

The Virtue of “Tilt Control” – Poker Gambling & Masculinity

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Abstract

“Tilt control” is a narrative that is widely used by poker players in reference to the control exercised by players in poker gambling. The masculinity of poker can be found in this narrative and the concept can be used to explain this connection. While there are indications that more women than ever are playing poker, the vast majority are still men. Research suggests that there are gendered patterns in gambling: men tend to gravitate towards skill games such as poker, whereas women are attracted to games such as bingo. This paper, based on interviews with 13 Danish male poker gamblers, investigates this connection. It is proposed that so many men find poker interesting because it captures a set of existential conditions in society that are predominantly oriented to males. The poker game offers the players an opportunity to explore, challenge, and play with these conditions.

Keywords: gambling, poker, extreme gender, fight culture, winning, losing, tilt control

Doyle “Texas Dolly” Brunson:

Nor do I like to see women at a poker table.

That’s not superstition, either.

I was brought (up) to respect women, and I just don’t feel comfortable in high-stakes warfare against women.

Brunson was the first two-time winner of World Series of Poker.

Introduction

The traditional analysis of gambling has its origin in the form of gambling known as “slot machines”, and these are still the most popular form gambling activity (Lund & Nordlund, 2003). But the increasing popularity of poker, especially within younger generations, suggests it is becoming a new central gambling activity. As an indication of its popularity, poker is currently played by an estimated 150-180 million regular players, ranging from professionals and semi-professionals to amateurs, and receives attention from mainstream media. It is a growing cultural phenomenon in western societies, and is viewed as a facet of popular culture alongside sports, art, literature, film, etc. (Bjerg 2011). A substantial boost for poker occurred with the development of computer technology that cemented its presence on the internet from 2005/2006 - and led to a shift in its identity from being viewed as leisure game to being viewed more as a sport like chess. The growing presence has been accompanied by increased media coverage in newspapers, magazines and electronic media (Bjerg 2011).

While the substantial majority of poker players are male, poker gambling to date has been analysed as a gender-neutral activity. This article explores the relation between poker and masculinity, and thereby contributes to a gendered analysis of poker gambling, and perhaps contributes to better understanding of problem gambling through addressing the key question: how do poker players perform masculinity?

Existing literature

Historically, gambling has predominantly been a male world (Shaffer, Hall, & Vander Bilt, 1999), despite indications that more women than ever are attracted to the game.

Research suggests that there are gendered gaming patterns: men gravitate towards casino table games, skill games such as poker and track betting, whereas women are attracted to games such as bingo and casino slots (Spunt, Lesieur, Liberty, & Hunt, 1996. Hing & Breen, 2001; Ladd & Petry, 2002; Potenza et al., 2001; Winters & Rich, 1998). Men tend to play games with high stakes and women tend to play games where losing is restricted, like the slot machine games and lottery games where losses tend to be much smaller (Spunt, Lesieur, Liberty, & Hunt, 1996. Hing & Breen, 2001; Ladd & Petry, 2002; Potenza et al., 2001; Winters & Rich, 1998; Bjerg 2011).

There is a growing recognition of some central gender differences, for example men begin playing at an earlier age and they play more often (Fisher & Griffiths, 1995; Oliveira & Silva, 2001). Female gambling has begun to be analysed from a gendered perspective within the last 10 years, especially the egalitarian-feminist perspective where so-called “underexposed” female gambling is analysed (Phillips & Wilson, 2009). However, little attention to the male gender is evident in relation to the gambling.

Methodological aspects and informants

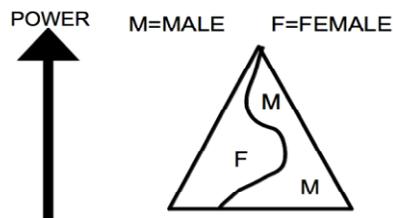
This article is based on qualitative interviews with poker players. The interviews are conducted as semi structured qualitative interviews. The method used is “life-world interviews” inspired by Kvale’s theory of post-modern hermeneutic phenomenology (Kvale 1989 & 1994, 1996a, 1996b) and Mishler’s moderate theory of hermeneutic phenomenology (Mishler 1984 & 1986), methods this author has used before and which are described in length in Simonsen 2004. The core of this method is the examination of the life world (Lebenswelt). It is the lived world of the informants and their relation to it, and it describes the meanings of central themes in the life world of the informant. The aim of interview is to describe specific situations and action sequences from the subject’s world in relation to poker gambling. Ontologically speaking this method gives insight to the primary world of the interviewee. The world of objects and physics is here seen as secondary to the world of personal history, culture and social process that animates, motivates and provides meaning. But gambling and masculinity is also biology. But too often the biological adrenalin rush is described in the literature as the “raison d’être” of gambling. The biological research sees serotonin as connected to impulse control, noradrenalin to arousal and dopamine to reward (Sharpe 2002). The biological basis has been used to explain all the gender difference in gambling. But this line of biological research does not describe the informant’s gendered motivation, their concepts and their thinking - as is the purpose of the method used here.

Epistemologically speaking the method (Mishler & Kvale) used here combines phenomenology with theories of social processes. Mishler does this through Habermas’ social theory (Habermas 1973) and Kvale through methodological working with local, personal and social truth. The generalisation from this method enables analysis of the cultural and social phenomenon of poker played by men. This then raises the methodological question of extrapolation: can the results from the interviewees and informants be transferred to other cultures/countries? The informants interviewed are ethnic Danish men and thus the analysis on masculinity and poker gambling has its origin in the in Danish culture and the Danish poker scene. But it is crucial to note that poker is highly internationalized, and these informants (similarly to many on-line poker players around the world) play international games on a regular basis. Furthermore, Danish culture in regard to masculinity closely resembles the standards and values of masculinity in most western countries.

The informant's favourite game is poker, and they play both Internet poker and live poker (where players physically sit in the same room). These informants also play other games like blackjack, slot machines, backgammon, and various forms of sports betting. Although from a non-gamblers point of view they may be considered as big players, they are not professionals. The 13 informants are considered as semi-professionals – they have other jobs to support themselves, but they also rely in part on their gambling. On average they have all won at least one game with a prize over \$30,000. In their gambling periods they spend at least 20 hours a week – but there are also periods of time in their lives with little gambling. The data is based on 13 qualitative interviews with semi-professional players conducted in 2009ⁱ. They are men from the age of 23 to 45 years old. Standard ethics of recruiting and interviewing participants are used and names are fictitious to preserve anonymity (Simonsen 2004).

Being a poker gambling man: framework and theory

The traditional framework of analysing masculinity has its origin in different concepts of so-called hegemonic masculinity developed by Michael Kimmel (Kimmel 1996), Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1999) and RW Connell (Connell 2000). The phenomenon of importance in this article: "tilt control" could in their discourse be described as an example of hegemonic masculinity. Traditional masculinity analysis focuses on the problematic side of hegemonic masculinity – for example, men are seen as suppressing their emotional lives, and invest considerable energy in competing with and seeking to dominate others. This view of masculinity is not emphasised here to analyse the findings. Rather, emphasis is placed on the concept of "tilt control", that does not make value judgements of emotional experiences and expression so much as attempt to explain them - the axiological question of good and/or bad masculinity is put aside. The purpose is to understand these men. "Tilt control" is here synonymous with a masculine fight culture – a culture of competing. This culture means that both winning and losing is important to one's sense of self. Not fighting is problematic. Winning is obviously preferred, but losing is not as problematic as not being in the game at all. The phenomenon is understood through the informants' desire for both winning and losing which has as its wider background the at times extreme positions required of males in contemporary society. The focus is on understanding the informants and the inherent masculine attributes to be found in the playing of poker, as seen from the perspective of the men themselves. It is essential to acknowledge that in part the male and female worlds differ, and the demands on males are in some respects far more extreme than for females, as proposed by Bonde (latest development Bonde 2008), and graphically represented below (Simonsen 2003) :



The pyramid illustrates that men generally live in a world of extremes and women generally live in a middle zone. The model states that only a minority of women in modern society attain the top positions in such areas as politics and business. Going from the top of society to the other end, the model proposes that males not only inhabit the top areas in greater numbers than women, but also the lower extremes. The majority of homeless people, alcohol addicts, prison inmates and heroin addicts are male. A male child born into our world will, in general, have a more extreme life. The male world is more divided and polarised in opportunity and life outcomes than the female world: the power of male privilege is counter-balanced by underprivileged men's lack of power (Andersen & Larsen 1996). An illustration of this can be seen in the labour market in Denmark and western countries, where women dominate in care & welfare industries (secure, flexible employment with low physical demands) - the "middle" of society in relation to labour market power (Simonsen 2004). Men are far more likely to dominate in industries such as construction, forestry and mining, where security, flexibility, workplace comfort and safety are far less attractive – but the pay can be far higher. That is, men are more likely to gamble with health and safety for larger rewards. When men perform certain roles and take certain positions in a society, it is because both the men and women of the culture instil a set of masculine "virtues" that create opportunities and pressures to encourage men to perform certain gendered functions of society. Poker is one of these aspects of life where the informants perform culturally determined masculine virtues. They compete with the knowledge that they will either win or lose – come out on top, or risk substantial losses.

The extreme framework can only create winners and losers because of the element of competition, of fighting. Anthropological arguments support this contention. Gilmore (1990) shows both the "macho-west" culture and other non-western cultures share masculine values that involve forms of fighting. Masculinity in western cultures is popularly known from the Latino word "macho" – which means to be "man-ly", and has its original meaning in making a woman pregnant. If you are not a "macho", you are weak, dull and lazy. A real man:

... is forceful in court ship as well as a fearless man of action. Both sex and economic enterprise is competitive and risky ...ⁱⁱ

Gilmore has examined the masculinity of a wide range of cultures, both the macho-west culture but also shows how non-western cultures also have similar concepts of masculinity. For example, the Truk cultures (islands in the Pacific Ocean are characterized by cultural preoccupation with gender differences. Here it is not "macho", but "pwara" which is the central concept of masculinity. Like "macho", the concept "pwara" means that a man must make a special effort, for example, through war and fighting and economic activity that involves strength, risk and danger. An overwhelming majority of the world's cultures share the "macho" or the "pwara" values. To return to our focus on the informants of this research, there is very obvious masculine identification in their poker narratives. They are very "macho", very "pwara".

Virtuous fighting in poker gambling: Tilt Control

"Tilt control" in the informants' narratives is seen as self-discipline. It's their self-discipline during the competition/fighting of playing poker. "Tilt control" embodies the relation between poker and masculinity. "Tilt control" is the word used by the informants and they share it with the poker community where it is widely used. The "tilt" derives historically from another game, the game of pinball. When a player knocks, tips and pushes the pinball machine too much, it will shut down and go into a state of 'tilt' and end the game – whereby the player loses. The analogy of the informants is that they are like the pinball machine player and their aim is to avoid tilting.

This narrative stresses that players should suppress their emotional attachment to the game. They must avoid displaying any anxiety when bluffing, or excitement when betting a strong hand. If you tilt it means that you are getting angry, upset or in some way emotional. If this happens - the informants explain - the player starts playing badly or at least below his normal standards. A display of emotion gives the opponents 'tells', and can upset the gambler's strategy. An informant (Carsten) gives the following example:

If there is \$2000 in a pot and you do not have a damn thing in your hand, then you have to bluff. And you should look like you don't care a shit.

And another (Bo) continues the line of thought:

I can feel from people that my calmness intimidates the other players. I just do not care. It shows a great strength and confidence. You don't get hurt when you go down. You don't care.

If you do this, then according to the narrative, you are in control. "Tilt control" it is about being detached from the bet, the risk and the money involved in poker, even when it's very large amounts of money. It's involves minimizing feelings about winning and losing money - and still seeking to play. Informants describe Tilt Control as the single hardest thing to deal with when they play poker. This part of the game is the masculine manifestation, where the player must prove his masculinity during the repeated sessions of play. He must produce an apparently natural calm, even if he is losing large amounts. The informants note that they try to project a dignified and stoical serenity when embarking on even a huge gamble. The players describe this in many different ways. The "tilt" narrative is in large part a way to handle yourself. Informants say that of course they get "annoyed" when they play. Some players speak about becoming indifferent while others "bite their teeth together". But as one informant says: "many weep over their lows and losses – outside of the sight of others of course". The masculinity of "tilt control" must be proved in the game, and no sooner is it proved that it is again questioned in a rise and must be proved again.

Another informant (Arthur) tells how he's good at being quiet, and explains that when less experienced players think they have a good hand, the informant can see it on them because they become emotional. He says that he can read the other players' ways to play their cards. He doesn't become emotionally involved when he has to play high games, because he is not afraid to lose. Arthur says:

Do not let yourself get angry. If you easily get angry, you lose.

The exercise of tilt control is in relation to the risks taking place in the psychological setting of a fight. Fighting is a highly valued subject for the informants. They focus on this in their narratives and gives examples of intimidation of other players. Poker gambling can thus be perceived as a battle, and is widely believed among informants to cultivate masculine values.

One narrative from a player sheds some light on this. He is in a poker club where an older player provokes a new younger player. The new player has sores on his upper lip. The old player jokes about this and says it's probably semen he has sitting in the corners of his mouth. And the intimidation works. The new player tilts and the teasing continues. In one of the very first hands the new player goes "all in" and loses.

Besides verbal fights, intimidation and harassments, staring is another tactic in the fight. It's one of the tactics that can be practiced, as one of the interviewed, Bo, says:

I had troubles many years ago, today I can stare everybody down.

It is a part of the discourse that poker gambling is a struggle and a central tactic is fighting with the eyes. Players use this to help find the weak players, and the weaknesses of other players. Carsten says:

I play a lot more on the person more than I play the cards. ... If there is anyone who has some weaknesses in certain areas, I play very hard on the weaknesses.

Oliver tells a story that is common among the players: using his power to "slay" others. He tells of a situation where he is a "chip leader", which means he is the richest player in the game. He says:

We were 7 men at the table. I had lots of chips. I pressed all the others - all the time. Every time I pressed one with lesser chips, and when he tried to come up, I pressed him down.

Oliver makes the other player either take a chance or drop out of the pot. And he follows this strategy in the rest of the time in the game – with discipline – without tilting. Only using his chip strength as a tool to win by putting pressure on the other players, all the time. He is a man in the sense of "macho" and "pwara", using his (chip) strength to overcome other men.

One player (Anders) says he sees the fight "as the beauty of the game". Yet another player "Carsten" says: "it as a man-to-man fight". Others talk about "smashing" the other players, but the informants are aware of that it's a psychological – not physical - fight where you control yourself, stare, keep your poker face up and hide your emotions.

Among the informants it is not just winning, but also losing that is seen as masculine –it's the standard outcome of fighting. Losing is equally masculine to winning – it is not fighting that is non-masculine. This is a core narrative of the interviewed poker players. If you are not willing to lose – you cannot win. And if you cannot apply self-discipline when losing, you will not win. One player tells how he was glad and proud to have lost a large amount of money over a few weeks. When asked why he seemed proud, and even glad, about this, he said that anyone else would have lost the double amount. He explained that he had the fighting discipline. And he continues to state that in poker you will lose at some points no matter how good you are. How the players act in these situations is just as important as how they act when they win.

The informants are generally aware of the fact that there is a population of female poker gamblers and they recognize them – but the recognition is done in a certain ways. Peter says:

There is no difference in how good you are, whether it is a man or a women. I think this is unimportant. [Talking about a women in a tournament] She played well.

He stresses the irrelevance of gender on one hand, but then continues to make a point about an important gender difference – the lack of risk taking:

She plays a little too tight. When she wins, she will win on good hands. But she will not win enough.

Playing tight means not taking risks. Informants perceive themselves as men being more risk-oriented in general, and particularly in the risk-oriented game of poker. They see them selves as more risk-oriented than their female poker opponents. Carsten says:

It is definitely a macho thing, and it has certainly permeated poker environment for a long time. But there are a lot of girls now, at least online.

Carsten recognizes that female gamblers are a part of the poker culture, albeit a minority. Another informant (Bo) explains that while women are playing more, that gender is important in success:

Yes, there are very few percent women on the tournaments. There are a maximum of 5% of female players in tournaments. I don't know if you look at women differently ... you can quickly do the analysis on a woman in comparison with a man... You can do the analysis in minutes or simply by just talking to her. So you can find out whether she is pro or not. I have played with many women who are sort of sharp, but there are never any women in the elite.

Like Carsten, Bo is aware of women in the game, and positions them as "okay sharp" but never with elite status. He continues his explanation and says that it is a masculine virtue to take risks. He says it's like at school where women are more responsible in relation to getting their homework done. But he notes it is the men who get the top positions and the best paid jobs, because they do and can manage to take risks.

Anders, another player, gives his understanding of why this is so:

There is something buried deep within us men, with the fighting and competition, with the rush, the adrenaline and the need to compete. I will not go hunting and leave the women home, as they did in the old days, I go out and chase wealth and recognition through games.

According to Gilmore (1990) fighting is masculine in most cultures. Women today and through history have also fought, but they are a minority. Of course in one sense women fight as much as men when they struggle to achieve some objective. But according to Gilmore (1990) when it comes to staged institutionalized fighting, women are a minority. Thus it would be fair to state that the fight culture the informants describe within the poker world has a strong relation to the gendered sub-culture of men.

Conclusion

The connection between poker gambling and masculinity is complex, but can be interpreted in relation to men's fight culture. The masculine fight culture in poker gambling can be understood through the concept of tilt control and the desire for winning and losing can be understood against the background of men's extreme position in contemporary society.

The concepts underlying the phenomenon of "tilt control" (concepts as "Macho" and "pwara") are described within traditional masculinity research in a negative way, focusing only on the problematic side of so-called hegemonic masculinity. But the ability to control is an essential core value in many male cultures and societies, and especially a part of male world and male self-understanding (Simonsen 2004). In a society where the division of labour is moderately or highly gendered, some of the male tasks involve male virtues – and some central male virtues are found in poker. Especially the virtue of "emotional control", the ability to suppress the experience and expression of doubt and fear. We can find this same "Macho" virtue in traditional male work, such as fire-fighting. The fire-fighter climbing a ladder surrounded by flames must suppress his feelings of fear and doubt, he must practice "tilt control" to complete his work successfully.

As poker seems to attract mostly men, it can be suggested that this is because the game provides a set of existential conditions that are predominantly special for men. Poker gambling offers the players these conditions in a form that allows them to explore, challenge, and express masculine aspects of self.

This research is important perhaps because it allows better insight into the nature of men. Perhaps its value lies in helping understand the nature of gender, by showing how men will seek opportunities to express core values that reinforce a positive sense of self.

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ⁱ Interviews were conducted with coworker Ole Bjerg, Ph.D.

ⁱⁱ Gilmore, 1990, p. 40-41