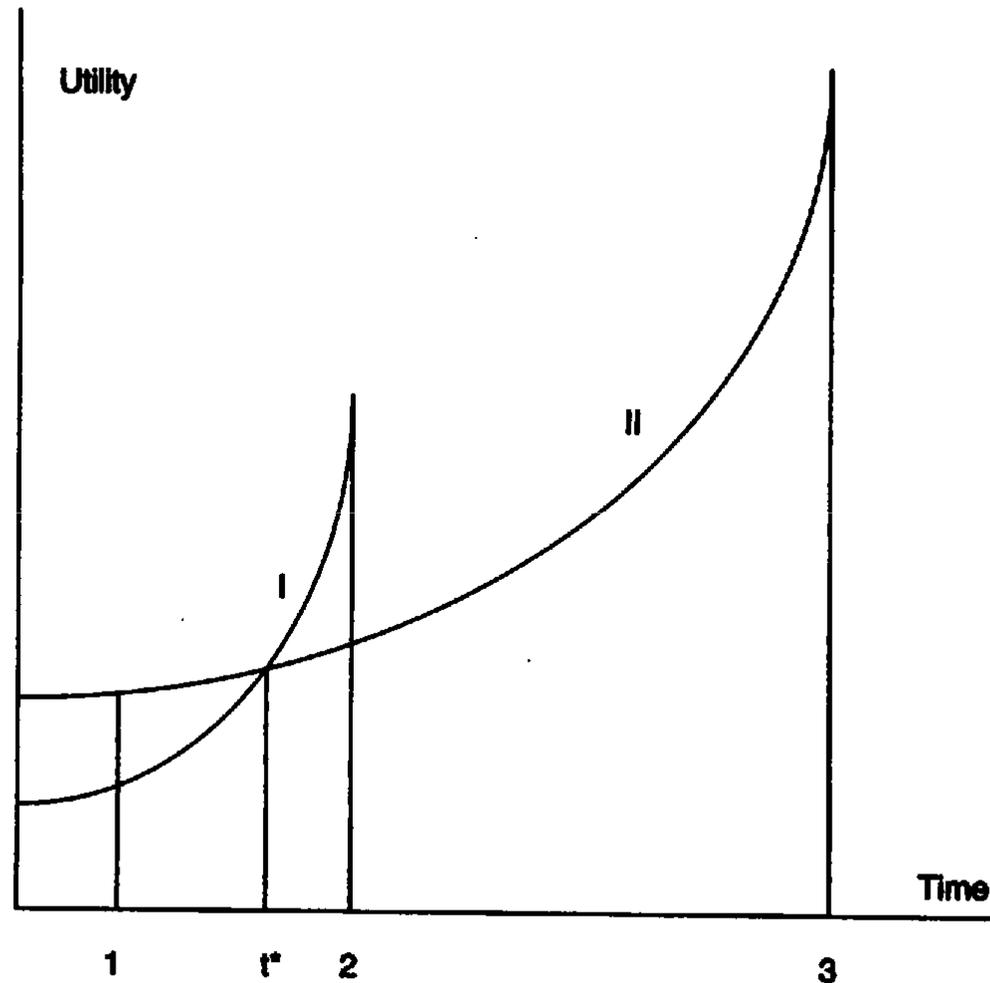
- We may define rationality as the coherence between judgments and actions: if someone judges A (an action) preferable to B, he will do A
- According to the Rational Choice Theory position (Becker and Murphy, 1988) addiction is rational -> addictions are strong habits that agents decide to succumb to until costs are too high (ex: rising the costs of cigarettes is supposed to reduce consumption)
- This radical assumption has been criticized on numerous points: how to explain regrets displayed by gamblers who wish not having started in the first place? Gamblers do not seem to plan to get addicted, addiction is not the same as a habit
- Among the criteria of pathological gambling is the loss of control: gamblers seemingly act against their own judgment (they prefer A but do B)
- Such an action is paradoxical in a theoretical frame that supposes that individuals act according to their preferences (Davidson, 1970)

## *The paradox of akrasia and weakness of will*

- In order to nonetheless keep rationality into the race and solve this paradox, researches have introduced the possibility of preference reversals: agents may procrastinate (they intend to stop tomorrow but tomorrow they do not) and change their mind when time passes
- Addiction seduces: when confronted to the possibility to gamble we tend to forget the reasons not to gamble and focus on the immediate pleasures (“we are not so much overpowered by brute force as seduced” (Watson, 2004))
- And it appears that there is a “cold-to-hot empathy gap” (Loewenstein, 2005) : we have difficulties to anticipate that our judgment will be blurred by hot motives

# Hyperbolic discounting of the future (Ainslie, 1994)

Source: Elster J., *Strong Feelings. Emotion, Addiction and Human Behavior*, p.171, Jean Nicod Lectures, The MIT Press, 2000



**Figure 5.2**  
Preference reversal due to hyperbolic discounting of the future.

## *Diachronical ambivalence*

*“I am completely addicted to this shit. Nobody should play, you lose everything. You know, I would like to quit, but I can’t. Every day I tell myself that I should not play. I have more important things to do: I should be at work. And yet every day I am here. [...] You know, I lost three houses with gambling, even though I was honestly working. Races rotted my life. Every week I tell myself that I’ll stop. **At night, in my head, I say ‘I quit’. The morning...** [hand gesture signifying that his good intentions fly away]”*  
(Aziz, worker, 55)

- Problem gamblers feel trapped in a mechanism stronger than their will
- Preference reversals might be interpreted as a difficulty to stick to resolutions
- The preference reversal is caused by various cues such as temporal and physical proximity with gambling opportunities

# Reasons of preference reversal

"Interviewer: So are you trying to set limits? Do You put money aside for example?

Ramiz: *Yeah, you're going to try one week, two weeks, but it's impossible. Eventually some day you'll not feel well... **It's like smoking. You try to stop for one day, two days, a week... One day you have an argument with someone, your mother or I don't know. Is anyone next to you, you will say: 'give me a cigarette!'** You saved money for one day or even two weeks, you'll lose everything in a game, just like that.*

Interviewer: Do you mean at some point we do not care of the consequences...

Ramiz: *Unless you don't have no worries... **If you have nothing that stresses you, it's possible to quit, you don't care about money.** You'll walk, you're doing something else. It's possible. But there ain't many people who manage to quit. There are very few people who can get by.*

Interviewer: Are your friends in the same situation?

Ramiz: *Everyone is in the same situation. Yes everyone has its tricks. Everyone believes in its tricks. If one day it works I will win. One believes that when it rains, his horse will win. Everyone has his thing. He believes this or that. "* (Ramiz, unemployed worker, 45)

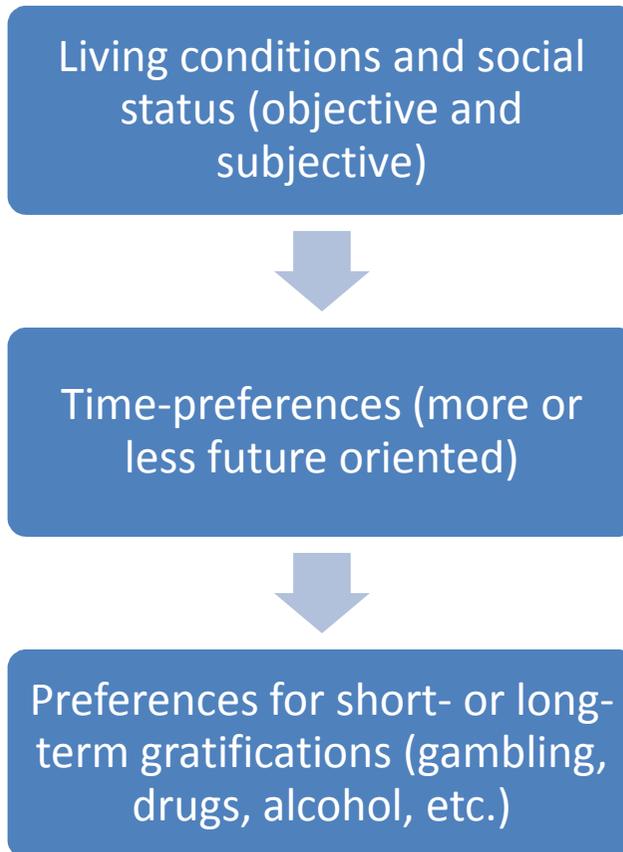
- The core of the process is a shift in time perception: the immediate relief is more important than the long-term consequences
- This is also favored by strong emotions: the “push” of dysphoria and the “pull” of euphoria
- For consumption of an addictive good appears to be a form of medication: one consumes it as a solution to problems (the high of nicotine relieves from stress/the hope to win thanks to gambling relieves from an unsatisfactory daily routine)

- Some negative changes in the social context might also induce disinterest for long-term consequences and favors addiction
- Pathological gambling seems in fact more frequent among deprived individuals or unsatisfied ones
- This may be due to social norms surrounding temporal orientation or simply gambling uses
- But individuals also display sudden changes in temporal orientation that might favor cessations of gambling habit or relapses

# *Hypothesis*

- Well-being tend to encourage individuals to be more future oriented and favors tentatives to regain control over consumption
- In contrary resolutions to stop gambling do not resist to negative events, for present life does not seem to be worth the effort of quitting gambling
- Relapses should be triggered by modifications of time perception so that problem gamblers concede to the satisfaction provided by the habit of gambling more easily in periods of personal troubles
- The temporal evaluation hypothesis might be of interest if cessations and relapses are caused by changes in personnal life

# *Mechanism explaining the correlation between social variables and addiction to gambling*



## *Method*

- Semi-directive face-to-face interviews with gamblers recruited in betting shops of Paris, France (n=40)
- Re-transcriptions of gambling careers of pathological gamblers consulting in an hospital service of Nantes, France (n=84)
- Statistical analysis of data from a national prevalence study of problem gambling in France (CPGI)(n= 25034, Problem and at risk=551)

	<b>At risk and Problem Gambling</b>	
	<i>%</i>	<i>odds ratio</i>
<b>Sex</b>		
Men	3,3%	2,7***
Women	1,3%	<i>Ref</i>
<b>Highest completed level of education</b>		
None	3,8%	2,6***
National diploma (year 10/9th grade), vocational certificate	2,6%	1,8***
Baccalaureate/certificate	1,9%	1,5*
Higher degree	1,2%	<i>Ref</i>
<b>Personnal monthly income</b>		
less than 1100 euros	3,0%	0,9
between 1100 and 1800 euros	2,1%	0,8*
more than 1800 euros	1,9%	<i>Ref</i>
<b>Nationality</b>		
French	2,0%	<i>Ref</i>
French by acquisition	4,4%	2,3***
Foreign	5,4%	2,3***
<b>Social status</b>		
Upper class	1,1%	<i>Ref</i>
Middle class	1,7%	1,7***
Lower class	3,0%	2,3***

## Frequency of at risk and problem gambling by category in France

Based on data provided by the National Prevalence Study of 2010 (INPES)

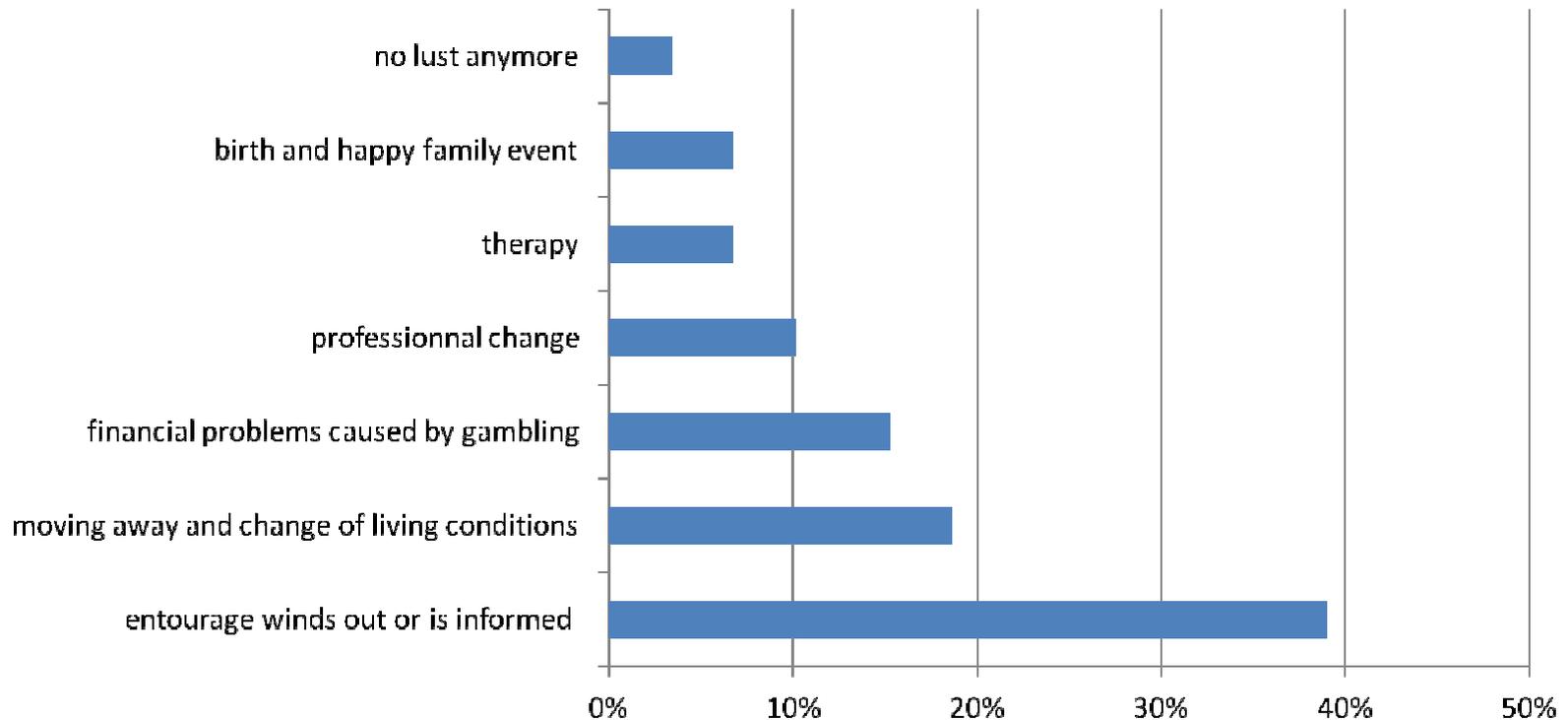
**Logistic regression** (Wald method) \*p<0,05; \*\*p<0,01; \*\*\*p<0,001

## *Gambling careers of pathological gamblers: empirical evidences*

- Among the patients studied 68 have at least once stop gambling (81% of all patients, n=84), 54 relapsed at least once. Among the 20% that did not relapse most received support from their family (a frequent scenario is the following: the wife discovers the gambling problem, formulates an ultimatum that is followed by consultation)
- This frequency of cessations and relapses (in most cases multiple tries) proves an **ambivalence** of attitudes toward the habit. The process of regaining control over consumption is an iterative one, with successes and failures. A form of intra-individual battle is clearly to observe.

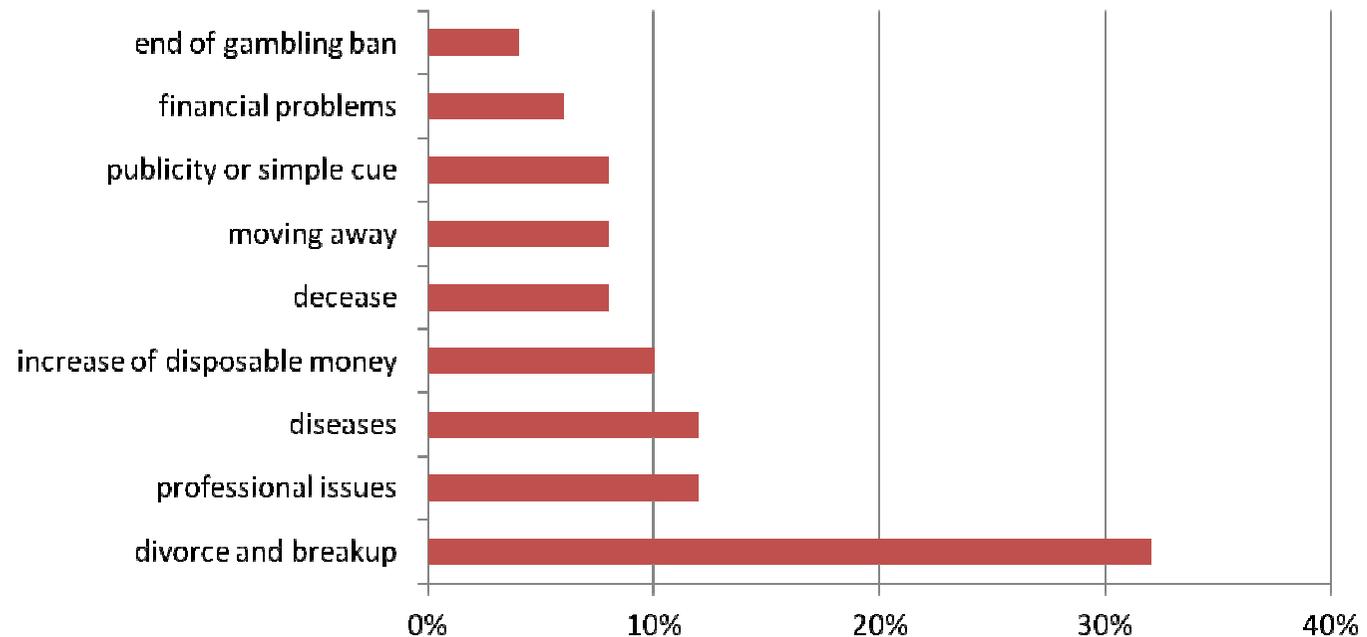
## *Reasons of cessations*

- Cessations are mostly triggered by the realization of negative consequences that the entourage of gamblers arouse
- A “touch the bottom” effect: it seems that the accumulation of negative consequences may sometimes be followed by a realization of one’s problems and a decision to quit



## *Reasons of relapses*

- Relapses are triggered by disturbing events that drive to depreciation of life and the future (short-term pleasures are a form of escape from the present reality)
- They are also triggered by the will to solve immediatly all the personnal issues by gambling (through the expected wins)



## *Sophisticated strategies to avoid preference reversals and its consequences*

- Ulysse-like strategies (Elster, 1984): sophisticated gamblers create conditions to avoid preference reversals (for instance moving away)
- In a way they develop a consciousness of their so-called weakness of will
- This will to impede preference reversal is more frequent in contexts of long-term planning (in order to improve the quality of family life, economic conditions, keep a job, etc.)

*“At one point I told myself to stop. I should not stay in Paris any longer. I went to the south of France. [...] **If you want to stop you can't if you're in the same neighborhood, in the same bars.** Eventually you'll say 'oh let's place a little bet, it is down to my place.' When you're 1000 kilometers from Paris it's different...” (Hassan, retired employee, 50).*

## *Strong habit and Self-labeling*

- The importance of the entourage in cessation seems to underlie the importance of social norms in self-control: once the family has discovered the gambling problem it increases the costs of gambling for gamblers (a form of peer-pressure is taking place)
- One of the conditions of success is a redefinition of self identity and a the adherence to norms of temperance

## *Limits and perspectives*

- Financial problems may both be an incentive to cessation and relapse
- Data are based on recollection of gamblers themselves, a method that may induce lies or *a posteriori* justifications
- Further research is needed based on a larger sample of gamblers

**Thank you for your attention!**

Thomas Amadiou

[thomasamadiou@gmail.com](mailto:thomasamadiou@gmail.com)