

Women, Pleasure and the Gambling Experience: 16 Years On

Emma Casey

Volume 5, Number 1, 2024

Critical Directions in Early-Career Gambling Studies

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1114242ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs203>

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Publisher(s)

University of Alberta Library

ISSN

2563-190X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Casey, E. (2024). Women, Pleasure and the Gambling Experience: 16 Years On. *Critical Gambling Studies*, 5(1), 84–89. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs203>

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CRITICAL gambling studies



ISSN: 2563-190X. Available Open Access at <https://criticalgamblingstudies.com>

COMMENTARY

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APA Citation: Casey, E. (2024). *Women, pleasure and the gambling experience: 16 years on*. *Critical Gambling Studies*, 5(1), 84–89. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs203>

Article History:

Received July 4, 2023

Accepted July 17, 2024

Published October 5, 2024

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Women, Pleasure and the Gambling Experience: 16 Years On

Emma Casey^{a1}

^a University of York

Article History: Received July 4, 2023; Accepted July 17, 2024; Published October 5, 2024

Available Open Access from <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs203>

At the age of thirty-seven,
She realized she'd never ride
Through Paris in a sports car,
With the warm wind in her hair.

Marianne Faithfull, "The Ballad of Lucy Jordan"

Women, Pleasure and the Gambling Experience, my first monograph, published in 2008, has gained a reputation over the years as being one of the primary studies of women's "everyday" domestic experiences of gambling. It explores the entanglements of class and gender among a group of working-class women as they used gambling as part of their attempt to navigate their way through a hostile and precarious society. In this commentary piece, I will reflect on the book and describe what it meant to me as a young woman early career scholar writing about gambling in the mid-2000s. I will explain something of the wider political and scholarly landscape that underpinned the book's conception, my experiences of its publication, and how the book fares within the contemporary field of gambling studies.

Publication of the book coincided almost exactly with the birth of my first son. I arrived home from hospital with my baby, aching, leaking, exhausted, and tearful on the very same day that a box containing copies of my book arrived from the publishers. My dad excitedly held up a copy. Sadly, I couldn't have been less interested. Birthing a baby is often used as a metaphor for writing a book: the pain of

childbirth, the pride of holding your newborn—your own creation!—and the legacy that you have made are deemed comparable to the experience of bringing a book of your own into the world. Of course, this is nonsense. In February 2008, my book, the product of so much hard work, paled into insignificance, enveloped as I was with every sound and movement from my baby son.

My total distraction from my academic work at this point was ironic because the book gained a lot of interest very quickly, and it immediately became obvious that academia is not set up to accommodate motherhood. Mothers are expected to perform miracles and acts of superhuman resilience if they are to cling onto their careers—this is especially true for single mothers, and even more so in 2008, where the idea of Zoom meetings and virtual conference papers were still a fantasy somewhere in the distant future. Physical presence was expected and often demanded with no regard to whether your baby might require your presence too. Thus, the media interview requests and invitations to deliver conference keynotes all over the world came at the worst possible time. However, I tried my best to combine both. My partner waited with our baby outside the BBC's Broadcasting House

¹ Corresponding author. Email: emma.casey@york.ac.uk



during a radio interview, and again outside a conference hall at Cardiff University when the book was shortlisted for the prestigious BSA Philip Abrams Memorial Prize. But I never managed to shake off my guilt as I rushed off early from conferences and missed the dinners and socials that are often so vital for networking.

The book describes the gambling experiences of a group of working-class women surviving on very low wages and living at the sharp edge of capitalism. The qualitative methods used—small-scale, in-depth, unsystematically sampled—were unusual within gambling studies in the early 2000s and were not well received by everyone. My first experience of presenting the research to an academic audience was also my first trip to the United States at the *International Conference of Gambling and Risk Taking* held at the MGM Grand casino in Las Vegas. It is hard to imagine a more incongruous setting for a presentation about the everyday, ordinary, and mundane lives of a group of middle-aged working-class women living on the margins of society in a northern English post-industrial city. My PhD supervisor squeezed my hand before I went up in front of an audience, made up mostly of representatives from the North American gambling industry and European psychology researchers, to present my inaugural conference paper. In reality, my early gambling studies colleagues probably weren't as perplexed by my research as I imagined them to be, but I felt acutely that my research was glaringly out of place. Early submissions of the research to gambling journals and conferences were not sympathetic to the lived experience focus of the research and were often desk rejected, owing to the research being "too descriptive and unempirical." The research may not have been generalizable, but I am proud that it was honest and true to the women whose voices shine through its pages, breathing life into the often

hopelessly abstract theories that are supposed to help us understand human experience.

Revisiting the book, re-reading the women's accounts, and remembering the hardships that they suffered but also their kindness and resilience has been an emotional experience. Often their decision to gamble was a choice between a lottery ticket and basic food shopping. I wanted the book to speak to some of the myriad burgeoning inequalities and prejudices that were and continue to be so omnipresent in British society, and to illuminate some of the experiences of people in what have often been described as "left behind" communities.

Today, we call this exploration of the details of human life, rather than simply counting events, "lived experience." Lived experience, as a research method, has become more established and respected within gambling studies, but it is also often erroneously used to describe any research that draws on personal experience and intimate life. In fact, meaningful lived experience research, in accordance with its roots in feminist epistemology and reflexive methods, ought to incorporate biography, narrative, feelings, emotions, and interpersonal relationships in a holistic sense. This type of lived experience research is still often missing from gambling scholarship.

This absence of poorer, working-class women from gambling research is perplexing, given, as Gerda Reith notes, U.K. Lottery tickets were disproportionately purchased by poorer people living in the north, while the proceeds tended to be spent on arts and heritage projects in the south. Moreover, at the time of writing the book, women were gambling in new ways, differently to men, many for the first time in their lives, notably on the National Lottery² which, unlike all other forms of gambling, was played in almost equal numbers by men and women.

² The U.K. National Lottery was launched in 1994. It was one of the last countries in Europe to launch a revenue-raising lottery for good causes.

In spite of these marked gender and class differences, so much of gambling studies has ignored the structural inequalities of gender, race, and class within which gambling is always situated, other than to note some of the quantitative differences in play. I think this is partly because it is easier to imagine solutions and policy interventions when the “problem” is personalized. The emphasis of policy intervention and the “responsible gambling” mantra has long been on managing the individual to make better, more informed choices; to shield them from gambling advertising; to signpost them to support services. And yet, gambling-related harms in the United Kingdom are as stubbornly persistent as ever. One of the critiques of the book in 2008 was that, by not focusing on the deviance, danger, and harms of gambling, I risked appeasing the gambling industry. In fact, the book shows how powerful institutions and industries—including the gambling industry—feed off and exploit the inequalities and vulnerabilities of players, and that the relentless focus of research on pathologized individuals ultimately lets those industries off the hook.

The women who participated in the research project that informed the book were living through the last days of New Labour: a rebranded Labour government that had espoused a narrative of corporate-friendly social reform with a firm emphasis on consumerism and personal responsibility. The vignettes from the interviews that are presented throughout the book describe the emotional and physical effects of a nagging, gnawing poverty. The women’s voices also have a prophetic edge: times were hard, but they were about to get harder. The women’s lives and experiences pre-date both the economic austerity politics of the proceeding British Conservative government and, later, the cataclysmic events that disproportionately impacted working-class and women of colour, notably the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown and the United Kingdom’s cost of living crisis.

From the outset, I felt a sense of deep loyalty and respect to the women who had so generously devoted their time to talking to me about their lives and gambling experiences. I didn’t want to pathologize them, or present their choices as stupid and irrational, or their lives as a miserable Orwellian trudge with the futile hope of winning the lottery their only salvation. In part, I wanted to do this out of respect to them, but *also* because to do otherwise simply wouldn’t be true. As a social scientist, my responsibility is to make sense of, understand, and critically reflect on the intersections of inequalities and experience. I have always felt that, too often, gambling research does the opposite, by turning explanations for gambling and gambling-related harms inwards towards the individual who is perpetually pathologized and held personally responsible for their risk taking. We see this reflected in the relentless contemporary policy discourses of “responsible gambling,” with its firm emphasis on *individual* rather than corporate, industry, or state responsibility.

The lyrics from the Marianne Faithfull song “The Ballad of Lucy Jordan,” cited above, were reproduced on the opening page of my book. I remember thinking that the lyrics perfectly epitomized the women’s lives that were limited not by stupidity, desperation, foolishness, or personal pathology, but by the intense economic disadvantage that permeated their lives. It was a creeping and pervasive type of poverty that seeped into their daily thoughts that, in turn, became impregnated with a constant sense of anxiety and dread about financial struggles and economic insecurity. In this sense, *Women, Pleasure and the Gambling Experience* is also a political book. By refusing to pathologize and medicalize the women’s gambling practices, the book set itself apart from mainstream gambling scholarship, which at the time was dominated by discourses focusing on personal, individual blame and responsibility for what were in fact social problems. Yet the women’s decision to gamble was inextricably linked to their lack of privilege

and their location within exploitative capitalist structures. Not only was their unpaid domestic labour and their low-paid care work unvalued, they were also virtually invisible within gambling studies. No one knew *why* they chose to spend unprecedented amounts of their small monthly income on gambling because nobody had thought to ask.

Today, we would recognize much of the above as analogous with neoliberal discourses but interestingly the book does not include a single mention of neoliberal or neoliberalism! Yet, re-reading the book today, it is clear that the women's experiences very much echoed the beginnings of what was to soon become an entrenched cultural neoliberalism. One of the cornerstones of the contemporary neoliberal experience is the endless personal search for a release and freedom from the everyday anxieties of late capitalism, and the offer of heavily personal and commodified solutions. Throughout the book, the quotes from the women depict, in often raw and poignant detail, their daily struggles for economic survival. Gambling weekly on the National Lottery came to symbolize hope for a better, less precarious future within the context of a society racked with inequalities that offered little in the way of meaningful social mobility.

The book describes how the women's lives were characterized by a felt need to take personal responsibility for navigating a careful balance between the various contradictory demands that permeated their lives. First and foremost, as working-class women living at the sharp end of late capitalism, their lives and experiences were underpinned by a constant search for the acquisition of "respectability." Respectability is a term coined by the sociologist Bev Skeggs in the late 1990s and is used to refer to the struggle for value and status for women who lack the cultural and economic capital to acquire this. Skeggs's work inspired so much of the book: the ways in which class and gender are formed and reformed in difficult circumstances where working-class

women, in particular, are subjected to an extraordinarily vociferous level of judgment and surveillance for their actions. The women whose stories are told in my book performed the exhausting labour of respectability by endlessly seeking ways of getting by on a very limited budget while never asking for help, performing care and ensuring the well-being of the family, avoiding "waste," alleviating personal guilt and stress, and curating an image of respectable familial harmony and well-being.

Gambling as it is *morally* framed—as deviant, irrational, irresponsible, and unethical—stands directly opposed to the type of respectability and worthiness towards which the women strove. While gambling for men has long been excused as fun, camaraderie, and an accepted working-class, male leisure activity, this was not so for women whose consumption and household management were always held up for a very particular type of scrutiny and surveillance. Buying National Lottery tickets was a compromise for the women—a "tasteful and acceptable" (Office of the National Lottery, 1994, p. 20) gambling activity where participation could be interwoven into everyday life. Tickets could be bought at the supermarket, post office, and even online, avoiding the smoky, gloomy betting shops that had long been the preserve of men. Something that struck me from the very beginning of my research was the sheer mundanity of gambling for many of the women. The *ordinariness* of National Lottery play was a key part of its extraordinariness. The systematic and non-spontaneous nature of National Lottery play was palpable:

It ... comes out of the housekeeping ... then we put (our winnings) in a jar and it buys the rest for the next few weeks. We have a jar for our winnings. (Casey, 2008, p. 68)

The reframing of gambling during this time, alongside the liberalization of gambling legislation that was formalized in the 2005

Gambling Act, coincided with the opening up of new sites for gambling. In particular, the women in the study embraced new ways of gambling alone at home and helped to illustrate the complete reframing of domestic space as sites for gambling during these years. It is worth noting that the women's accounts of gambling predate both the widespread use of the internet, particularly home Wi-Fi, and importantly also the entrenchment of social media into everyday life. In 2008, the idea of smartphones that would incorporate 24/7 internet access was only a distant possibility, and social media was still an almost science-fiction notion for a distant future. This is reflected in Tracey's account of her daydreams about how she would spend her winnings if she won the jackpot:

If I'd won the Lottery, I'd have bought the 350-pound mobile that I saw. It's gorgeous. And it's got the internet. (Casey, 2008, p. 100)

Tracey, though, was unusual in her wonderfully unbridled account of her clearly well-thought-through jackpot fantasy. Most of the women expressed a palpable fear of the jackpot: of winning "too much" and losing their place within their communities of friends and families. The emphasis was generally on winning enough to ease the struggles and anxieties that made everyday life so painful, while also not being thrust into a world in which they felt they would never "belong." The women talked about how the jackpot "scares the hell out of me," said that they "would hate it," that they'd "be scared" and that "it'd so much change yer" (Casey, 2008, p. 103). Discussions of the fear of the jackpot echoed Bourdieusian accounts of cultural capital and habitus. The women were acutely aware that, in the unique British class system, economic capital alone is not enough to project oneself into the echelons of middle- or upper-class society. Sandra beautifully articulated this when she remarked that money "can bring happiness but it can't bring love with it" (Casey, 2008, p. 103).

Future research could pull together some of the threads that hang tantalizingly from the final pages of the book. I would love to see research exploring contemporary narratives of meritocracy—the idea that anyone can make it, and that we alone must take responsibility for our own successes and failures—which were present in 2008 as the women went to extraordinary lengths to try to make their lives work against a hostile and precarious backdrop. But today, as I have explored in my more recent writing on gambling, social media has made these narratives impossible to resist. Social media offers a hyper-visual, compelling norm of aspiration, consumerism, and hyper-individualism, within which neoliberal accounts of "responsible gambling" and the "problem gambler" thrive. Social media also *appears* to celebrate "ordinary" people, with intimate, confessional, and "relatable" content the norm and increasingly expected. Looking back at the prime-time televised, mega media exposure of the freshly launched National Lottery in the early 2000s, we can see the beginnings of the popular entrenchment of gambling as a form of consumption that offers an individualized solution to economic and social problems. Adverts featuring the Scottish comedian Billy Connolly were replaced with adverts depicting "ordinary" players and their communities. And, of course, the popular slogan *It Could be You!* similarly echoed wider meritocratic fantasies of accessible egalitarianism that were becoming increasingly popular in the early 2000s and are entirely ubiquitous today.

Today, I have found my gambling studies allies in others who are also appalled by the gambling industry's grip on research and seek ways of avoiding the pathologizing of vulnerable communities of gamblers. I now have an academic home of sorts in Critical Gambling Studies. My next book, *The Return of the Housewife*, to be published in 2024 by Manchester University Press, is not about gambling at all but shares many of its themes with

those first developed in *Women, Pleasure and the Gambling Experience*. Capitalist societies have always sought out new ways of persuading women to accept their lot by offering glimmers of hope for pleasure, daydream, and temporal forms of “escape,” but always in ways that ensure that the profits of highly lucrative commercial ventures are protected. The National Lottery went to extraordinary lengths to centre its promotional activities around altruistic discourses: of contributing towards “good causes” and of promising to make people’s dreams come true. This is, of course, the perfect neoliberal strategy; one that offers a highly lucrative commercial solution to complex social problems, while at the same time offering the daydream of hope for a better future.

From the outset, I wanted my book to emphasize how much the women *matter*; to say plainly that their lives *matter*. My colleague Kate Bedford told me that the book made her cry. I can understand why. The emotional power of women’s words is valuable to scholars everywhere and can be the first stage in provoking positive social change. As bell hooks so powerfully argued, listening, hearing, and recording life as it is lived on the margins, and recording the fear, anxiety, and precarity of everyday life on the edges of late capitalist society, can be the first stage in taking steps to change it.

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Funding and Conflict of Interest Statement

I have never received research funding, either directly or indirectly, from the gambling industry. The submitted paper and the research on which it is based is entirely distinct and independent

from gambling industry–funded sources. In 2018, I received travel and accommodation costs to present at the GambleAware annual conference. I have supervised a PhD student who was funded by GambleAware. In 2015, I received travel and accommodation costs to present at the Alberta Gambling Research Institute Conference.

Author Details

Emma Casey is Reader in Sociology at University of York, United Kingdom. She writes about everyday processes and practices of consumption and domestic life in late modern societies.