



From pathological to professional: gambling stories

Andrada-Mihaela Istrate¹

Abstract

Theories on gambling are as disparate as they are diverse. While on the one hand gambling is condemned as being pathological, a curable addiction, on the other it is regarded as merely leisure. While playing on the exterior features of gambling, these two perspectives narrow the vistas of gambling research. I contribute to the debate by treating gambling (poker playing in particular) through the meaning conveyed by players upon it, discussing games and play as part and parcel of everyday experience. My research is centered on how poker players make professional claims and the way they justify poker playing as a profession. By discussing games as world building practices (Schutz, 1945; Huizinga, 1950; Goffman, 1961) I deemphasize the deviant character gambling actuates and advert on its informative potential on emergent societal and cultural transformations. Making a living out of poker, making sense of the game, at the same time, as a lens that organizes their way of going through the world, players connect the reality of the world of daily life to the reality of the game. I argue that the horizons of this finite province of meaning (Schutz, 1945) are not confined to the world of poker, but communicate extensively with the wider reality through its characteristics, from its unique time structure and the pervasive identities created in the game, to the money players circulate.

Keywords

Gambling, poker, profession, world building practices, multiple realities

Introduction

In October 2010, the members of the city council of Techirghiol, Eastern Romania, approved the mayor's proposal to gamble the amount of their annual salaries in the state lottery in order to finance the town's ongoing projects. The account they provided relied on the existence of chance: "as long as there's a chance, why not play it, even if it's one

¹ CEU Budapest, andrada.istrate@gmail.com, I am deeply thankful to Puiu Lățea for his endless advice and enthusiasm and also to my friend Panda, for enkindling my interest in the game of poker and poker players.

in a million?" declared the mayor.² The event was a nine-day wonder. Apart from its anecdotal aspect, and perhaps its ordinariness, the story carries significance in terms of people's reliance on providence, uncertainty, risk and chance.

Reminiscent of a moralizing and perhaps a medicalized discourse (Reith, 2007; Castellani, 2000), gambling and gamblers still carry the stigma of mental disease and irrationality. Researchers and social scientists focus on gambling's addictive nature and the consequences it has for the individual, the family and society as a whole.³ Although it is an intensely debated issue in the field of social problems, I would rather not dwell on the negative influences gambling may have, but follow a long-standing line of qualitative approach that discusses games as world-building practices (Schutz, 1945; Huizinga, 1950; Goffman, 1961). I deemphasize the deviant character gambling actuates and advert on its informative potential in emergent societal and cultural transformations.

The theoretical debate on gambling is structured around two issues: gambling theorists, on one hand, focus on problem gambling, arguing that gambling is addictive, therefore pathological, a disease (Lesieur and Custer, 1984; APA, 1994, Schaffer, 2003) and, on the other hand, other theorists deem it as purely entertaining, actively working at separating it from real life and situating it in the realm of fantasy (Coleman, 1968). I contribute to this debate by investigating gambling through the meanings purported by players upon play, more specifically, by the accounts of poker playing as a profession, a type of professional work, with a peculiar time perspective, a specific career timetable as well as a great deal of face-work, subjective beliefs and rationalities integrated in its structure.

One of the aforementioned transformations concerns how Romanians came to regard work, professions and careers. Poker playing, in particular, has emerged, especially owing to heavy advertising, as a full-time occupation, a new type of professional work, raising issues of respectability and legitimacy. Out of the smoky little rooms with bad lighting and improvised poker tables, from the basements, lodged in private, secluded settings, an image marginally linked to that of street punks and slicks, emerges a new type of profession that demands public acceptance and recognition:

² The news appeared in almost all Romanian newspapers, see for example <http://www.ziare.com/articole/primaria+techirghiol+loto>.

³ The label "pathological gambling" came into use in the 1980s when the American Psychiatric Association included gambling as a mental disorder. The manual suffered various revisions until 1994, when the term was finally grounded. The criteria established for the identification of pathological gambling represent the gold standard employed for the recognition of gambling addiction. This model is built on the types of harms gambling produces: at the individual level (expressed through preoccupation, need, lack of control and withdrawal consequences), social level (deterioration of relationships with significant others whom the gambler seeks out in order to fund his/her gambling habit and employment of illegal devices in order to finance his/her "addiction") and the motivations why s/he engages in such activities (escapism and chase) (DSM IV 1994: 618). In compliance with the medical model of addiction, Lesieur and Custer (1984), keen supporters and promoters of the gambling disorder described in DSM IV, introduce the notion of "pathological gambling career." They see a progression and the increased involvement of the gambler, which takes a predictable course. The authors introduce the medical model of pathological gambling as a shift from the previously enforced public image of gamblers as sinners and criminals; their approach is rather interventionist, as they claim that "treatment, rather than moral condemnation, is needed" (p.147).

“Who thinks of poker, associates it with the casino, the roulette, slot machines, the looney floor, lost his fortune, sold his house and jumped off a building, that’s what most people understand of poker” (Memo, 23 years old).⁴ Can poker be regarded as a legitimate profession, and if so, what does this profession entail? In order to address this question, my research is targeted towards poker players who openly admit that they rely on the game as an exclusive means of subsistence, play in high stake games and thereby invest a great deal of time. With the help of unstructured observation and in-depth interviews, I try to describe the world of these professional poker players as constructed through their professional claims and aspirations for success as well as some particularities of the game, the setting and, most importantly, the players.

I became acquainted with a group of poker players in Bucharest, whom I now further investigate, and what struck me most was the amount of face-work invested in gaining peer recognition and public acceptance. What I learnt later was that face-work was not only part of the self-presentation of this occupational group, but, in the case of poker players, it represented part and parcel of their earning a living, the definitional cue of their profession as well as the basis of their definition of the situation. The media present such players as consistent long-term winners, shrewd connoisseurs of psychology and mathematics and innate bearers of competition (Hayano, 1977; Schuck, 2010). What is particularly interesting is that players themselves convey similar images of themselves: by making use of strategic techniques as well as linguistic devices to account for both their financial gains and losses they fashion themselves as “professional gamblers.” (Holtgraves, 1988)

Their professional stories, the story of poker as a profession for the group I interviewed, began with the opening of a poker parlor in Bucharest, a gambling venue exclusively designed for poker, where most of them started their gambling careers. Once the card room is popularized, the number of players increases and, with them, the number of self-defined professional players. The legislation is changed: the casino taxes increase: gamblers themselves, not only the casino owners, are subject to taxation and, along with this, concerns related to professional players emerge. It is a story of oscillations and probabilistic variations which has engraved on its map the number of played hands, betting practices and the identities created in and through the game.

Methodology

This study is not designed as a poker manual, nor is it a guide to best poker practices. Most poker players (whether recreational or pro) will find little information on how to improve their game. Instead, I plan to shed some light on the world of professional poker players, a group of people who makes a living on the edges of conventional work.

I made friends with a former high school colleague on the basis of a mutual interest in gambling; I, on the one hand, was more interested theoretically in gambling and how the subject could be investigated and he, on the other, an inveterate gambler, was into

⁴ “Cine se gândește la poker, se gândește la casino, ruleta, sloturi, etajul 9, a pierdut averea, a vândut casa și a sărit de la etaj, asta înțelege majoritatea lumii din poker” (Memo, 23 years old).

playing actual games. He, a poker player at that time, was the one who introduced me to the game and to some other poker players. I knew people played poker, people play all sorts of games, but I did not imagine that there were people who played poker for a living.⁵ I began inquiring into the subject in May 2009, when I conducted my first four interviews with established, self-declared poker players. I was bedazzled. The talk, their backwards schedule, the casualness with which they spoke of what were to me (and probably to most people of our age) immense amounts of money, the probabilities talk, their disappointments and losses and especially the specialized vocabulary which framed the game, were beyond ordinary understanding. It was a different ordering of reality.

At that time, it was still unclear to me whether the way they presented themselves was an exercise of face-work (Goffman, 1967), an attempt at advertising respectably (Luckenbill & Best, 1981) or simply a mode of consciousness (Garfinkel cited in Rawls, 2006), aimed at producing recognizable practices in order to communicate with others.⁶ However charged with impression management techniques, face-work and already standardized (and socially accepted and acceptable) accounts, these interviews help to disentangle the ways in which gamblers make sense of their worlds.

Subsequently, I went to occasional tournaments in casinos as a mere observer, I registered on several online poker sites (Carbon Poker, Poker Stars and Fulltilt Poker), where I tried to play, and scrupulously followed Romanian poker blogs (such as Pește Prăjit Holdem.ro). I tried to investigate gambling through many and diverse theoretical lenses, from the construction of the pathological (see for example Castellani, 2000; Lesieur & Custer, 1984; Reith, 2007), to the sphere of deviancy (Becker, 1963; Rosecrance, 1985), to the construction of gambling as sport (Schuck, 2010) or work (Sallaz, 2009). Needless to say, I became well acquainted with the subject.

Two years later, in April 2011, I returned to the research and compiled a new interview guide comprising several themes:

1. Players' introduction to gambling in general and poker in particular (I was interested mainly in gambling organized in institutional settings – casinos, poker parlors and other such venues);
2. relationships between other gambling forms and poker;
3. knowledge in poker – what knowledge means in poker and how it is achieved;
4. justifications for poker as work, the discursive construction of poker as work;

⁵ One of my respondents terms this better when speaking of his early poker days: “I started to know the concept, to believe in the concept of professional poker player; until then, there were no poker players, I simply went and played poker” (Bomber, 24 years old).

⁶ I took as an example Garfinkel's interview with a guard, who, as the sociologist explains, was so absorbed by his practices, that he supposed the researcher is confronted to a lack of understanding of what he does. In other words, he may be engaged in what Garfinkel conceptualizes as modes of consciousness. What these modes of consciousness entail in this example is that the guard tries simply and naturally to explain the nature of his occupation, thus creating social order without any intention of impression management (Rawls, 2006: pp.20-25).

5. the game itself – rules, conventions, stakes, strategies, theories put to work and time spent playing.

I opted for in-depth interviews. I returned to my initial four respondents and asked them to grace me with a discussion again. I interviewed, in total, twelve poker players, ten of whom declared themselves professionals. The definition of what the term *professional player* meant (*For me, a player is a professional player when he does not have any other job except poker, he's a pro, that's what he does for a living*⁷ – Bomber, 24 years old) was imported from the field; the interviewees defined the professional player as an individual who makes a living out of the game, the money won through the game being their only source of subsistence.⁸ This emic account is similarly conveyed by David Hayano (1977, 1982) in his two-year ethnography of Gardena card rooms. He offers a thick description of career professionals (the same category I deal with in this article), as being skilled, experienced players who rely exclusively on the game in order to make a living, play in the games with the highest stakes, and are extremely competitive. This definition was used as a guideline for selecting the respondents. All respondents were male, aged between 22 and 44 years old, most of them university graduates or about to complete their studies, and the others still deciding if university was the best solution.

The manner in which I selected interviewees was decisive for the entire design of my research. While I began my investigation aiming to inquire into gambling practices, my first respondent was a professional poker player. He introduced me to some other poker players to whom I talked on several occasions. I found the way they justified poker playing as a profession intriguing. The research question stemmed from these initial respondents and their professional claims. Who was to be considered professional and who was not? While all the people I interviewed declared themselves as being professional players, not all of them were on a winning strike. Some had a bankroll which could be considered as being indicative of a successful player, while others had dashing hopes in poker as the best alternative. Still, all players continued to play poker and to make a profession out of play.

Two categories emerged after the interviews: the externally supported players and the career professionals. The former players regard their winnings as auxiliary sources of income, they do not rely on the game in order to survive and do not invest a great deal of time. The career professionals, on the other hand, rely financially on the game (whether we are speaking of money made at a poker table, or from coaching other players, or from publicity contracts) and spend at least eight hours a day playing poker. It is important to add that the career professionals interviewed are regarded as being among the best in the game not only by other players but also by official rankings devised by websites,⁹ this constituting empirical evidence of reputation and recognition. This,

⁷ “Simplu, pentru mine unul e profesionist în momentul în care unu nu are nicio slujbă în afară de poker” (Bomber, 24 years old).

⁸ There are of course, nuances to be taken into consideration in defining professional players, and these nuances are discussed more exhaustively later in this paper.

⁹ See, for example: <http://www.anytwo.ro/articol/97/monsterducati-in-echipa-anytwo.html>, or <http://www.pkrmagazin.com/romani/interviu-cu-dan-murariu>, both available on June 7, 2011. The names used in the text are fictional; the identity of my respondents remains anonymous.

however, may be taken as one of the limitations of my research. Having interviewed only established, successful professional poker players, I cannot draw comparisons between them and regular punters or between their experiences of the game. The terms: “betting,” “playing” and “gambling” are used interchangeably in the paper merely for stylistic purposes to avoid countless repetitions; I do acknowledge the many differences between the terms.

The game

One of the intriguing aspects of my research is the play on the word “gambling.” Having an exterior perspective on the game, poker is gambling: it possesses all the features of gambling, it has its setting in institutional gambling venues (the casino), it is sometimes illegal, if played in unauthorized settings (such as home games) and, most importantly, it involves subjecting something of value (be it money or objects) on an uncertain result. But it is not the external, observable, features that qualify a casino game as gambling, but the amount of gambling involved in each game. The game of poker, in fact, has a dual nature when it comes to its gambling status: professionals argue it is not gambling whereas others still consider it as such. Pros have not always been pros, and they too have had issues with this: *“it’s interesting that a long time I didn’t realize the mathematics behind the game, that there are diverse card combinations that you can have at some time in the game that only through a logical approach can make you win a hand; it’s a probability that you can calculate mathematically, so, it’s not only a psychological approach to the game or waiting for luck to strike”* (Doru, 44 years old).¹⁰

Duality, played in the form of the constant transgression from an inside perspective on the game to an external one, is also marked by poker promoters (such as online poker sites) when advertising. One example of such advertising is the campaign conducted by Fulltilt.net in 2007: *“We play because poker is not a scratch-off ticket, a half-court jumper, or a knock on wood. It’s no game of luck, poker. It’s a game of patience and well-timed aggression. We know when we play, a little luck helps. But luck can’t explain why final tables have so many familiar faces.”*¹¹ While acknowledging the pariah status which gambling has, they actively work at separating poker from gambling and promoting the game as a game of skill, experience and knowledge.

This duality is exacerbated to the level of discursive construction of poker as a profession: *“when I’m not with my poker friends or in a casino, or in the world of poker, it’s worth explaining to my close ones that poker is not gambling, that it’s ok and respectable what I do, they come to appreciate what I do. Others regard it as a superficial job, good on the short term, they don’t trust poker as a profession because they don’t know what this*

¹⁰ “Culmea e că o perioadă lungă de timp nu mi-am dat seama și de matematica din spatele jocului, pentru că există diverse combinații de cărți pe care tu le poți avea la un anumit moment dat, când, doar printr-o abordare logică, îți dai seama că acolo există o probabilitate pe care o poți calcula matematic, deci nu mai este vorba de o abordare psihologică sau o așteptare a norocului.”

¹¹ The Fulltilt advertisement can be seen at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3b3vj-xgxm4&feature=related>, available on June 7, 2011.

game is about, they can't be pertinent about it"¹² (Bogdi, 23 years old). Although this particular respondent takes pride in the outside validation he gets (as a working and disciplined individual), those who do not understand the intricacies of the game, or are not worth explaining them to, are without hesitation deemed as unimportant.

Theoreticians argue that the differences in the structure of a game determine how risky a game really is and that when comparing poker with other casino games one can acknowledge the fact that it is possible to win consistently and in the long run. In poker, unlike other casino games, skill is exercised, the amount of risk and chance diminished and that of control increased (Hayano, 1982). Caillois (1961: p.130) delineates four fundamental categories of play - *agon*, *alea*, *simulation* and *vertigo* - out of which poker would best be depicted as *agon*: a competitive game that entails training, skill and discipline and no outside support.

The rules of the game are simple enough: out of a 52-card deck, two cards are initially dealt to each player, and five cards are gradually unfolded for all players to see. The dynamics of the game can be described using Goffmanian lenses of strategic interaction (Goffman, 1969); in the light of this theoretical orientation, the player assesses the situation (his/her odds, interprets the other players' reaction when seeing their cards), makes the decision whether to stay in the game or not, initiates a course of action (s/he can check, raise or fold) and receives the payoff (wins the hand if the pursued course of action is a favorable one). Behind the simple logic of the four actions in the game (check, call, raise or fold) lie manifold mental operations as well as their translation into decision mechanisms put to work. As Potter (2003: p.172) insightfully points out, the game is ideally suited to scholars of symbolic interactionism, as it involves rules and conventions, calculation and deceit, impression management and face-saving, memory of hands, accessibility and inaccessibility of knowledge, subjective beliefs and rationalities.

Before further lucubrating on the game of poker and poker players, several theoretical adjustments must be addressed in order to clarify the exceptionalist view of play, games and work. Caillois defines play as a "separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, engaged in with precise limits of time and place" (1961: p.125). The definition is based on the divide between life and play, separation bracketed by time and place. Ordinary life appears to be a loose concept that encompasses all but play, similar to the current distinction between virtual and real life. Another feature that traditionally distinguishes play is that compared with work or art it renders itself not only unproductive, but primarily wasteful: "waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill and more often money." (Caillois, 1961: p.125)

Coleman (1968) argues that not only do play and games represent a time-out from life, they also express the individual's inability to explore social organization properly. His

¹² "Cei din jurul meu când nu sunt cu cei de la poker sau într-un casino sau într-o lume a pokerului, cei mai apropiați mie carora a meritat efortul să le explic că nu e vorba de un joc de noroc, și că e ok și respectabil ceea ce fac, mă privesc destul de bine și chiar mă apreciază destul de mult, în schimb... alții, o privesc ca pe o meserie superficială, ceva de moment, nu au încredere în treaba asta ca meserie pentru că nu știu în ce constă jocul ăsta, atunci nu pot avea o părere pertinentă." (Bogdi, 23).

rationalist perspective on life as a sequence of events directed towards goals leaves little room for the experiential features of play. Play is useless, play is wasteful and, as Lastowka (2009) remarks, when games are played, *post hoc* accounts are given in order to reinstall the longstanding values of Protestant ethics. Play rocks the steady ground on which social organization stands: work, seriousness and responsibility. Everyday experience is thus envisaged as a work of bricolage, where the bits and pieces that do not fit are scrupulously cropped.

The same type of work is done by the scholars of pathological gambling. Their story begins with Edmund Bergler in the 1950s, who stated that compulsive gamblers are driven by an unconscious wish to lose; gamblers suffer from chronic masochism; they need to punish themselves in order to expiate some unconscious source of guilt (Rosecrance, 1985: p.277). They suffer from a treatable illness, nonetheless, but they are discreetly removed from real life, from vice and sin, and placed in artificial, medical contexts. All of a sudden, gambling is seen as a problematic subject, a case of “making-up people”, as Ian Hacking (2002) would suggest: the concept is scientifically developed, the category comes to life, and worried gamblers around the world “Frankenstein” themselves into a curious state of disease. In a similar manner, Erving Goffman cautions social scientists against creating the very phenomena they study:

‘It is remarkable that those who live around the social sciences have so quickly become comfortable in using the term “deviant,” as if those to whom the term is applied have enough in common so that significant things can be said about them as a whole. Just as there are iatrogenic disorders caused by the work that physicians do (which then gives them more work to do), so there are categories of persons who are created by students of society, and then studied by them.’ (Goffman, 1963: p.166)

Waste, irrationality, addictiveness, loss and destruction are the features that accompany the discourse on pathological gambling. The medical model imposes a lens for evaluating gambling. The basis of the medical model of addiction stands on several questionable assumptions: it makes no distinction between social and pathological gambling, these scholars anticipate that the social gambler will undoubtedly transform in a pathological one. Furthermore, it does not question the pathological nature of gambling and is dismissive with regard to any other type of explanation, other than psychological ones: “while anthropologists and sociologists have looked at gambling, psychologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts have done most of the research on pathological gambling” (Lesieur and Custer 1984: 150). Finally, the assumption is that help materializes in the form of medical treatment and provide no critique to the application of the medical model.

Just like the boundary-setting distinction between life and play, the essence of the analysis is forever lost, play is sinful, play is waste, but who said that “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”? Proverbs aside, these two perspectives narrow the frameworks for the study of play, games and gambling, they diagnose and condemn rather than understand and ultimately foreclose the vistas of social research. By declaring their gambling as an emergent profession, poker players challenge the

theoretical assumptions of play as a separate domain. Making a living out of poker, making sense of the game, at the same time, as a structuring matrix that organizes their way of going through the world, players connect the reality of the world of daily life to the reality of the game.

Positively inclined, play stands out as being safe and fun, with no consequences on everyday life (Malaby, 2007: p.96). All the same, the above-mentioned features are not built into the concept of play but are always “cultural accomplishments specific to a given context” and should be investigated as such (p.99). Malaby suggests a re-conceptualization of play that would treat it not as a form of activity, but as a mode of experience, portraying games as process (p.96); his great contribution is in rehabilitating the concept and bringing it back to real life, as part and parcel of everyday experience. The emotional payoffs of poker (or experiential features) are overlooked if we adopt a conventional view of play and games: the rush of adrenaline at the sight of a good hand, the hesitation when placing a bet, or the disappointment as well as shifts in playing patterns and strategies when facing a *bad beat* (loss despite statistically favorable outcomes) (Avery, 2009).

Goffman, through his extended metaphors, offers a less fragmentary perspective that links games and play with life to some extent. Games, through the roles and identities created within, constitute “an engine of meaning” which allows for a new perspective of games as “world building activities” (Goffman, 1961: p.25). Similarly, when delineating play, Huizinga introduces the notion of “magic circle”: engaging in play one enters a temporary world; “all are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (1950: p.10). He stresses among the positive aspects of play the creation of order: “into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection” (Huizinga, 1950: p.10). Order as regularity emerges on the casino floor, “in the repetitive rituals of play, the world becomes organized again” (Reith, 1999: p.119).

Players, both physically and mentally, cross the threshold between everyday life and the world of play, engaging in what Goffman names *focused gatherings*, but this separateness is marked through the meaning assigned to play. The game generates a “field for fateful dramatic action, a plane of being [...] a world in itself” (Goffman, 1961: p.25). At this point in the argument, some implicit assumptions should be clarified in order to carry on with the demonstration. Games create worlds in themselves, but their reality is neither singular nor unique, it exists analogously with different other realities. James (1869) terms these realities worlds of attention, sub-universes, orders of existence, each with its own special style of existence defined by selective attention, intimate involvement and non-contradiction (cited by Goffman, 1974: pp.2-4). Departing from James, Alfred Schutz (1945) endows these sub-universes with subjective meaning and redefines them as finite provinces of meaning. Reality is created through the meaning which experience has for the one who experiences it, not through the ontological structure of the objects which constitute reality. It is the wider reality, the world of working, which stands out as paramount reality against the many other sub-universes of reality (p.549). Engaging in a game of poker, players transport themselves

into a finite province of meaning. Its “finiteness” implies, however, the existence of boundaries, frontiers between the wider reality and the reality of the game, temporarily enacted. By maintaining a single visual and cognitive focus of attention, players become spontaneously involved, an integral part of the situation (Goffman, 1961: p.35). The roles and events are locally realized in the world of play yet not without consequences in everyday life. The transgression back and forth between the wider world and “the mutual activity embedded in a focused gathering” is marked through certain boundaries (p.31), barriers “... more like a screen rather than a solid wall” (p.31).

Each of these provinces of meaning is constituted as real according to several structural principles, or, as Schutz terms it: “we may bestow the accent of reality” to a finite province of meaning by its specific “cognitive style” (1945: p.551). I shall now discuss each characteristic of the cognitive style pertaining to the world of poker.

The wider reality is under-represented in description by poker players, in the form of relationships outside the poker entourage (family and significant others), institutional arrangements (especially faculty) or as prospective plans following the concluding part of their poker careers. Poker is seen as the better alternative to a conventional career, if only a short-term alternative; all the same, the short term ranges from five to fifteen years, according to individual levels of stress endurance. What will happen after these five to fifteen years of poker? “*Life... and what life assumes: a family, children, a house, a settled life*”¹³ (Frunză, 24 years old). All respondents claim that poker occupies a large part of the day, as they are either playing or learning the game through videos, books and discussion forums. It is not the wider reality that is paramount over the many other realities, but the reality of the game is used as the standard against which all other realities are judged. *Attention à la vie*, the tension of consciousness inherent in each plane of being (Schutz, 1945: 537), “exclusively directed to carrying its project into effect” (p.538), is shifted temporarily onto the game.

So engrossed in the game do players become that the entire structure of time is altered. The rhythm of the game and its length are constitutive of the experience of time. Schutz draws a distinction between cosmic time (objective, spatialized and measurable) and inner time or *durée* (1945: p.540), the time perspective of the province of meaning being given by the intersection between the two (p.552). The swiftness of time is best depicted when players speak of the time spent engaged in play: “*I once played for two days in a row, from Sunday till Tuesday... I didn’t get up from my computer, I couldn’t stand up straight, I was hunched from the playing, I’d run to get to the bathroom*”¹⁴ (Bomber, 24 years old).

The game expands its jurisdiction outside its realm and conquers all the other provinces through comparison. Time is experienced as sluggish and void in the wider reality, as it is also linked to personal schedules. The game of poker, whether it is played

¹³ “Si apoi viața... și tot ce presupune ea: familie, copii, casă, masă” (Frunză, 24 years old).

¹⁴ “S-a întâmplat să joc două zile încontinuu, am jucat de duminică până marți, nu m-am ridicat de la calculator, nu mai puteam să stau drept, eram cocoșat și fugeam ca să merg la baie” (Bomber, 24 years old).

online or live in a casino, has a nocturnal character¹⁵ and, in order to get into action, players conform and adapt. They play mostly at night, and therefore the day is spent resting. As a consequence, adaptability to the game is translated as inadaptability to regular schedules: *“my schedule is American, I sleep during the day [...] Just think about it, I don’t have to go to work; if I wake up at 9 am, all my friends would be asleep, what would I do?”* (Cristi, 22 years old).

The reversed schedule has further implications. Every group of friends revolves around, and is sometimes restricted to, people with similar schedules: *“most of the people to whom I speak daily are tied to poker, this is why I want to enroll back in college, so I can interact with people outside this world”* (Cristi, 22 years old). Relationships with significant others are usually disassembled through play. Both the game and the players create worlds, multiple realities that arrogate time and relations: *“all my time was loaded with this preoccupation, the roulette and poker, in this way, it affected my relationships with most of the people I know that are not part of my gambling entourage”*¹⁶ (Bomber, 24 years old).

Sometimes the above-mentioned institutional arrangements do not prove satisfactory and are abandoned, as in the case of George. I interviewed both George and Cosmin. They both played poker, but at different levels of intentness. Whereas Cosmin had graduated and was in his second year of master studies abroad, George was still coming to terms with being in faculty. Having dropped out of college, he enrolled in a different one: *“in the first year, I would go, let’s say once every three days. I read a lot about poker, I watched videos about poker, I think I saw a great deal of videos about poker.”* When asked about the existence of a link between his dropping out of college and poker playing, it was Cosmin who answered: *“well, he won’t do anything if somebody doesn’t push him from behind. And as long as he has poker, he could see at that time that he could make a career out of poker, he still believes that, he no longer has the proper motivation to graduate.”* The above-mentioned motivation comes in the form of an explicit connection to the wider reality – money. Poker playing for a living comes with the promise, if not the ultimate chance, for some, of getting rich. It provides, in prospect, the same imagined salaries which multinational corporate CEOs and successful business people enjoy.

In the world of the game, money, however, shifts its outside value to a mere tool of trade, an instrument: *“during the game, I see the money I play as instruments, as utensils, something that helps me do my work, my job”*¹⁷ (Bogdi, 23 years old). The terminology also changes, according to the game: money is calculated not in real-life currency, but in *buy-ins* or *blinds*, the former describing the money needed in order to enter a particular game (entrance fee) and the latter the duration of the game, the amount of time in action.

¹⁵ This nocturnal character is not always linked to the way professional poker players envisage their timetables, but is tightly connected to other people’s schedules. Most non-professional players play after work, while other opponents are on a different time zone.

¹⁶ *“Aveam timpul umplut de preocuparea asta, de ruletă, poker, în felul ăsta mi-a afectat relațiile cu majoritatea lumii care nu facea parte din anturajul meu de gamblerit”* (Bomber, 24 years old).

¹⁷ *“[...] în timpul jocului, banii pe care îi joc îi văd ca pe niște ustensile, niște lucruri cu care îmi fac treaba, meseria”* (Bogdi, 23 years old).

Most players play for the money, whether for the functions it has outside the world of the game, or in the promise (sometimes kept) of an immense win. The promise, if kept, dematerializes into a perpetual discontent. Cristi, for example, started playing poker for a living some two years before the time of the interview. When he started playing, he says, he wanted to win a great tournament and then get out of this work, get in a public university and focus on it, or, if the situation changed, enroll together with his sister in a university abroad. *“I’ve already got two years playing, but I’m still affected by these swings, up and down, up and down [...] And the game, well, it’s not only the fact that it’s difficult through its nature, but it’s getting more difficult by the day.”* The situation has changed since then: he won the great tournament he was hoping for, his bankroll increasing by over one hundred thousand Euros. The amounts themselves indicate a different ordering of reality. That money, as Cristi terms it, has been “life changing money,” but his life has not changed since then: what did change, however, was his game: *“I can now go to any tournament abroad, I can afford to go, I can play at higher stakes”* and his time as a professional poker player has accrued to five years: *“when I started, I had a plan in my mind, but, the further I get, the harder it is to get there.”* The question poker players cannot answer is the time spent in action; how long is too long? How does one calculate individual *durée*? In actual, measurable time or in ideated money?

As demonstrated, the world of poker players is in every sense a “finite province of meaning,” a world on its own with a different time structure, schedule, social organization and values that animate play. The next part of this papers deals with the settings in which poker takes place.

The setting

The Hold’em version of poker (which is the most popular version and the one which is addressed in this paper) can be played either live or online (in “poker rooms”). Live poker is played in casinos (mixed with other games of chance such as roulette, slot machines and blackjack), special card rooms which are equipped mainly with poker tables, or in home games (customarily considered to be the friendly version of poker, held in one of the players’ houses for relatively low stakes, or illegal miniature versions of casino games). To play online, one has to register with a poker site (such as Party Poker, Poker Stars or Maxi Play¹⁸), download a software and, after submitting personal data, gain access to the world of play. I have interviewed both online and live poker players. This chapter deals with the settings in which poker takes place. To each setting pertains a specific type of knowledge, a situated approach to the game and different forms of sociality.

All stories are tied to the opening in Bucharest of a poker parlor designed exclusively for the game (Poker Club). Until 2009, the law stated that the existence of a Texas Hold’em poker table inside a casino was limited to the existence of ten other tables (employed for other gambling games, such as roulette, blackjack or dice). It was

¹⁸ There are perhaps hundreds of such online poker rooms; it therefore seems pointless to list all such venues.

not profitable for casino owners to offer this game, and those who did restricted entrance to high stakes players. The legislation became more permissive after 2009 and permitted casino owners to host poker games, as long as they had two roulette tables for every eight to ten poker tables.¹⁹ What did this mean? Lower stakes players, online players freed from the confinement of high stakes games and inexperienced players who could learn the game: thus came into being the first Romanian poker school.

Poker initiation is inextricably linked with playing in this venue. Although most of my respondents had previous gambling experiences, it was in Poker Club that they learnt the game and became aware that, if played correctly, the game could render itself financially lucrative. Poker Club was, in the gambling world, a big hit: in the first few weeks the number of poker tables increased from two to eight, every gambler had to score a visit for his/her private gambling experience collectibles. My respondents associate this venue with low stakes poker, weak opponents and, with a reflective glance towards the past, even weaker styles of play. *“There were some that were terrible, worthless players, you don’t find them anymore. Those were good times. We were weak as well, the first time we went there we all won about five million lei each, some three, some seven. Wow”* (George, 23 years old). Another respondent speaks of the money won there as *“easy money,”* easy to win and just as easily lost.

For poker players, money has a dual worth. For beginners, money is estimated through the market value, for the social functions it has outside the game. The money of their beginnings is characterized by its irregularity and perennial nature. Once a professional definition comes into play, money loses this calculable feature and transforms into a sign of success or failure. The money won there, however, was the first motivational push. It was there where poker playing, as a profession, was substantiated. It was because of this particular setting that most players started to research the game and began to synchronize their knowledge of the game with Western poker culture: *“I started searching on the Internet, looking for other players’ experiences, I ran into professionals that explained their game, or at least part of the game, some of decisions they called during the game [...] and realized that the game of poker is more a game of bad luck than one of luck”* (Doru, 44 years old). The two years the poker parlor functioned represented the period of transition from a gambling perspective to a professional stance on the game. Professionalization meant learning the game: the probabilities calculus behind each hand, the minimization of risks through the ongoing analysis of game situations. Even though the game per se is based on a clear, explicable mechanism through mathematical and probabilistic theories, the strategies employed in either setting or situation are completely negotiable. It is difficult (if not impossible) to adopt a good strategy (that is, a financially lucrative one) because of the trouble in defining the good strategy, that is, the best suited for the game situation. Also, another quandary stands in the immense number of card combinations as well as the flawed sense players have of what information is during the game. Position at the poker table itself is a moving target. There are three positions that are informative for all players: the *small*

¹⁹ For more information regarding the legislation, see Ordonanță de urgență nr. 77 din 24 iunie 2009 privind organizarea și exploatarea jocurilor de noroc. In Monitorul Oficial nr. 439/26 June 2009.

blind, the *big blind* and the *dealer*. I try to avoid the technicalities of the game but merely point out that the rest of the game is dependent upon the actions of the players occupying these positions (the dealer, for example, is the last player to bet and holds the most complete information with regard to the game).

Most of my respondents have started playing poker at Poker Club or on online poker sites. The two settings distinguish players as live players and online players, each game with its own strategies and approach to the game: “[online poker] it’s a totally different sport, it’s like playing football in a gym and football on the field” (Mircea, 25 years old). Each setting is chosen according to individual characteristics. Poker has an intrinsic interactional feature: compared with other casino games when players bet against the house, in poker, players bet against each other. Apart from the mathematical dimension, there is a differentiating social dimension of the game: “there are many psychological components of the game, many psychological moments when you have to time your winning, to win more or less many from your opponent, according to the moment of the game”²⁰ (Agentul, 28 years old). Live playing, in casinos, is an arena where all social skills can be exercised as tools of the trade. From spontaneity, a good sense of humor, charisma to outstanding arrogance and dismissive attitude, all can be incorporated in the face-to-face game.

Online playing lacks precisely this interactional feature. Even though players still bet against real-life opponents, this form of gambling is one “evacuated of sociality” (Suchman, 2007: p.15) and it entails a more mathematical approach to the game. It has other advantages, however. Live poker playing implies the adjustment of one’s schedule to the schedule of the casino, which functions mostly at night. The money won online indicates different degrees of reality: one game pertains to a realer reality than another; “when I won money and it entered on my credit card, I didn’t get to realize what the deal with that money is. I had it one day and the next it was gone” (Bomber, 24 years old).

The players

Although I have talked endlessly about professional poker players, I did not, up to this point, provide a definition of what the poker profession entails. To speak today about occupations and professions is like trying to juggle plates on shifting sands. This constant reshuffling of professional worlds, however, allows more permissive definitions of professions. The consensus on the definitive traits of professions is that “a profession is an occupational group with some special skill [...] one that requires extensive training” (Abbott, 1988: p.7). One of the many attributes that distinguishes professional poker players from the regular punters is the ability to “read their opponents’ hands with uncanny accuracy from the tiniest clues: the position they occupy at the table, timing and pace, the way they move the chips to the unnoticeable pulse beats and threads of sweat on their foreheads” (Alvarez, 1983: p.34). The reading of the opponents is represented in mirror, as players themselves make use of face-work in order to disguise the inferences

²⁰ “Sunt multe componente psihologice, sunt multe momente psihologice în joc, momente când trebuie să știi când să câștigi mai mulți bani sau mai puțin bani la un adversar în funcție de momentul jocului.”

other players make of their game. The number of hands played is indicative of the players' expertise: the more the merrier (usually exceeding the order of thousands): "*It was all I did! Only that! It's only normal that I leant to play and that through work and exercise you get better, experience amassed, this is what made me become a better player*" (Bomber, 24 years old). The rule of thumb in poker is that the more encounters a player has, the more experience s/he acquires, experience equals knowledge and knowledge renders authority. Numerous implications can be further acknowledged: skills and knowledge are obtained only by unremitting involvement in casino life.

Not all poker players are good players and not all good players consider themselves and are considered, in turn, professionals. If the term professional is to be applied to all experienced poker players, it should not be based on external financial criteria, but on the implicit definitions of oneself, that is, the personal evaluations of self, success and gambling aspirations (Hayano 1977, 1982). Let us consider, for example, the way in which players define and are defined. Poker manuals categorize players according to stable patterns of play: loose, tight, aggressive, and combinations of these attributes. Players themselves define themselves and other players, a little more colorful in their orality, indeed, but carefully avoiding normative denunciations. Gamblers are not judged as good or bad, but talented or untalented: appraised players are *winner players* or *sharks*,²¹ whereas the less talented are *inveterate gamblers* or *fish*.²² Players claim that hard work combined with the experience of play makes the difference. Whether these are accounts aimed at promoting poker playing as an accessible activity remains a question for debate and research; it is certain, however, that players who consider themselves and are considered *professionals* - the constant presences in casinos who claim to be playing mostly for the financial payoffs - thrive on the existence of less talented gamblers: "*no table without fish, that's how the saying goes in poker*"²³ (Memo, 23 years old).

Bomber's story is by far the one most explicitly interconnected with gambling. His transformation to adulthood draws nearly to the games he has played during his life. He is, in every respect, a gambler. He introduces himself as a gambler, providing abstract definitions of himself mediated by gambling: "*I like to be a gambler, I like to bet, to depend on chance, to wait breathless for the result*". Goffman (1974) criticized both James and Schutz as weak in providing definitions as to what can one get caught up in, engrossed in, carried away by. Neither of them provides uplifting enlightenment as to the structural similarities between everyday life and the worlds of make-believe, leaving scholars unaware of how this relationship should modify their view of everyday life (Goffman, 1974: p. 6). Bomber's story is extremely indicative in this respect. He has learnt through play and gambling real-life concepts such as the concept of friendship and similar interests: "*gambling has generally strengthened my relationships with the gamblers and worsened the ones with people outside the gambling world*"; the concept of indebtedness: "*I wasn't used to debts, I didn't know one could have debts until I started gambling, at one time I had created a mentality out of being in debt*"; that of losing face:

²¹ "jucători câștigatori," "rechini," "Nazis" or "buncări."

²² "jucători degenerați" and "pești."

²³ "Nicio masă fără pești, ăsta e dictonul în poker."

“when people find out that you gamble, they become reluctant to give you money”; and later, through poker, that of discipline: *“bankroll management has its rules, you have to follow them, but you have to become very disciplined, especially in day to day life, to follow the same rules.”* It was his evolution *“from monkey to gambler,”* his ongoing life project of ego negotiation and personality formation (Potter, 2003), parallel to his upbringing as a poker player.

He too was motivated by the “easy money” of his beginnings and, deciding to take the game seriously, he educated himself through books, videos, professional accounts and hand analysis: *“I put in practice the stuff I read for one, two or three days and I realized it helped, I could notice a serious difference from my simple, hackneyed style.”* Since then, his stakes increased tenfold, along with his bankroll and his aspirations of success: *“it was this tournament in San Remo where, up to the final table, I was considered favorite [...] I lost one hand and I got out of the tournament. For me it was a huge failure, even though I scored an OK sum, I couldn’t even enjoy it.”* Gambling, in general, and especially poker, is challengingly divorced from what game theorists term as “the game of life.” (Potter, 2003) The game is played for the money; money typifies the reality of life transgressed in play. Money, again, appears in its dual nature as a transformative principle between the world of play and the wider reality. The sum won is described by Bomber as an “OK sum”, and its designated value is in accordance to the value money has outside the game. His malaise stems from the functions it would have had inside the game. Bomber managed to improve his betting style, from uninformed guesses to skilled improvisation: *“you have to adapt yourself to the game, to look at the cards you have, the style of your opponents, the way they raise, the sums they raise, the position from which they raised and your position at the table. If you have a good card and you want to play it more complexly, you have to look at the amount of money you have, your stack, and your opponent’s stack and so on.”*

Apart from the stakes, which, as they increase, are indicative of one’s level of professionalism, all respondents adhere to an unwritten ethical code. They avoid both cheaters and cheating, and try to avoid playing at the same tables as their friends. Professionals maintain a single frame or perspective, a professional definition of the situation; cheatings and dealings under the table provide a nice illustration of what Goffman terms as being “out of frame” (1961: p.51).

The money, the knowledge, the different ordering of reality, all constitute merely a part of these professional stories. Undoubtedly there is a residual part which cannot be explained and accounted for. Undoubtedly this article leaves facets of the phenomenon insufficiently if not completely lacking exploration. My analysis on the subject is not extensive, since gambling has numerous theoretical implications. Students of gambling sometimes entrap themselves in over-confining theories, fall into their own previously constructed categories and manage to “lose the phenomenon.” (Garfinkel, cited by Rawls, 2002: p.116)

Concluding remarks

Abbott contends that professions are breathtakingly diverse: “winners and losers, public officials and private individuals, autocrats and subordinates. [...] Many claimants have never found a niche in the system at all. Yet all are a part of professional life” (Abbott, 1988: p.30). Professional poker playing is just such a part of professional life. I have tried in this paper to describe the type of work this profession entails, giving a glimpse into the world of professional poker players. All of my respondents make reference to a legitimization of gambling as professional work. Legitimization is seen here as social recognition and validation and as being separated from the poorly connoted, and somehow stigmatized, “gambling”. All stories are linked to gambling, (negatively regarded by players themselves) which actively work at promoting poker playing (still widely considered to be gambling) as respectable. This article is aimed at providing an alternative for gambling addiction theories and to reverse a commonly shared understanding of games being nothing more than fun. The game of poker should be fun, but its attractiveness does not stand solely in the amusement it produces to the participant. For some, it represents the bread and butter of their existence that shapes the way the world outside the game is evaluated. One troubling aspect is related to the fact that the label of “professional poker player” takes preeminence in the players’ self presentation, more often to that of business owners, university graduates, engineers etc. I argue that the self identification as a professional gambler is directly related to the shared understandings of what the game of poker mean for the players, as well as the distinct type of knowledge, routines, settings and individual characteristics of the players.

The players provide a basic definition of a professional poker player as one whose living is made solely from playing poker. They speak casually of the money gambled, seeming slightly disquieted only by the variation in the game. It is reasonable to assume that one cannot predict chance. Yet professional poker players pride themselves on the ability to predict chance, to read the game and their opponents, and to bet correctly according to calculated probabilities established through experience, strategies, and tells. “*I read the tells*” is common vocabulary among the players I interviewed. Still, in order to subsist out of poker one must prove herself competent, and this competence itself is affirmed through limited variation in the game, in other words, through the constant income made out of poker. This income stands as ultimate evidence for the validation of the professional poker player. Validation, however, has no meaning inside the game, its meanings reside only in the “wider-reality”, as players do not compete against each other as to prove that one is more professional than another. Their struggle communicates in the outside-the-game world and is battled against those who belittle the potential poker has as a fulltime occupation.

Studying professional poker players, I have studied the way poker players produce evidence of being more than just poker players, respectively, professionals. Being a pro means convincing others, whether players or not, that you have an edge. In other words, professional players not only play poker, they play upon evidence. The evidence provided by players for poker as a profession is intimately connected to the connections and

disconnection between the two worlds. When contested, they forward the constant income as the crowning proof of their profession. Most likely, the money won is not constant, but face-work comes into play only to inform of the expectations people have of what professional entails.

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Andrada-Mihaela Istrate is graduate student of the Department of Sociology and Social Work at the University of Bucharest and the Master of Research in Sociology. Currently she is enrolled in the Master in Sociology and Social Anthropology at the Central European University. She is doing research on gambling and poker, with an interest in determinacy and chance, play and creativity.