Information technologies and gambling: A Durkheimian perspective. Stuart Mundy McPherson

Abstract: Gambling has a long history as a social practice, through which bonds can be created and maintained, and as a part of creative and reasserted social habits and celebrations. Problem gambling runs counter to such orientations, in breaking down relationships, and being practiced obsessively and compulsively. A Durkheimian perspective offers insights into the phenomenon of gambling, by focusing on the social basis to practice, in analysing the ways in which economic, political and social conditions and changes affect society. New information technologies can be part of such conditions, bringing about new social, economic and political contexts for the practice of gambling, and was concerned about rapid changes and their impact on society. Not unlike an individual's sickness, negative forms of excitement and morbidity that can be acute and chronic can infect the social body. This presentation will outline Durkheim's significant concepts and relate them to information technologies and gambling.

The Internet has been publicly available since the mid-1990s, perhaps appropriately heralded by the well-established "old media" publication "Time", in its July 1994 cover story "The End of the Internet" (Jurey, 1994, as cited in Johansson & Götestam, 2004). Since then, the growth of people getting access to the Internet in the following years was a phenomenon that Durkheim could have foreseen. According to Johansson & Götestam (2004), by 1997, 10 million were connected (Mashable data 1995, as cited in Johansson & Götestam, 2004). John Perry Barlow, a Canadian-American writer, has gone on record as saying that Internet gambling was "the greatest invention since the printing press" (Mashable data 1995, as cited in Johansson & Götestam, 2004). While Durkheim (1893) argued that gambling caused the "infernal dynamics of excess", Durkheim's analysis has been updated with the historical development of gambling products. The Internet gambling phenomenon, particularly in recent years, has been heralded by the well-known Oxford English Dictionary definition of "dereglement" and "Internet gambling", which is the "supply of gambling services online, through the use of the World Wide Web or other Internet-based technologies" (Johansson & Götestam, 2004). The ethical nature of Internet gambling, over and above the moral underpinning of gambling, is a core aspect of Durkheim's analysis of gambling.