

## Don't talk to them, they will not understand: How poker players experience criticism and stigma

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### Abstract

In this qualitative study, 15 poker players described a lack of understanding and unfair criticism from non-players, both of which made them unwilling to discuss poker. A theoretical framework, based on classical theories from Goffman (1963), Becker (1963) and Douglas (2003), was used to analyze the players' perspectives. This article argues that the society's reluctance to acknowledge poker players' competence might cause a lack of dialogue between players and non-players. Over time, this situation may cause players to consider themselves outsiders. This result could contribute to make it difficult to combine poker playing with the life outside and to encourage former professional poker players into education or other jobs. In poker, unlike most forms of gambling, a personal connection operates between the winning and losing players. A common criticism against successful poker players is that they are cynical, and take advantage of weak or compulsive players. Previous research has hypothesized that cultural differences operate with players relate to opponents with potential gambling problems. This study identifies three different approaches and attitudes poker players may have towards suspected compulsive gamblers, and suggests that players from Nordic welfare states are more likely to empathize with compulsive gamblers than players from more market liberal countries. The players in this inquiry generally stated that they disliked playing against suspected problem gamblers, and argued that it created for them difficult ethical dilemmas. To confront a stranger with a gambling problem then advise him or her to stop was described as challenging, especially in front of other players.

**Keywords:** poker, outsider, gambling problems, information control, ethical dilemmas

### Résumé

Dans cette étude qualitative, 15 joueurs de poker ont décrit un manque de compréhension et une critique injuste de la part de non-joueurs, ce qui les rend peu enclins à discuter de poker. Un cadre théorique basé sur les théories classiques de Goffman (1963), de Becker (1963) et de Douglas (2003) a été utilisé pour analyser

les perspectives des joueurs. Cet article soutient que la réticence de la société à reconnaître la compétence des joueurs de poker pourrait entraîner un manque de dialogue entre les joueurs et les non-joueurs. Avec le temps, les joueurs peuvent se sentir marginalisés. Cela pourrait nuire à la possibilité de combiner le poker avec la vie en dehors du jeu et d'amener les anciens joueurs de poker professionnels à poursuivre des études ou occuper d'autres emplois. Au poker, contrairement à la plupart des formes de jeu, il existe un lien personnel entre les joueurs gagnants et perdants. On critique souvent les joueurs de poker gagnants d'être cyniques et de profiter de joueurs faibles ou compulsifs. Des recherches antérieures ont émis l'hypothèse qu'il existe des différences culturelles dans la façon dont les joueurs se lient aux adversaires ayant des problèmes de jeu potentiels. Cette étude relève trois approches différentes que les joueurs de poker peuvent adopter vis-à-vis des joueurs présumés compulsifs, et laisse entendre que les joueurs provenant d'États-providence du Nord sont plus susceptibles de sympathiser avec les joueurs compulsifs que les joueurs des pays libéraux. Les joueurs de cette étude ont généralement déclaré qu'ils n'aimaient pas jouer contre des joueurs soupçonnés d'avoir des problèmes de jeu et ont fait valoir que cela les mettait dans des dilemmes éthiques difficiles. Affronter un étranger ayant un problème de jeu et lui conseiller de se détendre a été décrit comme un défi, surtout devant les autres joueurs.

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## Introduction

The society has a long tradition for criticizing poker players. In an early study on players, for example, Hayano (1982) writes:

“[a] large proportion of psychological studies of gambling and gamblers have been explicitly critical and moralistic and have focused primarily on the loser or compulsive bettor. And, almost uniformly, sociologists have considered gambling a sordid aspect of “lower-class” subculture or an integral cog in the machinery of organized crime. Professional gamblers are grouped with other kinds of social deviants who pose dangerous threats to the moral fiber of society” (Hayano, 1982, p. 10).

In the last decades, society's view on poker players has shifted from a moral understanding to a social or medical pathological one (Radburn & Horsley, 2011; Scimecca, 2015; Vines & Linders, 2016).

In this study, I will examine how 15 dedicated poker players relate to criticism from non-players, and how those dedicated gamblers experience playing against players whom they suspect sustain a gambling problem. In the literature a tradition exists of trying to understand persons perceived as outsiders (Becker, 1963), persons stigmatized (Goffman, 1963), and how society uses moral criticism to prevent undesirable

behavior (Douglas, 2003). In previous research, I have identified several anecdotal findings from poker players' experiences, discoveries which indicate that the outsider perspective, the stigma, and the moral condemnation could be fruitful analytical framework for understanding the players' descriptions (e.g., Binde, 2005; Hayano, 1982; Istrate, 2011; Jouhki, 2011; Laakasuo, Palomäki, & Salmela, 2016; Radburn & Horsley, 2011; Scimecca, 2015; Vines & Linders, 2016).

As part of this inquiry, I combine these traditions to analyze the informants' perspective. The two objectives of the study were to describe how different sub-groups of poker players experience (1) criticism and stigmatization from non-players, and (2) gambling with players suspected of managing gambling problems.

### **Why are poker players exposed to stigmatizing?**

Binde (2005) argues that gambling, both throughout history and across societies, has been evaluated by its organization, social meaning and how it is regarded in moral terms. He compares poker to theft or to robbery by mutual agreement. However, according to Binde, the agreement does not free poker from the moral criticism, just as dueling is considered murder even though both participants agreed to the conditions of the duel. To view poker players as aggressive and hostile with the intention to bankrupt their opponents enjoys a long tradition (Binde, 2005; see also Zurcher, 1970). Poker players have been viewed as untrustworthy (Binde, 2005).

Poker, and gambling in general, have both historically been viewed as sinful, possibly related to organized crime, and a flaw in a person's character (Hardy, 2006; Hayano, 1977, 1982; Radburn & Horsley, 2011; Romoser, 2013; Vines & Linders, 2016). Ian Hacking (1995, 2004) argues that members of a group are affected by the way other persons categorize them. Frequent gamblers risk being labeled as mentally ill or at least irrational (Istrate, 2011; Jouhki, 2011; Laakasuo et al., 2016; Scimecca, 2015). Istrate (2011) writes: "the label 'pathological gambling' came into use in the 1980s when the American Psychiatric Association included gambling as a mental disorder" (p. 50). Gambling problems are commonly measured by specific pre-determined criteria, including frequency of playing, increases in stakes wagered, and attempts to win back lost money. These elements are also those ones necessary for succeeding as a professional poker player and therefore they are bound to meet at least certain of the criteria used to diagnose a compulsive gambler (Biolcati, Passini, & Griffiths, 2015; Bjerg, 2010; Laakasuo et al., 2016; Moreau, Chabrol, & Chauchard, 2016; Radburn & Horsley, 2011; Scimecca, 2015). In a Finnish study, successful poker players met several of the criteria for being diagnosed as managing gambling problems, a finding which made the authors conclude that the criteria for measuring gambling problems may not be valid when it comes to poker players who make a profit (Laakasuo et al., 2016). To be misdiagnosed with gambling problems may itself stigmatize the gambler. Barrault, Untas, and Varescon (2014) found that the amount of regular online poker players who are estimated to have a gambling problem in different studies varies 9–18% (Barrault et al., 2014), and the percentages that are considered to be at risk of developing pathological gambling

problems vary by 12–50% (Bouju, Grall-Bronnec, Quistrebert-Davanne, Hardouin, & Venisse, 2013).

The criticism towards poker players in these studies could be categorized as either moral (blemishes of the individuals' character such as being untrustworthy or linked to crime) or pathological (addicted to gambling and not able to control oneself). Another (although indirect) criticism is failure to acknowledge the player's competence.

**The player's level of skill or competence is underestimated (poker is perceived as a game of chance)**

Radburn and Horsley (2011) conducted an interview study of four professional poker players from the United Kingdom. Their informants emphasized the element of skill and that poker should not be understood as gambling. The importance of acknowledging the element of skill in poker is probably the most emphasized statement from the poker players in qualitative studies (Barrault et al., 2014, Bouju et al., 2013; Bradley & Schroeder, 2009; Istrate, 2011; Jouhki, 2011; McCormack & Griffiths, 2012; Palomäki, Laakasuo, & Salmela, 2013; Radburn & Horsley, 2011; Recher & Griffiths, 2012; Vines & Linders, 2016; Wood & Griffiths, 2008; Zaman, Geurden, De Cock, De Schutter, & Abeele, 2014).

Two of Radburn and Horsley's (2011) informants divided their non-gambling friends into two categories: (1) those respondents who understood (especially the element of skill in poker) and were open-minded, and (2) those respondents who did not understand and, therefore, stigmatized poker players, and were judgmental in their apprehension of them. To discuss poker with the last group informants considered futile. According to Palomäki et al. (2013), professional Finnish poker players were angry at Finnish mainstream media for not understanding the poker sub-culture and the element of skill involved. The professional gamblers believed themselves stigmatized as degenerate gamblers. Radburn and Horsley's (2011) informants reported that they tried to avoid speaking with non-players about poker. Certain studies report that players are unwilling to talk about poker unless the researcher has earned some poker experience (Hayano 1982; Palomäki et al., 2013 p. 257; Radburn & Horsley, 2011 pp. 32–33; Vines & Linders, 2016, pp. 1067, 1075). Such a relationship between the players and non-players may provoke an undesirable distance. This may contribute to strengthen the poker sub-culture (those who understand) and distance poker players from non-players (those who do not understand).

The online poker industry may use the discrepancy between the player's and society's views to promote poker as a full-time occupation and a new type of profession (Binde, 2007; Istrate, 2011). "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" (Istrate, 2011 p. 54).

### **Poker is described as unethical**

Recher and Griffiths (2012) argue that online poker is a game where it is easy to understand that the money won derives directly from other players, and not the gambling operator. This aspect creates a direct means of contact between winning and losing players. In live poker, the meeting between problem gamblers and dedicated players becomes even more personal since the loser and winner look each other in the eyes.

According to Vines and Linders (2016), playing poker professionally is often perceived as “dirty work,” an occupation that is unethical, consists of stigma and is considered beneath the common person (Vines & Linders, 2016). The words “work” and “dirty” requires further discussion. Heen (2008) argues that what is defined as “work” is normative and reflects a valuation of the activity. In the welfare states, work has been connected closely to a social project and positive identity (honest laborer), while the ones without jobs risk being stigmatized. Independent remunerative work might be considered less social and further from the social project. Having a respectable job is more than just making money (Heen, 2008).

To define something as “dirty” is society’s way of reinforcing moral behavior. Food is considered dirty on the table but not on a plate (Douglas, 2003). By the same token, being a recreational poker player could indeed be considered acceptable, but not a professional poker player. Defining something as dirty contributes to stigmatizing the persons who are involved in the dirty behavior (Douglas, 2003). However, in a study of Finnish poker players with extensive experience, Laakasuo et al. (2016) did not find any associations between poker experience and social dysfunctions, alienation, emotional coldness, or selfish behavior.

Danish researcher Bjerg described poker as a parody of capitalism and something that is far from the Nordic values. In poker, the best players can build their career on mistakes made by less-skilled opponents (Bjerg, 2010, 2011). The Nordic protestant working ethos and the expectation of hard work being awarded with a fair compensation does not harmonize with the brutal logic of poker. It challenges the Nordic ideals, such as social equity, fairness, and uniform distribution (Palomäki et al., 2013). Poker is closer to survival of the fittest, and slogans such as “Everyone is the architect of his or her own fortune,” which is closer to the American (Romoser, 2013) and British working ethos. Poker may be described as a “reverse Robin Hood logic”: the best players with the most chips (money) often defeat the poorer players. Cultural differences in working ethos may also affect the players’ perceptions of strangers with gambling problems.

Criticizing players for exploiting compulsive gamblers implies that the players are competent and in control simultaneously as the compulsive gamblers are not. If poker is not a game of skill it is consequently not possible to exploit other players. It also suggests that the compulsive gambler is not playing voluntarily. Thus the gambling addiction trumps free will.

### **Spending much time on poker is regarded unsocial and a waste of time and talent**

Several studies have suggested that poker may produce a new kind of problem gambler who loses time instead of money (Barrault et al., 2014; Biolcati et al., 2015; Bjerg, 2010; Griffiths, Parke, Wood, & Rigbye, 2010; Hing, Russell, Blaszczyński, & Gainsbury, 2015; Hing, Holdsworth, Tiyce, & Breen, 2014; Hopley & Nicki, 2010; Laakasuo et al., 2016; Shead, Hodgins, & Scharf, 2008). Losing time is however a highly normative concept since it implies that the players should be doing something else that is more valuable.

Online poker has faced more criticism than live poker for being unsocial. Playing poker online could be interpreted as a lonely activity, and may instigate more negative effects on academic performances, financial and interpersonal spheres compared to live poker (Hardy, 2006; Kairouz, Paradis, & Monson, 2016; McComb & Hanson, 2009; Mihaylova, Kairouz, & Nadeau, 2013); however, online players may find different ways to interact with other players (Laakasuo et al., 2016). O’Leary and Carroll also discuss this situation: “Online poker’s image is seen as highly unsocial (McCormack & Griffiths, 2012); however, these forums act as an outlet for intense social interactions, and dialogues surrounding the game. Furthermore, these social interactions are governed by a distinct hierarchy within the OPS [Online Poker Sub-culture]” (O’Leary & Carroll, 2013, p. 618). In the poker forums, players may consider themselves part of a sub-culture and have the opportunity to discuss society’s misconceptions and ventilate grievances.

### **Relating to others’ gambling problems and cultural differences**

In a study on American poker players by Vines and Linders’ (2016) several of the informants were keen to distance themselves from the compulsive gamblers—“we are not like them ... the suckers”—and argued that the compulsive gamblers were the reason for poker’s bad reputation (Vines & Linders, 2016, pp. 1068, 1070).

In two studies of British players, by Recher and Griffiths (2012) and McCormack and Griffiths (2012), certain of the informants took this matter one step further and emphasized that they had no problems with winning money from gambling addicts: “Bad players and those addicted to gambling are professional poker player’s revenue stream. If one of these professionals does not take their money someone else will” (Recher & Griffiths, 2012, p. 21). Or, to quote one of the informants: “I want [gambling advertising] to be allowed because I make a living off people who can’t control their gambling problems.... I want people to gamble because that’s who [*sic*] I make a living off so from a personal point of view I’m glad they advertise and to be honest I’m glad there are people who lose money gambling because otherwise I wouldn’t make a living doing this’ (Martin 26)” (McCormack & Griffiths, 2012, p. 253).

A third approach was determined in a study of Swedish poker players. Several of the informants worried about winning money from poker players with gambling problems.

These respondents desired responsible gaming features from the poker site. Here, the avoidance of playing with compulsive gamblers was considered a reason for not playing online (Wood & Griffiths, 2008). Recher and Griffiths (2012) hypothesized that the different approaches from Swedish and British players could exist because of cultural differences between the two groups.

### **Theoretical framework**

Douglas (2003) argues that, since no individuals can live in isolation, people consequently belong to a culture and a context (time and place). Within a culture a set of mediated standardized values of the community operate, values which gives the culture some authority over its people. Even though an individual may object to the community's categorization of what is dirty, moral, beautiful or deviant, the individual cannot easily escape the views of the society since the community's views are bound to affect the individual (Douglas, 2003). A discrepancy between the individual and societies values might lead to the individual being stigmatized. According to Goffman (1963), stigma can either be caused by physical deformities, blemishes of the individuals' character, or tribal stigma, such as person's belonging to an unfavorable group. When meeting a stranger we usually unconsciously assess if he or she has a positive social identity. This determination includes determination of specific personal attributes like honesty, and structural attributes, such as occupation. In extreme cases we might consider the stranger bad or dangerous. A person who believes himself or herself stigmatized is likely to be anxious in social situations and try to avoid revealing what might cause the stigma. Reluctance to discuss poker with non-players could be understood as what Goffman describes as "information control," which is being restrictive and selective on what should be revealed to whom (Goffman, 1963). Further he refers to a person that is not stigmatized themselves, but understands and supports the stigmatized group as wise. In this article, I will use the word "unwise" to describe those persons whom the players perceive as unwilling to understand, even if met with better arguments. To avoid the stigma a person may try to normalize his behavior, which is to tune down his deviance or the importance of his deviance. When referring to stigmatized groups Goffman (1963) and Becker (1963) often uses homosexuals and Jews as examples that reminds us of how stigma and society's values are situated in a time and context, as pointed out by Douglas (2003). These two groups are fortunately not related to the same level of stigma in the western world today as they were five decades ago, while others of Goffman's (1963) examples such as prostitutes and criminals still face stigma today although the degree of stigma vary among different societies.

According to Becker (1963) a person who breaks the rules or norms in a society is considered untrustworthy and labeled as an outsider. A person may be an outsider to a large degree such as murderers, or to a small degree such as a minor traffic violator. What we regard as deviant may be based on statistics (unusual, such as a very tall person), pathological (someone who is addicted to gambling), unsocial (someone that avoids participating in the "normal" society) or rebellious (a person who does not obey the rules or norms of the society). We fear that the second group

(pathological) may be contagious or dangerous because of desperation (may steal money to gamble), the third group (unsocial) might make the society less stable and divided and that the last group (rebellious) is hard to control and guide. It is common that those persons who are regarded as outsiders object to the rules and consider themselves misunderstood or unfairly treated. These persons may form sub-cultures to avoid criticism and develop a self-justifying rationale. In his book *Outsiders*, Becker studies two sub-cultures with quite different relations towards the society: marijuana users and dance musicians. The marijuana users are a bit defensive and eager to normalize their behavior, emphasizing that they are in control (not addicted), that marijuana is not dangerous (normalize, tune down deviance), and that they should be entitled to decide for themselves (free will, rebellious). The dance musicians, on the other hand, are to a larger degree proud of their sub-culture, and argue that the society lacks the ability to understand and acknowledge their competence and is not entitled to control them (Becker, 1963).

I will use this theoretical framework to analyze (1) if the poker players experience normative criticism, (2) if they are stigmatized and by whom, (3) if they have developed sub-groups, and (4) how they relate to non-players' criticism and the unwise (those players who choose to not understand). Compulsive gamblers may be understood as an unfavorable group that those players without a gambling problem need to relate to. Such players may be afraid to be associated with problem gamblers (unfavorable group), and therefore face a moral dilemma regarding whether playing against compulsive gamblers is acceptable.

## Method

### Participants

The dataset for this study has also been used in a previously published study (Talberg, 2017). It was difficult to recruit participants for the current study, and several players who first agreed to be interviewed ended up withdrawing. The author has more than 10 years of low-stakes poker experience. Several of the informants emphasized that such exposure was a prerequisite for agreeing to talk. Many participants admitted to having used web search engines actively to disclose the aim of this inquiry when considering whether they would participate. This fact suggests that certain of the informants were reluctant to talk with “researchers who do not understand poker,” and implies that certain of the informants are keen on information control. In several previously published interview studies on poker players, the authors' reports about skepticism from potential informants, and in many cases poker experience from the researcher, formed an important contribution to recruit informants (Hayano, 1982; Palomäki et al., 2013, p. 257; Radburn & Horsley, 2011, pp. 32–33; Vines & Linders, 2016, pp. 1067, 1075). This fact may contribute to an overrepresentation of poker researchers with an insider perspective and thus biased findings since researchers that lack this experience are less likely to recruit informants.



Eventually four current or former young adult professional poker players, eight amateur young adult poker players, and three “old-timers” were interviewed using an exploratory qualitative interview study. To help the reader, I provide all the current or former young adult professionals with a pseudonym that starts with a P, all the amateurs a name that starts with an A, and all the “old-timers” a name that starts with an O. The term “old-timer” is used to differentiate them from newcomers, and emphasize their identity as experienced practitioners with a central position in the poker environment (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 68). The “old-timers” are part of a large network of players, and combined they hold experience from playing professionally before the millennium and operating illegal poker clubs and discussion with most of if not all of the famous Norwegian players. The young players I categorized as professionals if they had had poker as their only income for over a year, and if they also had earned an overall profit of more than USD \$100,000 from playing poker. If they did not meet these two criteria, they were consequently categorized as amateurs. All the participants have played poker for more than five years. They were recruited either by direct contact (all the “old-timers” and one of the poker professionals), through advertisement during the first legal poker tournament in Norway with a cash prize (2015), through a Norwegian poker forum on the internet, or by snowball sampling. All the participants were male, and all the interviews were conducted in Norwegian. The three “old-timers” were in the 35–50 age range. The 12 young poker players ranged in age 20–30 ( $M = 25.5$ ).

### **Data collection**

The first interview took place in October 2015 and the last in July 2016. Six of the interviews were conducted at the University of Oslo, six by telephone, and the last three at the informant’s place of work, the informant’s home, and the author’s home, respectively. Although the possibility cannot be excluded, no findings suggested that indicate any systematic differences in responses depending on the interview location.

The interviews lasted for a total of 30.3 hours. The shortest interview was 52 minutes and the longest 203 minutes. The purpose was to induce the informants to talk spontaneously and to explore as many of the aspects as naturally as possible, rather than letting the conversation be determined by the order of the interview questions. The interview was semi-directive, the interview guide consisted of twelve sections: the interviewees’ (1) introduction to poker, (2) preferred stakes format and frequency, (3) learning process and strategies, (4) potential problems related to playing, (5) online poker experience, (6) live poker experience, (7) intra game experience, (8) poker community, (9) experience combining poker with the life outside, (10) future poker expectations, (11) definitions of poker related concepts, and (12) closing remarks. The three sections most relevant for this study were 4, 9 and 12. Among the questions was whether the informant had ever (1) played with players whom they suspected of having a gambling problem, (2) returned money they had won to problem gamblers or advised other players to stop playing, (3) been suspected of having a gambling problem by others, (4) concealed time or money spent on playing poker, (5) struggled

with combining poker with education, work or relationships with other persons, (6) received negative comments on their playing from family or friends, (7) quit other activities because of poker, (8) had friends that discontinued education because of poker. In addition, I asked them how they believed retiring as a poker player would affect their respective social lives.

### **Data analysis**

All interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim by the author. The study was conducted after approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, which enforces ethical guidelines. To gain an informed consent, I provided all of the informants with an information sheet prior to the interview, which was signed if the interview was conducted face-to-face. In the case of telephone interviews, consent was provided orally. Participants were informed that participation was completely voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw at any time. All informants consented to an audio recording of the interview, and were invited to read through the subsequent transcription and to make comments on it. Three of the informants did in fact want to read the transcription, and did so; but none of the informants had any comments.

The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (TA), which is “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The goal of TA is to capture systematically an important aspect concerning the data, and detect the patterned response. The method consists of the researcher actively interpreting, analyzing and organizing the informant’s answers into meaningful patterns (themes). Aspers (2009) argues that the social world is socially constructed. This belief implies that a qualitative study cannot merely be a report of what the informants said or did. We need theory to grasp the meaning structures in the participant’s narratives. If we only give voice to the informant’s stories we are performing storytelling. To analyze their perspective scientifically, we need to connect it to theory. The theoretical framework has been used actively when developing themes to analyze the players’ perspectives. However, analyzing the transcripts started before and continued after developing a theoretical framework. After having developed certain tentative codes and general ideas from the codes, I started actively searching for theories within and outside of the gambling literature to compare, analyze and elaborate on different aspects of the interviewees’ perspective.

The steps used in the TA in this study were inspired by Aspers (2009), Braun and Clarke (2006), and Recher and Griffiths (2012) and are as follows: (1) transcribing the data, (2) familiarization with the data, (3) short presentation of the informant’s stories, (4) creating initial codes, (5) searching for themes, (6) reviewing, defining, and naming themes, and (7) producing the report.

Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that, during the coding, one should move back and forth between the data set and the coded extracts of data. This process can take place either inductively (developing categories from the texts) or deductively

(creating categories based on theoretical knowledge in the research field). The aim of the study, and not the frequency, determines what is regarded as relevant (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, 7 major themes and a total of 53 sub-themes were constructed. However, recoding and renaming themes was an ongoing process that continued when writing and rewriting the articles. I will now provide a more detailed description of the themes relevant for this article.

### Themes used in this article

For this article, three major themes and eleven sub-themes was created, see Figure 1. The major theme “Others don’t understand” involves the players’ description of non-players’ lack of understanding and unwillingness to understand how poker really is. The theme is empirically based on the players’ description and analytically inspired by Becker’s (1963) term “outsiders,” as well as other players descriptions in previous studies (e.g., Radburn & Horsley, 2011). The three sub-themes “Competence not acknowledged,” “Believe it is dangerous” and “Not a real job” are three different aspects of misunderstandings committed by the non-players as perceived from the players’ point of view. “Competence not acknowledged” is both based on a commonly reported finding in qualitative poker studies (Barrault et al.; 2014, Bouju et al., 2013; Bradley & Schroeder, 2009; Istrate, 2011; Jouhki, 2011; McCormack & Griffiths, 2012; Palomäki, Laakasuo, & Salmela, 2013; Radburn & Horsley, 2011; Recher & Griffiths, 2012; Vines & Linders, 2016; Wood & Griffiths, 2008; Zaman et al., 2014) and Becker’s (1963) dance musician’s descriptions of how non-dance musicians are not able to understand their talent and therefore not entitled to judge them. The ongoing skill debate regarding poker is absurd, according to the players. “Believe it is dangerous” is based on moral panic and the historical stigma related to

<b>“Others don’t understand”</b>	Competence not acknowledged
	Believe it is dangerous
	Not a real job
<b>“Don’t talk to them”</b>	Information control
	Outsiders
	Successful but misunderstood
	Lack of meaning
<b>Ethical dilemmas when relating to problem gamblers</b>	Free will - unless addicted
	My responsibility to inform them?
	Actively or passively avoid

Figure 1. Major themes and sub-themes used in this paper.

gambling in general and poker in particular (e.g., Binde, 2005; Laakasuo et al., 2016; Zurcher, 1970). “Not a real job” is inspired by Douglas (2003) and the dirty work literature (Vines & Linders, 2016).

The second major theme “Don’t talk to them” could be understood as a reaction to others lack of understanding. It is theoretically inspired by Goffman’s (1963) term “information control” as well as Becker (1963) and previously studies on poker players (Jouhki, 2011; Palomäki et al., 2013; Radburn & Horsley, 2011; Vines & Linders, 2016). The theme leads to the players withdrawing from discussions with non-players and withholding information. The four sub-themes “Information control,” “Outsider,” “Successful but misunderstood” and “Lack of meaning” describe different aspects within this theme. “Information control” is the extent to which the players withhold information and their rationale. “Outsider” is the players’ impression of being alienated and different from non-players. “Successful but misunderstood” is a reaction to thinking that their competence and skill is not acknowledged even if they have success. And “Lack of meaning” is the belief that the effort is not worth the cost and considering other possibilities.

The third and last major theme is “Ethical dilemmas when relating to problem gamblers.” This theme is based on the players’ description as well as anecdotal findings from previous literature. A number of different dilemmas emerge, with the four most important defined as sub-themes. The first sub-theme, “My responsibility?”, concerns whether the players consider themselves morally responsible for other players’ gambling problems. The second sub-theme, “Inform them?”, concerns itself with whether, and how, other players should be informed that they are not in control and therefore bound to lose. The third sub-theme is named “Free will unless addicted”, and is inspired by a commonly-reported statement by the players starting with “it’s their choice, no one forces them to play,” commonly followed by “unless they have a gambling problem” and their reflection around this. The fourth and last sub-theme, “Actively or passively avoid,” consists of different strategies for avoiding playing against problem gamblers.

## Results

All off the informants reported that they at, some point, had experienced criticism from non-players. First and foremost, respondents described non-players as unwilling to understand the element of skill, with this disinclination motivating certain of the players to prove them wrong. However, even after continually succeeding at poker, their critics was often unwilling to reconsider their view.

### **Others don’t understand (the element of skill)**

Broad agreement existed among the players that it was exceptionally hard to make non-players understand that poker differ from other forms of gambling, especially when it concerns the element of skill, and that it is possible to be rational at poker and eventually make money. Even though four of the young informants

had each made more than USD \$400,000 during their poker career, all of them had nevertheless met much skepticism from others. Female non-players generally were considered more skeptical than male non-players. And several respondents suspected that the government had a hidden agenda when they defined poker as a game of chance.

Andrew (23): “I’m almost completely certain that the people in [the Norwegian Gaming and Foundation Authority], I really don’t think they have any clue about what it is. And about them saying it’s a game of chance.... I can understand the second argument, about people developing gambling addictions, OK, all right that is a possibility. But to claim it is a game of chance—that is just utter nonsense.”

Andrew’s view is that the government should try to prevent gambling problems, but that they show a complete lack of understanding when they refuse to acknowledge the element of skill. This finding is somewhat typical for the informants’ views. Questions about other persons, and especially the questions concerning governments’ understanding of poker, made the informants much more emotional (angry or eager) than any other questions during the interviews. Pierre (27) was no exception:

Pierre (27): “Of course I get provoked by it.... There are people claiming that [poker is a game of chance] even though they have no idea whatsoever of what it really is. Of course, I know it after playing professionally for eight years myself and having spent that amount of time on it. Then, I, of course, get a bit provoked when people say this without knowledge.”

Author: “Have you often felt as if society does not understand what you’re doing at all?”

Pierre: “Yes, yes (eagerly). That I feel every day.”

Author: “How does that affect you?”

Pierre: “.... I want, of course, for the people closest to me to know what I’m doing. But it is really just ignorance regarding the ones that don’t know. There are many that believe you’ve been to a [kiosk] and bought a lottery ticket and that you are just sitting in your living room drinking beer, eating chips, and watching the lottery. And that is so not what it is.”

Not to receive acknowledgment for their competence had several consequences for the players. The respondents reported problems with relating to non-playing friends and family as well as financial consequences. The players were strongly provoked that poker, according to the Norwegian law, is defined as a lottery. The understanding of poker as a lottery has a huge effect on taxation issues since taxation is estimated on profits from every single pot won with no deduction for losses. Taxation has been frequently discussed on the Norwegian poker forum, and several of the informants described confusion when handling the regulations. Most of them have found their own solutions and made a rough estimate of their surplus because a

literal interpretation would make it impossible to make money.<sup>1</sup> Even though none of them have received a penalty for interpreting the rules their own way, it has led to tremendous concern for some of them. It annoyed Paul (30) so much that he went to talk to the taxation officers in 2007. At the taxation office, the officers became confused and, according to Paul, displayed a complete lack of understanding and experience on the issue. The first man Paul talked to exclaimed, with a tone of disbelief: “There’s a guy here that says he plays card games on the internet.” Paul: “... They looked at me like I was an alien. I got so scared I just ran out from the tax office...” Since then Paul has moved to another country, and he claims that taxation issues played a major role in his decision to leave the country. It is a clear similarity between the poker players and how Becker (1963) described dance musicians. Both groups reported a perception of being misunderstood and not acknowledged which contributes to strengthen the sub-culture and distance them self from others.

**Believe it is dangerous.** Alex (21) states that his mother is concerned that his poker playing will affect his school performance or instigate other negative consequences. He defends his playing with his success at the table.

Several of the informants said that their parents were skeptical when they started playing. Their parents were typically afraid the informants they would lose money, become addicted to poker gambling, that the gambling would affect their academic performance, or that they were wasting their time and talent. Several respondents reported that, after a while, it was possible to convince their fathers that they were in control. In contrast, to convince their mothers was more difficult.

Pierre: “... She doesn’t like it. She would almost prefer that I still lived at home and worked at the grocery store.”

Author: “Isn’t she happy that you have made so much money?”

Pierre: “Yes, she is. She thinks that is great, but for some reason, she still doesn’t like poker playing. My dad was also skeptical at first, but from the moment he understood that I was actually able to make a living on it, he has supported me 110%.”

To fear the consequences implies a doubt of whether the player is able to control his gambling without being obsessed, addicted or neglecting more valuable activities. It is an indirect criticism of the players’ competence and their ability to produce stable results as well as the value of their activity.

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<sup>1</sup>Until 2016, all individual pots that provided a player a profit of NOK 10,000 (approximately USD 1,171) or more was taxable with no deduction given for losses (Norwegian Tax Administration, 2006). A high stakes player typically wins and loses many pots in a single session that exceeds the taxation limit. This could end up with a deficit on the session and could lead to a large tax bill. In 2016, the Norwegian tax department made some adjustment to the rules so that most players may pay taxation only on their annual profit (The Norwegian Tax Administration, 2016).

**It's not a real job.** When Patrick (28) was about 21 years old, he decided that, for the first time, he should not locate a summer job, and play poker instead. His mother was less than pleased with his decision and did not think it was possible to make money gambling. Patrick: "I told her, 'I've earned more on poker these six months than you do after working a whole year.' Then, she said, 'Yes, but it's not a real job.'"

By defining poker as "not a real job" Patrick's mom is questioning the moral aspect of professional poker. It implies that poker is unworthy. Paul has faced similar criticism from his family for participating in a game that is unethical; however, Paul argues that this reaction is caused by ignorance.

Paul: "My family [parents] hasn't always been so fond of this [poker], so to speak, but that is only because they don't understand. ... They think I waste my time and potential, and my stepfather thinks it's highly unethical to play poker because then you don't contribute anything to society in his view."

In the quotation Paul clearly distances himself from his stepfather's evaluation of poker as "not contributing to society" and "unethical." He clearly states that the only reason for his stepfather's criticism is lack of understanding. The poker players' self-justifying rationale is that they contribute to the society by paying adequate taxes. However, since the players view the taxation regulations as unfit for poker, they have consequently made their own interpretation and report annual income instead of every single pot. Patrick has also reported income from playing at illegal poker clubs, implying that he thinks poker clubs should be legal (in Norway) and players should pay tax. When contacted by the taxation office, he was concerned that admitting playing in underground clubs could cause him in trouble; however, he also believed that it was worth the risk since he wanted to pay his taxes. This attitude displays both a willingness to contribute to the society as well as rebelliousness in making his own rules, if the rules made by the unwise are inappropriate.

Whether poker is dirty, unethical, or questionable has also concerned Aaron (28). He works as a priest and has spent much time reflecting on whether he can morally defend his poker playing. He has given around 10% of his profits to charity as a way of contributing to society. On April 15, 2011, the U.S. Department of Justice shut down certain of the world's largest poker sites (Romoser, 2013), which made many players worldwide concerned for their accounts. Aaron, however, dismissed this concern by telling himself "its blood money anyhow," and kept a sarcastic distance.

### **Don't talk to them**

The second major theme is "Don't talk to them" which could be understood as a reaction or strategy based on the first major theme: "They will not understand." As we will see, the players describe specific long term effects when avoiding discussion with non-players over time.

**Information control.** A common strategy for the players when they believed other persons did not understand or were critical towards poker, was to conceal their gambling, distance themselves from the arguments, and avoid discussions. In Goffman's (1963) words, this is information control. This practice can be both a short-term and a long-term strategy. All of the professional players had used this approach frequently and several of the amateurs had used it from time to time.

Aaron is careful with whom he discusses poker:

Aaron: "No, it's not cool to be associated with this in my line of work. I don't write on my CV that poker is a hobby, and I didn't write it as a summer job, even though in reality it was, and during my studies."

Peter (29) tried to avoid talking about poker with non-players.

Peter: "It's a bit hard to tell people that this is what you do.... One time I was summoned as a witness in a lawsuit, and the judge asked me to state my occupation. She looked at me and said, 'Poker player? Is that an occupation?' It was kind of a weird situation when you're about to testify. But other than that, it [professional poker player] is not something I tell people that I am."

Paul has been a professional player the last ten years and has had similar experiences. He also tries to avoid the subject when meeting new people. Unfortunately, by doing that a new problem might arise; they may think he is a criminal.

Paul: "It happens all the time when you meet new people. First of all, it's a real hassle; that I can promise you.... When they get to know you better, they wonder why you don't have a real job, and then, you have to assure them you are not doing something that is dodgy.... If you tell someone that you play poker [for a living], you never get an 'OK, I work with computers.' There is something about poker that arouses curiosity."

Paul has also responded, to what he views as others' misconceptions of poker, by being restrictive about revealing his occupation. The logic is that since others do not understand, it is better not to talk to them about it.

Paul: "Well, there's a reason why I choose to be anonymous [in the interview] and why I don't want to tell everyone about what I do.... There is almost no one that understands poker.... It's actually quite frustrating sometimes."

Patrick reveals that poker has become a bit of a taboo between him and his parents to avoid tension. His parents know that he has been a professional poker player for several years, but it is not something they talk about.

Patrick: "My mom and dad are very conservative Christian people.... They are not fans of me playing poker, so we have a silent mutual agreement that it is something we just don't talk about. This, we have reached after many years of tension."



Paul's parents also know that he is a professional poker player, but he tries to let his winnings and losses affect them as little as possible. One of his most successful sessions was a Christmas Eve when he was playing online at his parents' home. He ended up winning USD \$40,000 and being late for dinner. Paul apologized for being late and put on a neutral face when he came to the dinner table. He did not say anything about his winnings because he did not want to instigate another poker discussion with his parents.

The downside of concealing information from those persons close to them might be that the players do not consider their success to be acknowledged as such. Instead they have problems with explaining why they do not "have a real job" or are studying. When conducting the interviews, I was surprised that not much bragging took place when referring to poker results among the players who have been very successful at the tables. Compared to, for example, a sports athlete, the stories were rather muted. The poker playing was described as hard work, unstable, highly time-consuming, a little bit lonely, and far from glamorous. Certain of the players argued that difficulties with relating to non-players over time had made them feel like outsiders.

**Outsiders.** Peter started a bachelor's degree three times but ended up dropping out and played poker instead. He says that he attended school for certain of the lectures, but that he did not read much or contribute much on group assignments.

Peter: "It's a bit boring to be a student when you feel like an outsider. If you're not in it from the start and attending the social stuff and things like that, you become kind of a loner.... To get to know new people is hard when you are only thinking about playing all the time."

Peter did not believe that he belonged in school. One reason was that he struggled with relating to the other students because poker took up so much of his time and thoughts. He also thought differently from the students who struggled to keep a tight budget. When he was partying with other students it was particularly evident.

Peter: "You were quite different in that moment actually.... People expect so much more from you when you've earned a lot of money. So, when it's time to pay the bill, you kind of get that look: the 'you know that's yours' .... You were always the one that had to pay. That kind of sucked. You were taken advantage of. Not by the people closest to you maybe, but by the ones that knew you just a little."

He moved home to his parents' in between his studying and made a great deal of money online. But he believed it was a bit unsatisfactory.

Peter: "So, it felt kind of miserable to sit in your old bedroom, and sit and play when you are 26. It's not where you are supposed to be then. But it's a lot of

money.... When it comes to meeting ladies, it's not a positive thing—I think apart from having a lot of money. But I don't think that matters much either.”

Patrick is still a professional poker player, and he too has become a bit tired of the poker lifestyle. He feels that he is a bit too old to only spend time with poker buddies and sleep in every morning.

Patrick: “You fall outside of society; there is no doubt about it. I sleep to around 2–3 [p.m.] o'clock every single day. And when you are playing on the internet, you spend an extreme amount of time in front of the computer, so it takes a lot of time. And so, of course, most of the time you hang out with other people that play poker, so you're kind of living in your own little bubble.... but there comes a point where you've been in the bubble for so long that it gets tempting to try out the ordinary life too.”

All of the poker professionals have occasionally considered themselves an outsider, and are becoming a bit tired of poker. Three of them are thinking about retiring, and Peter has already retired. He says it reached a point where he did not enjoy the game anymore.

**Lack of meaning.** The informants reported several reasons for wanting to retire from playing poker full time: the money involved no longer motivated them, the competition hardened, the game seemed monotonous, and the informants wanted more out of their life.

Peter: “It is a bit of a cliché, but money only takes you so far. Other things in life are more important. When you start to think like that, it's not much point to continue playing.”

Patrick has similar thoughts and is considering doing something else in the near future. He is a bit jealous of friends who enjoy a steady family life.

Patrick: “In a way, I envy those that have gotten married and made a family and have a steady income.... The everyday happiness is something I long for.... I don't want to be a 50-year-old poker player, or a 40-year-old poker player. In fact, I don't even want to be a 30-year-old poker player. But it is not so easy to do something else. I have some expectations for a job. They are not high, but I have some.”

To obtain a job might be difficult after having played poker the last five years or more and not having much to put on their resume. Over time, they may not enjoy poker as a career anymore, but other options are limited.

Author: “Do you feel that you have gaps in your resume that are hard to explain?”

Patrick: “Yes, obviously, quite obviously.”

Pierre also is considering retiring soon. He is not sure with what he will replace poker.

Author: "Have you ever considered retiring or winding down?"

Pierre: "Yes, I am actually winding down right now. I will quit when it's not worth it anymore.... And it is not compatible with a family life to play during the night and sleep during the day time, and no regular income. I guess I only have one more year left. But I need something else to do; I wouldn't be happy just lying on the couch all day."

For Peter (>40) and Oscar (>40), who have retired as professional players, it was not hard to quit. It almost seemed a relief when deciding to do something else. A decrease in profit was a huge part of both of their decisions to retire. It was just not worth it anymore.

**Successful but misunderstood.** The first argument the poker players typically met from their parents was that poker is just gambling—not much skill is involved, and that the informants are bound to lose in the long run. This interpretation is similar to what the gaming authorities convey and use in policy making. For those players who have experienced some success, such a situation could make them even more dedicated to prove others wrong. The more time and money they invest, the bigger the potential failure becomes. If successful, the players are often misbelieved, considered simply to be lucky or new critics emerge with arguments that it is not "a real job," not ethical, or it does not contribute to society. They are expected to do more than just earn money. The money is viewed as "dirty," or even as "blood money." Peter believed that acquaintances did not respect his occupation but expected him to be generous with his money because he had been so lucky. A strategy to avoid criticism is to avoid discussing poker with non-players, and to conceal the poker playing as much as possible. A silent mutual agreement that poker as a profession is not something to talk about (such as the one Patrick and his parents worked out) keeps the taboo alive. Because of the players' unwillingness to reveal their poker profession, they might also be mistaken for criminals when they meet new persons. This situation may lead to players feeling like outsiders and an increase in the gap between the players and non-players. The more time they spend on poker, the more difficult it becomes to obtain a "real job" since poker is not "CV-friendly." In this case, non-players' skepticism towards poker is also keeping specific players from retiring. The main reason professional poker is considered "dirty" is that the players are either suspected of being compulsive gamblers or of exploiting players with gambling problems. Either way, they must relate to opponents with gambling problems from time to time.

### **Ethical dilemmas when relating to opponents with gambling problems**

It is not common to feel sorry for the casino or bookmaker when winning at gambling. When collecting a jackpot from a slot machine or winning the lottery, one does not think of all the losing players who made it possible. It is more of "a Cinderella story" if someone finally beats the "house." In poker, however, the casino is just the organizer of the games. The money comes directly from the other players. If they are knocked out of a tournament, or become broke in a cash game, the winning player

may feel responsible, especially if it is caused by a bad beat.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, considerable differences exist between online and live poker and tournaments and cash games. In tournaments, all players buy in for the same amount, and when a player loses all of his chips, his tournament is over. In cash games, a losing player always has the possibility to buy more chips and try to win back what he has lost. This option is often referred to as “chasing,” and it typically leads to players losing much more than they had decided to risk in the first place. Most of the informants had observed players who seemed like they were losing more than they could afford. Online, it is hard to know if other players are struggling; live, it is more obvious.

**Free will unless addicted.** For Patrick, the change from playing online to live at an underground poker club came as a shock. He describes how other players with problems considered themselves more real when he saw them face to face, and how he tried to distance himself from the money involved:

Patrick: “One thing that made me uncomfortable when I started playing live was that I had to look people in their eyes. Online poker feels like a computer game. You look at numbers on a screen, and after a while, I got experienced, and it became large numbers.... If I had thought, ‘Oops, I lost a car,’ I would become crazy. It was just numbers on a screen and rather impersonal. I only remember one single incident where I thought, ‘Who is that guy? I see him every day, and he never wins anything.’ Then I was dealt a new hand and that thought was gone.... When you play live, you see people that you know lose more than they can afford. It came as a shock for me at first, but after a while, you shrug it off and think that it is their choice, they came there voluntarily. For some of them, that is not true, they have gambling problems.”

Aaron has had the same experience when traveling abroad. Even though the stakes in his games are significantly lower than in Patrick’s case, he has also believed that certain of his opponents lose more than they can afford.

Aaron: “That is kind of the dilemma with poker; for someone to win, others have to lose. To some degree, it is their own choice to play, but if someone is addicted, then they don’t really have any freedom of choice. In a bar, they are supposed to stop you if you drink too much, and it should be the same in a casino.... And the question is who is responsible for that? To what degree do we as players support an industry that does not always take good care of their customers?”

Alex wants to avoid playing against compulsive gamblers if he has the opportunity; however, it is often not easy to know if an opponent has problems or is in control.

Alex: “It’s their own choice; no one forces them to play. Of course, it is sad that someone has gambling problems, but that shouldn’t stop others from enjoying poker.

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<sup>2</sup>Losing a hand after being a huge statistical favorite is often referred to as a “bad beat” or bad luck.

But it is something to think about. It is not nice to ‘rob’ a player that has a large gambling debt, but if he joins the game, you can’t fold your cards just because you feel sorry for him. It is, however, possible to tell him to study the game more or reduce his stakes.”

According to Alex, certain players are not good enough and are bound to lose in the long run. If they can afford it, then that it is fine, but if they seem like they are not in control, it is something else. The argument “it’s their choice, no one forces them” was made by several of the informants. However, they often made an exception to the argument—“unless they have gambling problems”—meaning problem gamblers are not able to control themselves concerning their gambling, and do not play completely voluntarily. The question is whether this situation is something that should be addressed, or if problem gamblers need to determine that for themselves.

**Should you inform players that they are not in control?** Most of the interviewees considered gambling problems as the dark side of poker and something that is sad to witness. No one expressed that they enjoyed winning easy money when playing against compulsive gamblers.

Many informants had been in situations where they wanted to act to stop unhealthy gambling. However, they often believed that it was not an easy subject to address. More than half of the informants, at some point, have advised others to wind down or quit playing poker. Peter, Paul, and Andrew have returned money to players that they considered unhealthy gamblers. The older and more experienced players have to a larger degree advised friends and strangers to stop playing. Many players compared compulsive gambling to alcohol problems and wanted the casinos or poker clubs to enforce responsible gambling. Otto (>40) was running a nonprofit poker club several years ago and ran into a problem gambler who he ended up refusing to play; instead, he gave him the phone number to the problem gambling helpline.

Among the informants, Adam (30) was least affected by opponents with gambling problems. He said that he did not become uncomfortable if others had gambling problems.

Adam: “I think gambling addiction is a personal matter. If anyone has a problem, they have to solve them themselves.”

**Actively or passively avoid problem gamblers.** Paul, however, is affected if he sees players who are not able to control themselves, and he has made a habit of talking to them. As a professional player, he has witnessed gambling problems more than once:

Paul: “Yes. I have. That’s not nice. It is not to deny that the media tells the story of the successful players. That [gambling problems] is the dark side of poker. You don’t see it as much online. There, you are shielded from it. Live, however, I have been in many situations where I thought [long pause, unfinished sentence]. And it puts you in difficult ethical situations.”

Author: "Have you ever encouraged other players to quit playing or wind down?"

Paul: "Yes, many times. It is a hell of a lot easier to be nice to them and tell them they will be fine. But if you see a person that loses their mind every time they play, then that person should not play, no matter how intelligent that person might be."

Author: "Have you ever received negative comments from other players when encouraging someone to leave?"

Paul: "Well, yes, I have actually. If you play live, the others might not enjoy that [the problem gambler] leaves. However, I have gotten more support than criticism. If two players get mad, then it's often 10–15 that say that they wanted to do the same thing, but that they were too afraid to say something."

According to Paul players are often afraid to address the subject and tell others that they should not play. Several reasons may be advanced to explain why this is the case. One reason is not to offend the player believed to have a problem. It is common for problem gamblers to argue that they are competent but unlucky, and believe that it is likely that they will now soon be successful. Advising problem gamblers to retire implies that they are not as good as gamblers as they believe themselves to be, and that they need to accept their losses. Another reason is that they do not want to interrupt the game or they are afraid that other players will become angry if they talk a weak player into leaving.

This is how Patrick responds when asked if he has ever encouraged other players to stop playing:

Patrick: "[Thinks for a long time] I have thought about it so many times, that I should tell them that they should quit. But I am not sure if I have ever said it to them like that. I think. I don't remember any specific episodes. But I think that I have left the game myself to end the game in situations where the problem gambler gets broke and ask if the game will continue after he has been to the ATM. But considering that the question made me think for five minutes, it has not happened often."

Author: "Has that been a deliberate strategy? To end the game so the problem gambler has to leave, without telling him that he is not good enough or not in control? It is a different message than telling someone that they should not play, even though all others are going to continue."

Patrick: "You can't do that. That's too invading, even though they need it. It's not in its place to say it like that. If it was a good friend with a big problem, I would do that. If it is just someone I play with from time to time, it feels kind of out of place. And I wouldn't dare do it in front of several players that wanted to win that money. It would have been too much of a battle."

Many of the informants reported having received negative comments from the suspected problem gambler when advising him to wind down. However, for some, it made them more certain that the other player was not in control and needed their advice. It was, however, reported as more common to use the same technique as Patrick described: to quit playing for the night, with the intent of ending the game and force a problem gambler to stop playing. One time, Oliver (> 35) was playing in an underground poker club when he witnessed problem gambling (chasing) and had difficulties convincing a problematic gambler to stop playing.

Oliver: “A player started with 2,000 [USD \$230] and lost it after half an hour on a ‘bad beat.’ ... He bought in for 2,000 [\$230] more and lost again.... He went to an ATM and then lost another 10–12,000 [\$1,150–1,380]. Me and a couple of other players told him, ‘Maybe it’s just not your day. Maybe you should quit because you are on tilt and not focused.’ But he wouldn’t listen. He went to the ATM again.... I think he lost 30–40,000 [\$3,460–4,610] that night. It made me sad, and several players told him that they didn’t want to play with him anymore. He, however, wished to continue and even offered to pay others to continue playing. Eventually three or four of us decided to leave, even though he would have been an easy target if we had continued. But I just couldn’t do it. His problems were too obvious.”

Author: “The players that did not want to quit, did they dislike that you encouraged him to leave?”

Oliver: “Yes, of course. They make a living from poker.”

Oliver argues that narratives such as this one are the reason why live poker needs to be legalized and regulated. Certain of the amateurs argued that one of the reasons for not pursuing a career as a professional poker player was problems with relating to compulsive gamblers and that poker players are only “stealing” money from each other and not contributing to society. Several of the amateurs claimed that they could avoid compulsive gamblers when possible, but that professional players were dependent on compulsive gamblers to make the necessary profit. None of the professionals agreed to this statement, although Paul revealed that he sometimes had to shrug of the thoughts about his opponents’ ability to control themselves. Many of them told stories of other players that were more cynical and eager to exploit weak opponents and therefore actively searched for them during holidays when they suspected that they would be the easiest target (such as inebriated and lonely).

## **General discussion**

### **The diversities in poker**

To understand the players’ perspective and the society’s reluctance to acknowledge the game of poker, I have identified 12 antonyms that non-players may use to describe dedicated poker players as either normal and worthy or deviant and

unworthy (see Figure 2a). Further, four different approaches and attitudes poker players may have toward suspected problem gamblers are displayed in Figure 2b.

Poker players who spent an excessive amount of time on the game can either be perceived as obsessed (addicted) or diligent and in control. Success in poker can be attributed to luck, ascribed to the players' competence (skill), or just be disbelieved (untrustworthy). All of these aspects influence the player's ability to control his or her playing. There are also several moral components that are highly normative. Should a professional poker player be regarded as a good citizen, one who contributes to society by paying his (or her) taxes, and is his own boss? Or should that person instead be perceived as one who exploits and hustles weak players, exposing himself accordingly as an untrustworthy person in a dirty job? All depends on what is regarded as worthy and unworthy. Some may distinguish between the terms players and gamblers. Players have a considerable ability to influence the outcome while gamblers are more dependent on chance.

If we understand poker as a game dominated by luck, we may perceive frequent players as persons who are wasting their own time and not improving their skills. As a further result, players who boast of their successes are likely to be perceived as untrustworthy. If we are convinced that the players cannot succeed yet they persist on trying, their behavior can then easily be perceived as pathological. If we however understand poker as a game dominated by skill, we open up the possibility that some persons may be competent enough to make money on the activity if they work hard

<b>Deviant</b>	<b>Normal/Worthy</b>
Obsessed	Diligent
Addicted	In control/calculated
Lucky	Competent
Unworthy	Worthy
Immoral/unethical	Moral/ethical
Untrustworthy	Decent
Dirty work	Real job
Outsider	Good citizen
Unemployed	Own boss
Moocher	Tax payer
Hustler	Expert
Illegal	Legal

Figure 2a. Antonyms used by non-players to describe dedicated poker players.



Perceive them as stupid	Sympathize with their problem
"It's their own fault"	Assume they need regulation, help, or advice
Actively search for them (perceive them as an easy target)	Actively confront them and advise them to wind down
Passively shrug it off ("their own choice")	Indirect attempts (leaving the poker club to end the game)

Figure 2b. Different attitudes toward suspected problem gamblers by poker players.

enough. The element of skill is required for players to claim convincingly that they are expert, diligent and competent. This fact may explain why players in previous qualitative studies commonly stress the element of skill. Players who believe they have proven the element of skill yet are still disbelieved may perceive the others as unwise. Accordingly, they try to avoid discussions concerning their playing. However, even if the level of skill is acknowledged, the players may face moral criticism claiming that poker is unethical, and a dirty job.

According to Douglas (2003), defining something as dirty is society's way of valuating and reinforcing moral behavior. Even though a moral criticism towards players for exploiting weaker players indirectly acknowledges the players' competence, it will become a pyrrhic victory, since the new criticism is not better than the last. Claiming that "[i]t is not possible to win, but if you do win it is highly unethical" could maximize the pressure for not seeking a career as a professional player, even though the argument is inconsistent. Several of the professional players in this study described a feeling of almost being trapped when they successfully proved the "competence argument" wrong, and consequently ended up receiving moral criticism.

The players could be in need of a way to reinforce their status as honest and decent citizens. One way of this strengthening this perception could be to pay taxes on their poker earnings. The organizers of the game also use this argument. That poker may benefit the society through income taxation has been proposed by several members of the industry around the globe. As Chumbley correctly observed (2012, pp. 548–549),

it was former New York Senator Alfonso D'Amato who perhaps summed up this issue the best: “[t]his is just about the only industry I know of that has basically begged to be taxed only to be ignored by politicians who refuse to listen to the desires of the American people.”

This may explain why even money won from illegal poker clubs was reported by one of the informants in this study. It could be interpreted as a strong self-justifying rationale. Another highly important aspect when considering the players' worthiness is how they relate to the unfavorable group: the problem gamblers.

From the player's point of view, behaving appropriately towards problem gamblers may be a way to exonerate themselves from moral criticism from themselves or others. However, a player that sympathizes with problem gamblers and actively encourages, them to stop playing may reduce his potential income accordingly, become unpopular among other players, and struggle with defending his playing to himself. On the other hand, perceiving the problem gambler as greedy, stupid and responsible for his or her own misery may prove an effective way to defend their interest for themselves even though the person may consequently make the gambler appear less moral to non-players. A combination of perspectives, such as “it is their own choice, no one forces them to play, unless they have a gambling problem,” all commonly reported in this inquiry, could result in more rumination and uncertainty for the players, and prove harder to defend if challenged from both sides.

### **They will not understand**

In this inquiry, poker players commonly reported that they considered themselves misunderstood by non-players, and that it was hard for non-players to develop an understanding of the difference between poker and other money games. In the players' opinion, non-players often have strong views on poker that are based on misconceptions and dogmas. Most of them seemed to have abandoned arguing with non-players about poker and were instead trying to avoid the topic. That poker players emphasize the element of skill is commonly witnessed in the literature (Barrault et al., 2014; Bouju et al., 2013; Bradley and Schroeder, 2009; Istrate, 2011; Jouhki, 2011; McCormack and Griffiths, 2012; Palomäki et al., 2013; Radburn and Horsley, 2011; Recher and Griffiths, 2012; Vines and Linders, 2016; Wood and Griffiths, 2008; Zaman et al., 2014). That most poker players also concealed the extent of their poker playing (information control) to avoid discussions with non-players has been explored earlier by Radburn and Horsley (2011) and Jouhki (2011). The skepticism players have regarding talking to non-players makes it difficult to recruit informants, and may also contribute to explaining why earlier studies commonly have been conducted by researchers with poker experience (Hayano, 1982; Radburn & Horsley, 2011; Vines & Linders, 2016) or by researchers that has friends with poker experience (Istrate, 2011; Jouhki, 2012). If the element of skill is not acknowledged, the gap between the players and non-players may become larger and the poker sub-culture stronger. Poker forums are among several meeting places to discuss society's misconceptions and to ventilate about grievances (O'Leary & Carroll, 2013).

It is not only professional players who struggle with relating to non-players. Dedicated amateur players also face concern and criticism, which can in turn lead to discussions about poker. The professional players reported that they were keen to avoid revealing their occupation when meeting new persons, and often presented themselves as students instead. Vines and Linders (2016) described professional poker as “dirty work” because of the stigma related to it. The successful players in this study argued that their success was not acknowledged by others, which could be explained by society’s and others’ requirements for a “real job” and the understanding of poker as a game of chance. Heen (2008) emphasized that a “real job” is normative, and connected to a social project and positive identity, hence contributing to society by both doing something that is considered valuable and paying taxation as expected.

According to Romoser (2013), poker is a game that embodies the American ethos, with a high level of individualism and capitalistic scoring. As long as the Americans have played poker, their government has tried to stop them (Romoser, 2013). This current inquiry suggests that there might be even more skepticism towards gamblers in the Nordic welfare states than in less collectivistic countries. Poker’s disharmony with the ideals of the Nordic welfare states has been discussed previously by Bjerg (2010, 2011) and Recher and Griffiths (2012). Over time, the gap between the players’ and the non-players’ understanding and the lack of dialogue could lead to players feeling a lack of meaning and a desire to do something else. However, with a hole in their resume, options feel limited. I hypothesize that if the poker player’s competence becomes more acknowledged by others, the gap between players and non-players could become smaller and make a dialogue possible thus, making it easier for the players to find alternatives to poker as a career.

In Becker’s (1963) study of outsiders, dance musicians were presented as proud of their sub-culture and their own level of competence, while marijuana users were more defensive in their self-justifying. In this inquiry the poker players could be described as somewhere between those two groups, depending on the type of criticism they received. If criticized for not being competent or unable to control themselves (lucky or pathological), they were confident that the critics were unwise. However, when facing moral criticism, they became more defensive. To defend their poker interest to themselves and claim their status as a good citizen it becomes crucial to deal with suspected compulsive gamblers in an honorable way.

In previous studies, poker players have displayed different approaches towards opponents they suspect have a gambling problem: (1) wanting to display a distance from compulsive gamblers and arguing that the “addicts” are the reason for poker’s bad reputation (Vines & Linders, 2016), (2) perceiving problem gamblers as an easy target and source of potential income (McCormack & Griffiths, 2012; Recher & Griffiths, 2012), and (3) worrying about problem gamblers and wanting responsible gaming features from the poker site or advising the problem gambler to quit playing (Wood & Griffiths, 2008). In this study, the last approach towards opponents with a suspected gambling problem were most common among the informants. Several of the players reported that they had considered themselves personally involved and,

to some extent, responsible for opponents with gambling problems, and that such a position had put them in difficult ethical dilemmas.

Recher and Griffiths (2012) hypothesized that be cultural differences might operate between British and Swedish players, where Swedish players lean towards empathizing with problem gamblers, while British players lean towards 1 and 2. This investigation elaborates on that hypothesis by suggesting that Nordic players generally may feel more concern for opponents with gambling problems and want responsible gambling. This concern may contribute to explain the skepticism towards poker from non-players in the welfare states; see Danish studies from Bjerg (2010, 2011), Swedish studies from Binde (2005, 2007), and Finnish studies from Laakasuo et al. (2016).

In the current study, none of the players reported enjoying others' gambling problems. It was common to feel uncomfortable and, to some extent, personally involved when playing against strangers who had problems with controlling themselves or their gambling. The most common defense for playing poker was freedom of choice; everyone should be able to play if they desired to do so. However, one exception typically was made to this rule: arguing that compulsive gamblers do not enjoy free will when it comes to gambling. They should ideally be forced to stop by the gambling operator. If we describe poker as an "intellectual boxing- match," in poker—unlike in boxing—no referee is present to stop the fight if a participant is not able to "intelligently defend himself."

Several of the informants had confronted potential problematic gamblers and advised them to stop playing, and certain respondents had in fact returned money they had won from suspected compulsive gamblers. However, to confront a stranger and potentially interfere with the game was described as exceptionally challenging. The respondents were afraid to be seen as offensive from the problem gambler's point of view, and to ruin other players' potential income. Therefore, several informants had used a semi-directive method: leaving the poker club prematurely when the suspected problem gambler was broke, to prevent the player from going to the ATM and wagering more money. When successful, the game stops and the compulsive gambler is given time to "cool down," and, it is hoped, does not return to the poker club. The players who had confronted strangers reported more support than criticism from fellow players. However, the suspected compulsive gambler themselves usually did not appreciate the advice right away.

## **Conclusion**

This study is based on exploratory interviews with a small sample of relatively successful, and a few highly successful, Norwegian poker players. Since poker regulations (such as taxation regulations and general laws) vary greatly among countries it is hard to compare the results with other countries. Further, the research design is not suitable for generalizations, and casual explanations, although it is possible to make assumptions and generate hypothesis. It also provides a rich description of the player's perspective and how they reason.

In the theoretical framework I used Becker's (1963) study *Outsiders*, Goffman's (1963) theoretical study on stigma and, Douglas's (2003) concept of "matters out of place," as well as the "dirty work literature." Although Becker's and Goffman's theories are more than 50 years old, they have proved to be highly valuable in understanding society's skepticism towards poker players, and the poker player's strategies for avoiding discussions and criticism. The dirty work literature, and Douglas's theories on "dirt," were especially fruitful in analysis of the moral dilemmas described by the poker players when relating to problem gamblers.

The hypothesis generated from this study proposes that not recognizing the poker player's competence (skill) may make a dialog between players and non-players difficult, and consequently lead to the players withholding information from their playing, thus making their subculture stronger. Unsuccessful players may be skeptical to advice from non-players that "do not understand how poker really is," this may become a threshold against seeking help or treatment. Successful players who withhold information over a substantial period of time may perceive that they have become outsiders, and that returning to another job or education is challenging because they must now endure a "hole in their CV." The cultural differences between different countries may become especially evident when discussing how poker players relate to problem gamblers, with Nordic players being more likely to argue that they sympathize with problem gamblers than would players from more market liberal countries.

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