

The Facets of Problem Gambling: Evaluating Treatment-Related Research

A review of



Pathological Gambling: Etiology, Comorbidity, and Treatment

by Nancy M. Petry

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2005. 417 pp. ISBN 1-59147-173-7.
\$59.95

Reviewed by

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☞ The continued proliferation of gaming venues in the United States and abroad and its attendant public policy considerations have generated a marked increase in the quantity and quality of research on disordered gambling behavior. Between 1975 and 1994, there were only 376 published articles on pathological gambling reported in the PsycINFO database, and many of those dealt with either prevalence studies or small-scale explorations of populations of male treatment-seeking gamblers. In the past 10 years, that number has doubled to more than 770 articles in a field that is still emerging.

☞ A healthy proportion of those publications are authored by Nancy Petry, a relative newcomer to the field who has quickly become one of its most prolific researchers. In *Pathological Gambling: Etiology, Comorbidity, and Treatment*, Petry once again distinguishes herself with a clearly organized, wonderfully synthesized tome to educate researchers and policymakers about various aspects of the disorder.

☞ In her introduction, Petry makes two ambitious promises: (a) to offer a resource for researchers and (b) to provide experienced and inexperienced treatment providers with new tools for assisting clients. The primary strength of the book lies in the first aim, and this book delivers a precise analytical evaluation of the current state of research that will serve as an invaluable resource for several years to come.

Research

☞ In 1999, the National Research Council published a comprehensive literature review titled *Pathological Gambling: A Critical Review* (National Research Council, 1999). Petry's book, smaller in scope but more in-depth, provides a more detailed research update with significant critical analysis and case history applications that were lacking in the prior work.

☞ Petry begins by offering a succinct history of gambling, a framework for understanding the factors associated with the development and maintenance of the disorder. One particularly impressive feature of this book is the author's consistently analytical approach to the research findings and political climate. In clear and precise language, she provides excellent summaries for each of the major sections. More importantly, she details the significance of those findings within the larger framework of gambling research, answering the

questions “What does this mean?” and “Where are we going?” In this respect, the book serves as a blueprint, an appraisal of the current empirical foundation and a well-reasoned direction to guide future investigations.

☰ Another strength of the research chapters is organization. At the beginning of each chapter, Petry introduces the topics to be covered and the rationale for the order of the presentation. Although these introductions could have benefited from consistent use of the objective third person rather than repeated use of the word “I,” they nevertheless add clarity and integration to the material presented. The additional summary at the end of each section reframes those aims within the context of Petry’s analysis.

☰ The research chapters are logically divided into etiology (demographics, comorbidity, neurobiology, and genetics) and interventions (pharmacotherapy, natural recovery, and psychodynamic, behavioral, and cognitive-behavioral treatments). These chapters provide the empirical information necessary to understand the multifactorial nature of the disorder and the complexity of successful treatment strategies.

☰ In the etiology section, Petry begins by explaining the nosology of gambling, including differences in levels of involvement and criteria for the disorder. She then provides a case example of Mary, a 53-year-old divorced mother of three, who initially began as a recreational, or Level 1, gambler and moved ultimately to a Level 3 gambler with severe gambling problems. This example, like others in the book, serves to highlight the dynamic process of gambling disorder and to assist the reader in operationalizing the sometimes nebulous concepts in the field. The repeated use of case examples for clarification and illustration is an enlightening feature of the book.

☰ Petry also makes fine use of tables that are both informative and effective. In presenting prevalence information, for example, she offers an extensive, three-page table that sets out rates, population sources, survey instruments, and associated levels of gambling pathology in a variety of countries. These tables provide a useful complement to the denser text, allowing the reader to more easily explore differences in methodology and results. Notably, Petry’s overview of gambling prevalence incorporates an empirical discussion of subgroups and special populations (e.g., substance abusers, older adults) that includes analysis of a case history of an older widowed adult.

☰ Some chapters could benefit from additional resources for treatment providers. For example, the chapter on instruments and psychometric properties reviews the primary measurement instruments in the field. Although the section is comprehensive, clinicians would benefit from inclusion of full-page versions of the stand-alone scales with clear directions for scoring for use in practice settings. Similarly, the inclusion of screening instruments for comorbid disorders would also assist clinicians in assembling an optimal measurement battery to use with gambling clients.

☰ Among the more interesting chapters, the book reviews the phenomenon of natural recovery, summarizing the limited studies on problem gamblers who quit without significant intervention. This section posits the major reasons cited for gambling abstinence. However, it would have been clinically useful for the author to summarize the primary strategies that assisted abstinent gamblers in restraining their gambling urges. Although empirical validation of those strategies might be lacking in the research, Petry’s facility for critical analysis would lend itself to including practical suggestions for translating research findings into clinical interventions and handouts to complement other therapeutic strategies.

☰ Subsequent sections review primary therapeutic strategies as well as etiological factors (i.e., age, ethnicity, marital and socioeconomic status) associated with gambling disorder. In some instances (e.g., youth gambling), the book tends to overreference larger U.S. population surveys and omit foreign studies with equally significant findings; however, those omissions are relatively insignificant in light of the overall quality of the work as a scholarly synthesis.

Treatment

☰ If there is one limitation to the book, it lies in the fact that it attempts to serve both as a reference book and a treatment manual. Roughly two thirds of the book—226 pages—is devoted to an exhaustive research summary. Many clinicians, particularly those with

limited experience, would find that amount of information overwhelming and of limited practical utility.

☞ Instead, clinicians are looking for a simple, straightforward summary of relevant concepts and a comprehensive, detailed treatment manual that explains how to best administer treatments, with accompanying handouts and homework assignments. For example, books by Blaszczynski and Ladouceur, the two leading treatment researchers in the field, provide a succinct summary of the relevant literature then devote a majority of their texts to practical application of concepts in a clinical context (Blaszczynski, 1998; Ladouceur, Sylvain, Boutin, & Doucet, 2002).

☞ It should be noted that Petry, not a clinician herself, has adapted treatment strategies from the alcohol field to clients with gambling disorder. Although the treatment protocol might prove efficacious, the book could have been enhanced by the incorporation of handouts within the relevant chapters and the provision of session-by-session guidance in applying the therapy over the course of treatment. Instead, generic handouts and other treatment materials are grouped into 64 pages of appendixes. The description of the treatment constitutes only 35 pages of the text and fails to provide systematic instruction in applying the treatment in a variety of clinical situations with diverse populations. For these reasons, the book is of limited utility as a treatment manual.

☞ As a reference book and a research tool, however, Petry's work is unequalled. It is a must-have for any researcher, instructor, or policymaker interested in truly understanding the nature and course of pathological gambling disorder.

References

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