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## 'The notorious gambling class'

*Patterns of gambling among young people in Denmark*

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## **“The notorious gambling class”: Patterns of gambling among young people in Denmark**

### **Introduction**

Today, many young people grow up in societies where gambling is increasingly widespread and ubiquitous across a range of technological, social and terrestrial media. For clarity, we define gambling here as wagering on games whose outcomes are uncertain in order to win money (Ozuem & Prasad, 2014). The liberalization of this gambling landscape in many jurisdictions, together with the proliferation of online games and their incorporation into social media, mean that opportunities to gamble have become an everyday feature of the leisure space of many young people, with research showing that a majority have gambled at least once in their lifetime (Volberg et al., 2010). As availability of gambling has increased, so have concerns over the potential negative consequences of gambling, with evidence suggesting that young people are particularly vulnerable to gambling problems as they are less able to assess critically the messages of marketing campaigns (Turner et al., 2011). Indeed, prevalence studies show that rates of problem gambling are up to five times higher among youths than adults. (Shaffer et al., 1997; Kristiansen & Jensen, 2011).

The majority of research on young people’s gambling behavior relies on cross-sectional, and often quantitative, designs. This research has provided important evidence of a number of individual risk factors and correlates of youth gambling and problem gambling (e.g Shead et al., 2010). As we have noted elsewhere (XXX), research in this vein has established evidence that youths with gambling problems are more likely to be males than females (Jacobs, 2004), that gambling problems among youths is often associated with poor school performance, alcohol, tobacco and drug use (Winters et al, 1993), as well as various psychological characteristics such as impulsivity and erroneous cognitions (Nower et al, 2004). We also know that problematic youth gambling is often associated with parental gambling (Wynne et al., 1996), as well as starting to gamble at an early age (Burge et al., 2004). In addition to this, some longitudinal studies have been designed to explore long term behaviour, with research by Winters et al. (2002 & 2005) finding evidence of considerable variation in types of gambling over time. Others have found similar patterns, with Vitaro et al. (2004) identifying distinct longitudinal trajectories, and Slutske et al. (2003: 271) suggesting that gambling problems among young people over an eleven year period were ‘transitory and episodic than enduring and chronic’.

Although these longitudinal and quantitative studies add valuable knowledge of prevalence changes over time we still know very little of how such changes are related to the social environment and the lived experiences of young people themselves. This study aims to address this knowledge gap by examining, both qualitatively and longitudinally, the transitions and changes in gambling behavior among a group of young Danes. While longitudinal, qualitative studies of gambling among adults are still in their infancy, to the best of our knowledge, there are to date no such studies of gambling among young people.

This research shares methodological and theoretical features with a recently completed study of adult gambling behavior in Scotland (Reith & Dobbie, 2011; 2012). The British research used longitudinal qualitative methods to explore the gambling “careers” (Becker, 1963) of a cohort of fifty problem and non-problem gamblers, focusing on the social context and locally embedded nature of behavior change over time. It concluded by calling for further qualitative, longitudinal research “to explore the changing forms of gambling behavior over time” (Reith & Dobbie, 2012: 388), and it is this call that the current research addresses. During different stages of the research process there has been collaboration between these two projects, and the sampling frame, interview schedule and topic guides for the Scottish study were shared with researchers involved in this present one (see XXX for further details on methodological and analytical approaches). Previous analysis of the Danish project explored the influence of various factors involved in routes in to gambling among young people (XXX). The overall aim of this present paper is to extend the analysis by investigating patterns of change in gambling behavior and to explore the complexities and social contexts, as well as the subjective meanings that may lie behind such changes.

Before moving on to detail our methodological approach, it is worth briefly outlining the Danish gambling environment, which is slightly different from that of the other Nordic countries. Different types of gambling activities (such as sport betting, lotto and gambling machines) and have been legal for decades and Internet gambling was legalized in 2002. In contrast to the other Nordic countries, Danish authorities issue licenses to private slot machine providers. Until 2012, the Danish gambling market was characterized by a monopoly status, as Danske Spil (the state owned gambling provider) was the only legal gambling provider. As from 2012, however, Danish gambling legislation has been liberalized, allowing marketing and operation of foreign and private gambling providers in Denmark. The national age limit for gambling on slot machines, on the internet or in casinos is 18 years and 16 years for other kinds of gambling (Örnberg, 2006).

Internet gambling is furthermore restricted by credit card rights, as credit cards are issued only to over eighteens (Nielsen & Heidemann, 2008). However, the most recent national gambling survey found that 51% of young people between 12 and 17 had tried to gamble at least once their lifetime, with 22% trying to play online (Nielsen & Heidemann, 2008).

## **Method**

Details of our methodological approach have been provided elsewhere (Reith & Dobbie 2011, 2012), but are outlined again briefly here. Participants included 51 young Danes (11 females and 40 males) aged 12–20 years. Data were collected through three waves of interviews between 2011 and 2014, with a 10–12 month frequency. Participants were recruited from primary schools, technical colleges and high schools in the Aalborg region.<sup>1</sup>

A translated version of the South Oaks Gambling Screen – Revised for Adolescents (SOGS-RA) (Winters et al., 1993a&b) was incorporated into questionnaires to assist in recruitment of participants. The screen classifies participants into three different groups: Social gamblers (score of 0–1), at-risk gamblers (score 2–3) and problem gamblers (score 4 or more). After Winters et al. (2002), we define at-risk gamblers as an intermediate group who report some level of gambling related problems and who may have an “increased likelihood of developing more serious gambling problems in the future” (Winters et al., 2002:4). 1,034 questionnaires were distributed by members of the research team, and almost 40% of young people indicated willingness to participate in an interviews. In addition, snowballing was used to recruit sufficient numbers of problem gamblers, and a post was also placed on a gambling-related site on Facebook. Participants were contacted, and completed the questionnaire by phone. In the majority of cases, interviews were carried out in participants’ homes or at the university. After each interview, participants were given cinema tickets as reimbursement for their time and willingness to participate in further interviews. The cinema tickets, together with the fact that informants were continuously reminded when they would be contacted again for the next interview, contributed to a very small number of drop-outs. Of the original 51 participants, 48 took part in all three waves of interviews. An overview of participants is given in Table 1. Throughout this paper we have made reference to the numbers of participants in each pathway. Although we are aware that qualitative research does not support the presentation of findings in such a numerical format, we have elected to provide these figures simply to give readers some idea of the kind of movement involved, and the spread of experiences, when we talk about

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<sup>1</sup> Aalborg is located in Northern Jutland and is the fourth largest city in Denmark.

behavior change and pathways. They are included only for illustrative purposes, and are not intended to suggest that the findings might be representative in any way.

**[Table 1 near here]**

Interviews were semi-structured and guided by an interview schedule that allowed informants to ascribe meaning to their gambling behavior in their own words. They covered such themes as initial gambling experiences, current behavior, self-perceived gambling abilities, friends and social networks. Some questions were identical across all three sweeps, making comparisons possible over time. However each sweep of interviews also had a distinct focus. The first sought to uncover the participant's early gambling experiences<sup>2</sup>, the second focused on current gambling behavior and developments since the initial interview, and the main theme of the third was on how participants themselves and their friends perceived gambling. Of course, multiple themes were dealt with in all three interviews, especially the environment and social context of participants' gambling experiences. Participants were also given the opportunity to explain how they saw their own changing (or, for some, stable) gambling involvement; in other words, to articulate their own accounts of their behavior.

Interviews were digitally recorded, and verbatim transcriptions of each interview were produced from these recordings. Subsequent data management and analysis were conducted using the QSR Nvivo software package 10, with interpretation of the data guided by a modified version of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial coding was carried out in order to identify analytical categories and from this a number of categories were identified. Subsequently these categories were refined into analytical themes and used in the final coding process. Explorations of change were supported by Nvivo's attribute and set-functions. Each transcribed interview was assigned a sweep number using the attribute value-function. In addition, data was organized in three different sets allowing subsequent searches within data employing attribute values, nodes and set as search values.

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<sup>2</sup>. Some participants' gambling debuts were as much as 10 years in the past, and it is possible that their accounts of these experiences were subject to omissions, and other forms of bias associated with recalling distant events

## **Findings: Pathways of Gambling Behaviour**

We identified four distinct ‘pathways’ of gambling behavior, which were markedly similar to the trajectories described by Reith and Dobbie (2012) in the “gambling careers” study that informed our approach. Following their classification, we have described our pathways with the terms: *progression; reduction; consistency, and non-linearity.*

[Table 2 near here]

As can be seen in Table 2, only a minority of participants gambled consistently over time. From this we concluded, that, like the respondents in the Scottish study, stability among our sample was rare, and that change was the norm. In the following section, we explore the behavior and attitudes of individuals within each pathway.

### **Progression**

We define a pathway of progression as one in which gambling escalates, whether from social to more at-risk gambling, from at-risk to problematic gambling, or where already problematic behavior increases in severity. Participants whose behavior progressed in this way described their heightened gambling involvement with reference to a number of factors, such as having more time on their hands, having more money, experiencing increased availability (especially online), entering a new social group, or experiencing a big win. These are explored in more detail below.

#### *Money and social groups*

Data from a survey among U.S. adults has indicated that participation rates in most forms of gambling increase with socioeconomic status, but also ‘that higher socioeconomic status gamblers have lower rates of pathological gambling, and lower extent of gambling involvement’ (Welte et al., 2002: 313-314). Although it was not designed to explore these kinds of relationships, our sample nevertheless provided a basis for illuminating some aspects of gambling behavior among participants who belonged to a higher SES subgroup. As mentioned earlier, young people for this study were recruited from different types of school, from both affluent and less affluent neighborhoods in and around Aalborg. Participants from one high school, which is renowned for recruiting students among high SES-families, gambled more often and for higher stakes, and had a relatively high proportion of at-risk and problem gamblers. The participants from this school stood

out in the sample because of the frequent gambling and the large amounts of money involved, with a number of them speaking of using gambling as a way of showing off, “flashing their money about” and displaying their gambling skills. Indeed, this kind of gambling played such an important role in their everyday interactions in school that some of these participants referred to themselves as “the notorious gambling class”. In this context, gambling can be seen as a form of “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen, 1899/1994), whereby material wealth, as well as symbolic knowledge and status, are displayed in ostentatious rituals. Discussions about Oddset (soccer betting) and online poker games were important activities among the boys in this class, who would also arrange weekly poker nights together and created a tradition for going to a casino on their eighteenth birthdays. One of these boys said:

I probably used to bet about DKK<sup>3</sup> 1,000 a week, but now I have much more money, I’ve received my trust fund and I make more money now than before I got this job, so I can afford to gamble more. The Champions League final is coming up this Saturday, and then there is Kessler (Danish boxer), I don’t know anything about boxing, but I have to bet on him, because he’s Danish. We’ll see. But in the Champions League I am definitely betting a large amount, maybe DKK 4–5000 because I’m feeling quite confident (Male, 19, T3).

Over the course of this study this group of gamblers became smaller, but their gambling grew heavier. In the first wave of interviews, most of the boys at this school gambled and there were approximately 15 participants at their weekly poker nights. At such events they got to know each other and it was clear that they regarded gambling as an opportunity to display skills and affluence. In later interviews, some of them had stopped going to the poker games because of cheating episodes and instances of individuals borrowing money without paying it back. In addition, some of the participants had stopped or decreased their sports betting because there was no longer, as they said “any status in it” for them as the amounts gambled on sports had increased to levels no longer affordable for them. A significant motive for gambling is status and acknowledgement from peers, but these participants felt that they could no longer attain this acknowledgement by winning DKK 1,000 when classmates were winning DKK 10,000 or more. As a result, some withdrew from

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<sup>3</sup> The Danish currency is “kroner” (DKK). To contextualize for foreign readers, 1000 DKK currently equals 105 British pounds, 145 US dollars, or 135 Euros.

gambling while others gathered in small groups of high-level gamblers. The participants, exclusively males, in this relatively small group increased their bets during the course of the study to continue to experience the "kick", and they preferred not to talk about gambling with friends who did not wager the same type of amounts of money as them. For participants in this group, wagering only small amounts of money means that you "do not play the game" and thus that low-wagering individuals would not be recognized as "real" gamblers. Of course, not all our respondents had the opportunity to take part in these kinds of high stakes status contests, particularly those from lower SES groups, who were simply unable to afford them. Less affluent young people were excluded from these conspicuous kinds of leisure, although for them, engagement in lower stakes games nevertheless held a range of social meanings.

In general, this material suggests that social groups and social context play a crucial role in young people's gambling behavior, with participants whose gambling intensified over time using the practice as a means of displaying social status and allegiance. For some then, it could be suggested that gambling involvement acted as a way of displaying a kind of gambling "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1984) in which specialist knowledge of games and access to considerable amounts of money, as well as the willingness to risk it, act to both reflect and reinforce social status amongst peers. The adult gamblers in Reith and Dobbie's (2011) study similarly displayed a form of cultural capital, whereby participation in games reflected wider practices and values in the working class culture they were part of. However, the quite distinctive ways that our younger participants spoke about using gambling raises the possibility that it may be more accurate to speak of "subcultural" (Thornton, 1995) rather than cultural capital among this group. Thornton used the term to refer to the knowledges and behaviors used by members of a subculture to distinguish themselves from more mainstream groups. Amongst this group of young gamblers – the self-described "notorious gambling class" – the engagement in high stakes games, in ways that they felt set them apart from others who did not "play the game", suggests the use of particular gambling practices and attitudes in the formation of a distinctive sub-culture, which may extend beyond gambling to their wider peer group. Such possibilities will be the subject of further interpretation and analysis of our data.

#### *Increased availability – online gambling*

In 2012, foreign gambling companies were allowed to advertise and operate in Denmark, during a period in which technological innovations such as smartphones, tablets and computers were also



making gambling more accessible and ubiquitous. These developments were going on while many of our research participants were turning eighteen (the legal age for gambling online in Denmark), encouraging them to play more. One said:

Now I am allowed to bet online, because I've turned 18, and I also have a lot more money at my disposal.<sup>4</sup> So that's the only two reasons why you start spending more on gambling, and that is because you turn 18, and it is much easier to do it online than to go to the store and tick off the boxes on the betting slip (Male, 19, T2).

The liberalization of Danish gambling venues that enhanced the availability of online games took place between the first and second sweep of interviews, allowing us the unique opportunity of witnessing the impact of changes as they were experienced by our participants. The increased access made online gambling popular among participants who could now bet anytime and anywhere. They did it while in (high) school, during both recess and classes, and they gambled on public transport. Several participants said that they logged on to their gambling account on their smartphone, tablet or computer several times a day; with gambling apps are especially popular because “You don't even have to use your NemID,<sup>5</sup> you just open the app and play” (Male, 18, T3).

Some young people spoke of how gambling was a constant presence in their lives: “It is so easily accessible, so it is easy to have it on in the background of the computer, so when you are just sitting and relaxing it is really easy to just have an extra tab on the computer where the game is streaming, so that you can get to fill up your everyday life” (Male, 21, T3). These participants were males, typically over 18 years of age. Many of them mentioned the heavy marketing and easy accessibility and convenience of online gambling activities when explaining their participation in online gambling. Sometimes they gambled socially, while connected via social media, but more often they reported engaging in gambling alone and most frequently on sports betting activities.

## **Reduction**

Many of the themes relating to accounts of intensified gambling are also present in those where involvement is reduced: a feature that also characterized the interplay of factors in the British

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<sup>4</sup> In Denmark, students over the age of 18 who are attending school receive “The Danish students' Grants” of approximately DKK 1,400/month for students living with their parents and DKK 4,500/month for those who live independently.

<sup>5</sup> “NemID” is the Danish digital identification system used to log on to both public and commercial websites.

gambling careers study (Reith & Dobbie, 2012). Themes that emerged from respondents' narratives in this pathway included changes in social groups,; bad gambling experiences, where the participant has lost a large amount of money; and money itself. We explore these in turn in the following sections.

### *Changes in social groups*

As with intensification of gambling, the specific social setting plays an important role in reduced gambling behavior. Changes in social setting may range from changing schools, getting a new (part-time) job, joining a new sports team/club, or getting a girl/boyfriend. One participant, who started out gambling with his friends in elementary school, lost contact with his old classmates which affected his gambling. When asked why he stopped, he said:

It's a combination of the fact that I don't hang out with the guys I used to play those small games with anymore, and also that I actually like to have money for other things besides gambling, and then there is the colossal disappointment when I lost all that money, so I just don't feel like gambling anymore (Male, 18, T3).

Clearly, as this quote shows, there are multiple issues involved in the reduction of gambling, although overall, social context plays a particularly important role.

Interestingly, we found that while for some participants, gambling can be used as an icebreaker, in that, as one put it, "all boys love soccer" (Male 17, T3), others only engaged in games with people they trusted and knew well. Several participants changed school and moved from elementary school to high school during the research period, and many of them reduced gambling during these transitions as they did not know their new classmates well enough to gamble with them. In addition, prestige and recognition were only generated in contexts where students knew and trusted each other. One male, who had just started a new school, used gambling as a way to get to know new people, but he also recognized the lack of status in it, saying:

There is only one guy in my new class who bets on sports, and I have also bet with him a couple of times, but when there are only a few who gamble you don't get .... the opportunity to gain prestige by winning (Male, 18, T3).

While some participants (mostly at-risk or problem gamblers) used gambling as a kind of an icebreaker in this way, for others, a new social setting put a stop to their gambling. So, when asked if he gambled with the students in his new class, another participant said:

No, I have never gambled with people from this class, I have only known them for three months. I didn't know any of them to begin with, so I don't know who gambles....Most of them place bets online, and I don't want to do that, because I know I'd get too caught up in it (Male, 16, T1).

Many of our participants were quite concerned about sharing information about the amount of money they wagered and their gambling behavior in general; reserving such information only for old friends, or particular people whom they know condone gambling, and in social contexts in which it appears as an acceptable activity. They made quite clear that if they did not feel that their environment is a "gambling friendly" one, gambling-related interactions were most likely to not occur. This feature also exemplifies one specific trait that set apart participants with intensified gambling behavior from those who had reduced their gambling: The willingness to gamble on the internet. Interestingly, online gambling often seems to work as a catalyst for reduced gambling involvement. Several participants in the reduced gambling behavior category were sceptical about online gambling: First, they did not trust gambling providers, feeling they would be cheated by the gambling sites, and they were aware that gambling sites only exist because they can make money from gamblers. Secondly, they were afraid they would become addicted to gambling or end up gambling away all their money if they started online.

### *Bad gambling experiences*

Bad experiences with gambling, either involving losing large amounts of money or by losing in the last minute of a game when a win was expected, contributed to some young people stopping gambling either completely or for a period of time. Many participants reported feelings of disappointment, anger and frustration when losing money on gambling activities (often casino or sport betting) and while a small minority reported examples of 'chasing' behavior, the majority described how such experiences led to shorter or longer periods of reduced gambling involvement. Some participants also described experiences of loss with metaphors such a "burning your fingers"

or “get a rap over the knuckles”, which could also lead to lack of confidence in one’s luck or gambling skills. One participant, who previously gambled quite heavily, often at high odds, underwent a change of self perception in which he came to see himself as a permanent loser. This put him off gambling although he still had the urge to gamble when he heard about his friends winning:

I don’t really gamble any more. I learned the hard way, financially, that it’s not the smartest thing to do. And then I can also get a little jealous when I hear about my friends winning DKK 500, 1,000 or 2,000. Then you can get a little bitter and then you want to try again. Then I gamble on a few games and usually end up losing, and then I come back to my senses... Other people’s success in gambling makes me want to gamble, but my own lack of success discourages me from it (Male, 18, T3).

These bad experiences led to the redefining of gambling as something that was no longer pleasurable. The likelihood of such redefinition occurring often depends on the participant’s interaction with other gamblers. In other words, if several of the participant’s friends gamble, it is likely that he will be talked back into gambling. When having bad experiences, some participants knew they should stop gambling but found it difficult to do so. One young male who reported heavy gambling in the two first interviews but had recently lost a lot, used the “self-exclusion” feature offered by most gambling websites to ban himself from gambling for a month. He was asked if he thought he could stop gambling without the help of this feature:

No. I don’t think I can. Well, yes, maybe I could if I *really* pulled myself together, but it is just a huge step along the way [to self-exclude], it’s just so much easier if you really can’t stop, and sometimes it can be a good idea to just kind of give yourself a hint that now it has become a bit too much. Then you can take a look at yourself and then stop gambling (Male, 18, T3).

### *Money and new priorities*

Saving money to travel abroad or move away from home was a key motivation for participants to reduce gambling. Some participants were going through significant life changes that influenced

their priorities and made gambling less important to them. One male who had just returned from traveling abroad said:

I didn't want to throw away too much money on stuff like poker and sports betting when I was saving up because I had a budget to think about... Now my focus is completely changed since I returned, because I have to figure out what to do about education, get an apartment, start calculating budgets and SU [State Support for Education] (Male, 20, T3).

Such statements are typical of those participants who reduced their gambling. Gambling, and especially sports betting, has a great attraction in elementary school and at the beginning of high school, but gradually, many individuals seem to “mature out” of it. Such processes may be part of wider transitions towards adulthood, involving new responsibilities, new roles and relationships, and changing perceptions of selfhood, and it is perhaps inevitable that such shifts will be reflected in changes in a wide range of behaviors, including, for some, gambling involvement.

### **Consistency**

“Consistent” gamblers maintained the same level of involvement throughout the study, whether this involvement was at a high, medium or low level, a categorization that was also found among the adults of the British gambling careers study (Reith & Dobbie, 2012). All in all, nine participants were categorized as consistent gamblers, with more than half of the female participants in the study in this category. One possible explanation for this uneven distribution of females and males is that girls often gamble with family members, especially their mothers or aunts, while boys seem primarily to gamble with friends from school or sports. As such social groups change more often than family ties, gambling with family members seem to be associated with a more stable gambling pattern. In addition, participants identified as consistent gamblers were on average younger than participants in the other categories, and most of them had not yet left elementary school. In other words, they stayed in the same social group throughout all three interview sweeps.

### *High involvement*

Although only one participant had a consistently high level of gambling, his experiences are nevertheless illustrative of some key themes in this study; namely around the maintenance of controlled, problem free playing. This participant was a member of the previously mentioned

“notorious gambling class”, and this group membership seemed to stimulate his high gambling frequency throughout the study. The boys in this class gambled daily but regularly changed the types of games they played, and he was aware some forms were more risky for him. Explaining why he had cut down casino visits and increased betting instead, he said:

I was recently in the casino, and then I started thinking: ‘I really have to start betting again’. Yeah, so I started that again, and now I think it’s probably mostly sports betting because I go to the casino maximum once a month, because it can be risky to go there. I mean with sports betting you just place the bet you want and then you go home and wait, but in the casino you can just take the five steps up [to the ATM] and get more money, I mean if you can’t seem to stop. So it’s definitely mainly sports betting right now (Male 18, T3).

This participant was well aware of the potential of becoming addicted to gambling, and he had a preventative rule for himself that he would never try to win back money he had lost. Awareness in problems in others - one of his friends was a self-proclaimed pathological gambler, the other was banned by the casino - also acted as permanent reminder for him to stay in control. His narrative suggests that high levels of self awareness, self imposed rules and the presence of these “bad” examples contributed to keeping his high levels of gambling at a consistent level throughout the study.

#### *Medium involvement*

These young people mostly gambled alone once or twice a month and they often combined gambling with games that can be played without money while still involving an element of gambling. These games played a major role in the social lives of these young people and were used together with social media as a way to interact with friends. The participants often partnered these games with real gambling; for instance, playing *Texas Hold ‘em* on Facebook gave them the same high and resulted in the same acknowledgement from friends as they would get from playing real poker for money. Other games that were used interchangeably with gambling were social games such as *Hay Day*, *Smurf Village* and *Go Supermodel* by way of which players can spend money on products and accessories in order to keep up contact with friends. Our participants reported

spending large amounts of time on these games and some even felt addicted, raising issues around “real” and “social” gaming which we intend to explore in forthcoming papers.

### *Low involvement*

A small number of participants (two females and one male) had consistently low levels of gambling involvement. They were also among the youngest in the study; the male was 12 when the study started and the two females were 15. They typically gambled as part of leisure activities with their families and as a way to feel connected to their parents. The young male gambled on special occasions, on vacation with his family or during the holidays, and this was consistent throughout the study. The two girls shared some characteristics; both having divorced parents, living in low economic and social status neighborhoods, and having mothers who gambled on a daily basis. One girl, who had occasionally been joining her mother in the local bingo hall since the age of seven, said:

I also talk to some of my mom’s friends and it’s good fun to go and say hi and talk to them. Just me being with my mom in something that she likes, and I know she’ll be happy if I go with her. That’s what makes it fun (Female, 16, T2).

This young woman reported that the bingo hall had been a “magic place” when she was a child, remembering feeling like “a big girl” when she was first allowed inside. The other girl was involved in gambling-like activities in an attempt to better understand something of the world in which her mother spent so much time.

### **Non-linear**

This was the largest single pathway, involving 15 participants of all ages whose behaviour was highly dynamic over the two year period of the study. It included young people who had high gambling involvement, then reduced and later increased their gambling again; and those who had low gambling involvement then increased and finally decreased it again. Many of the themes discussed in the sections on intensification and reduction of gambling behavior also apply to this pattern of behavior; a finding which, again, echoes that of the British gambling careers study. However, as we indicate through the use of the distinct descriptor of “non-linear”, the drivers

behind behavior in this category were not simply a combination of, one the one hand, those involved in intensification and on the other, those of reduction, but rather an interaction of themes that produced this distinctive pattern of behavior. Overall, the participants in this group are highly social and extremely busy young people and several of them have changed schools at least once. They all spend a lot of time with their friends and most of them belong to several social groups relating to specific social arenas school, sports clubs and work. One said:

Well, I have kind of stopped playing poker, that's because poker is a game where you have to stay up late in the evening and I don't really have time for that any more, but on the other hand, with my new friends, what we are all really into soccer, I would say that we do a lot more sports betting. Typically it's right after or just before soccer practice, then we will just go to the shop and place some bets. So I do sports betting quite a lot more than before, but not so much poker (Male 18, T3).

It is clear from this quote that gambling behavior can change rapidly, depending on different types of friends and interests. Participants were constantly adjusting to new situations and their gambling behavior changed accordingly. For many males, getting a girlfriend, in particular, seemed to cause a temporary decrease in gambling involvement sometimes succeeded by renewed gambling involvement as participants adjusted to new relationships. In general, participants were motivated to gamble by the sensation of thrill and excitement and also by the idea that one day they might get the big win:

It's a little rush, a little twist in your everyday life. It gives you something to keep track of, and as soon as you have bought the ticket you walk around planning what to do with the money if you win. You've already spent it in your mind (Male, 19, T3).

Adding to this, easily available gambling activities, supported by information technologies, such a mobile phone gambling, seem to catalyze gambling involvement. As one participant said:



The fact that I can play it on my iPhone or that I can just log on using my app without using NemId, that definitely makes me gamble more. It would definitely decrease my gambling frequency drastically if I had to get out my NemId every time I wanted to log in and play (Male, 18, T2).

It is evident from our material that gambling involvement among young people is highly dynamic, affected by changes in social groups and changes in gambling availability. The high number of participants in this category can be explained by these two factors. Changes in the social arena may both reduce and increase gambling involvement, and heightened gambling availability means that some of the participants in this group increased their gambling involvement for a while, then stopped or decreased their gambling again, sometimes because of negative experiences such as big losses, close calls, or the feeling of being cheated.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

We set out, in this analysis, to address the call made by Reith and Dobbie (2012) to explore the ways that gambling behavior might change over time, and the processes involved in this. The rich, qualitative material generated by our research suggests to us that youth gambling is a highly dynamic phenomenon which is embedded in specific contexts and influenced by a multitude of different social factors. Such findings concur with longitudinal studies that emphasize the transitory and episodic nature of problem gambling (Slutske et al., 2003). Only a minority of participants in our current study displayed what could be described as consistent gambling behavior with the majority moving in and out of gambling, depending on changes in social groups, interests, money, availability and opportunities to gamble. To this end, our findings echo those of the British gambling careers study (Reith & Dobbie, 2012). Its authors' conception of trajectories of consistency, reduction, progression and non-linearity (with non-linearity as the dominant trajectory) map closely on to the model of four pathways identified in this study. In addition, the often interdependent role of a number of factors such as social networks, money, familial gambling, availability and changing social contexts, was found to characterize patterns of behavior across both studies. Such striking similarities suggest that similar processes may be at work, across different age groups, and in different jurisdictions.

Natural recovery from gambling problems or reducing risky gambling behavior was common among our young participants, and although some later returned to increased gambling

only four maintained high/problematic levels of gambling throughout the study. Our findings, then, do not support the conventional notion that problem gambling constitutes an inevitable downward spiral and a gradual worsening of gambling problems over time. Thus, in some respects, our research only partly supports the findings of Reith and Dobbie (2012), given that only a small number of their participants were considered to be on trajectories of improvement. One explanation for this, supported by research by Stinchfield (2011), may be that age itself accounts for some of the difference. It is plausible that the young participants in our study (as opposed to the adults in Reith and Dobbie's) mature out of gambling behavior and/or replace gambling with other types of activities as part of their more general transition towards adulthood. This possibility would benefit from exploration by further research. It also has implications for policy suggesting that early interventions for young people at risk from gambling harm could perhaps capitalize on the potential for natural movement away from gambling by focusing on some of the factors associated with the more general transition to adulthood.

One of the surprising findings of this study was that maintaining a consistently low level of gambling involvement with family members seemed to serve as a protective factor against developing problems. This does not accord with existing research suggesting that gambling problems among youths are often associated with parental gambling (Wynne et al., 1996) and that high gambling frequencies are more likely to be found among youths with family members or parents who gamble (Winters et al., 1993b). One explanation might be that our participants simply have not yet reached adulthood, and so have not begun to display signs of problems. Follow-up studies to explore the evolution of behavior would be required to confirm or disprove this one way or the other. If, however consistently low levels of familial gambling are found to serve as a protective factor, then harm minimization interventions directed towards families should be tailored to reflect this situation with specific forms of messaging..

The findings presented here have implications for theory, practice and policy. In terms of the former, our study suggests that youth gambling categories are not static "types", each with distinct etiological models. Rather, a plausible interpretation of our data is that youth gambling (including forms of problematic gambling) is a highly social behavior which emerges from, and changes with, the intersection of variety of personal and contextual factors. Clearly, future longitudinal studies are needed in order to build a more comprehensive understanding of the patterns underlying such behaviours, with a focus on the intersections of gendered, ethnic and class-based experiences.

In terms of policy and practice, given the widespread nature of gambling among our sample of school-aged young people, policies to reduce the potential harms of gambling need to focus on developing age-specific initiatives that are deployed in school settings. A number of educational school-based prevention programs have been launched and evaluated in various jurisdictions (see St-Pierre et al., 2015) and many have proven effective in improving knowledge and reducing misconceptions of gambling in young populations. As such, school-based initiatives to provide information on issues such as probabilities, gambling fallacies, types of games, the personal, social, and economic consequences of high level gambling, as well as the provision of advice on how and where to get help, are recommended as future, national initiatives. Finally, as many of our participants mention the heavy marketing, easy accessibility and convenience of online gambling when explaining its appeal, future policy initiatives should also involve monitoring of advertisements and practices to limit underage gambling. State authorities could audit online gambling operators with regard to their procedures to limit minor's illegal gambling.

We believe that this study has important strengths, as well as some limitations. Our longitudinal approach allowed us to follow the same sample of participants over time, and so reduce the impact of recall-bias, as well as generate the kind of rich data that is generated from repeated discussions with participants. This also assisted in developing rapport that helped to keep attrition at a very low level. We lost only three participants over the entire course of the study. The study also has some limitations, however: First of all, it involves a relatively short time span for a longitudinal study. Second, our sample was based in one specific Danish region with a particular rural/urban configuration and, accordingly a particular gambling landscape in terms of physical gambling opportunities. As with the non-generalizable nature of all qualitative research, readers should, of course, bear this in mind when thinking about our results.

To sum up, we believe that this study has provided unique insights into various dynamic patterns of change in the gambling behaviors of group of young Danes. Our overall finding, that transitions or oscillations in behavior are more common than a progressive linear gambling pattern, and that these changes are affected by a number of contextual factors, highlights the importance of approaches that are longitudinal and sociological for better understanding these kinds of multi-dimensional behaviors. In pursuing the original call made by Reith and Dobbie (2012) we would now suggest that further research, across different age ranges and jurisdictions, is carried out, in order to generate more nuanced understandings of the complexities underlying changing patterns of gambling behavior.

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