

# Ethnography of Horse Racing Gamblers' Lives. Constructing Biographical Narratives in the Process of Interviewing

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we analyze the narrative strategies employed by horse racing gamblers in the context of their interactions within interviews. The empirical base consisted of 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with long-term regular gamblers from Warsaw, Poland. First, we state our position in the context of interviews with people aware they may be assessed negatively regarding a very important part of their lives. Second, we discuss how the interlocutors presented their biographies and employed discursive methods of protection against negative interpretation. The research reveals how bettors justify their passion by referring to individual myths about the origins of their interest in gambling. We reveal how bettors consciously employ emotive discursive methods that alleviate the discourse of addiction. Emotions are not presented as triggered by compulsively realized needs but as a result of intellectual passion, pursued by like-minded people joined by a drive for agency.

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“By talking to you, in a way, I sum up my fifty years at the racetrack” (Adam<sup>1</sup>), acknowledged an interviewee who has been regularly betting at the horse racetrack in Warsaw for five decades. All the long-time gamblers we talked to used the social situation of the interview to work through their biography and find the reasons behind their longstanding engagement in racing.

In this paper, in two steps, we analyze the narrative strategies employed by horse racing gamblers in the context of their interactions within interviews. First, we will interpret our social positions in the context of interviews with people aware that a crucial part of their lives may be assessed negatively by society and, therefore, also by the researchers. Second, we will discuss how, during the process of conducting a conversation, the interlocutors presented the elements of their biographies and drew upon various protective discursive methods. These were directed against negative interpretations of those aspects of their lives which, according to them, might be considered trivial, unusual, or even pathological.

The data and field experiences discussed here are part of a bigger study whose major objective was to ethnographically investigate Warsaw's horse racing social world (Bossak-Herbst 2020). Our research was conducted during 2015-2018 at a notable moment. An organizational and financial crisis of horse racing in Poland was accompanied by an outflow of both its audience and horse owners. Alongside that, subsequent attempts were made to implement projects aimed at a functional and spatial transformation of

the historic Służewiec Racetrack, which is the main venue for Polish horse racing.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of our research, we gathered extensive ethnographic material, including audience observations collected during two racing seasons in Warsaw, along with interviews with the racing audience. We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with primarily long-time racing players. The older players invariably reported several decades of experience, dating back to the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s—they were regular gamblers appearing on the Warsaw racetrack on most or even all weekends from April to November. In ethnographic research, long-term contact with a given “social world” (Strauss 1978) is crucial. However, we learned about its participants mainly from conversations with those from this world.

The study of life history has a long tradition in ethnography (Peacock and Holland 1993; Jackson 2002; Falconi and Graber 2019). We were also inspired by biographical research and employed the notion of “biographical work” coined by Anselm Strauss (1984; 1993). Biographical work is a personal endeavor to interpret one's biography in the context of personal identity, choices made, and activities during one's life course. Strauss and other researchers underline that biographical work is conducted by people in difficult circumstances (such as the terminally ill patients researched by Strauss) or in the case of dramatic events and life changes (e.g., in the case of Holocaust survivors, see: Kaźmierska 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The research consisted of the analysis of documents produced by institutions running horse races in the past and present, the analysis of press materials, as well as ethnographic observations conducted in training center locations, both backstage of the racetrack and at the racetrack, during racing days. A total of 98 interviews (IDI) were conducted with trainers, jockeys, horse owners, the authorities of the Służewiec Racetrack, as well as with regular and occasional racegoers.

<sup>1</sup> All interviewees were assigned pseudonyms after transcription.

In our article, we combine those two traditions to reveal the processes of entering the social world of betting on horse racing under communism. We also reveal the nostalgia for that world that gamblers experience today when the social world underwent a drastic transformation along with the social, economic, and cultural events that took place in Poland after the political changes in the early 1990s. Those are narratives that describe the social world, which we ethnographically researched, but they also consist of biographical work that our interlocutors conducted. And it was precisely the interviews that became the pretext for conducting this work. It challenged our interlocutors to summarize their biography and look for justifications for its course. The need to look for justification resulted from the social stigmatization of the activity that gave meaning to their lives—gambling at the horse races. Our analysis, therefore, not only contributes to research on constructing biographical narratives but also to ethnographic studies on gambling.

## Ethnographic Studies on Gambling

Scholars analyze the phenomenon of gambling in sports considering its relationships with capitalism (cf. Young 2010; Nosal 2019; 2023). In the case of horse betting in countries such as Great Britain, those roots are traced back to the turn of the XVII and XVIII centuries (Eisenberg 2020). In the Polish case, the variable relationships between horse gambling and the political and economic systems throughout history were discussed by Barbara Bossak-Herbst (2020). The gamblers whose narratives we analyze began their interest in horse racing during the period of real socialism when the game was at its most developed.

The field of ethnographic studies on gambling had a great founder in Erving Goffman, who breached

“the wall between betting practices in entertainment venues and risk-taking in society at large” (Shalin 2016:25), as well as between mainstream occupations and deviant occupations like professional gamblers (Goffman 1967). Nonetheless, they are scarce. The classic book by Henry Lesieur, *The Chase. Career of the Compulsive Gamblers* documents the relationship between compulsive gambling and crime (1977:15). According to Lesieur (1977:xi), “[c]ompulsive gamblers are those people who through the chase become trapped in a self-enclosed system of options usage and involvement.” “Since a compulsive gambler uses up his financial resources to recover his losses, he is constantly in search of money: he owes money to progressively more people and finds more ways of ‘juggling money’ from person to person” (Lesieur 1977:xiii). As Grills (2004:6) underlines:

Lesieur makes an important distinction between gambling as entertainment and gambling with the expectation to win. In the first case the participant may very well anticipate ‘taking a hit’ as entertainment is expected to cost money. In the latter instance, the instrumentality associated with gambling is financial advantage. When this does not occur and the gambler gambles to get even, the chase begins. Those who attend to long-term gains and losses and become locked in to the longer-term chase are cast as compulsive gamblers.

In our research, differently to Lesieur, we focus on the first type of regular gamblers as they dominate on the sole Warsaw racetrack operating from April to November on weekends.

Social studies in gambling are dominated by theories of deviance and take a social problem perspective (Rosecrance 1990). Even scientists who declare

to reject them still use the term. Prus and Grills (2003:ix) have coined the eponymous term of their book, the “deviant mystique,” to “refer to the allures and fascinations, the anxieties and fears, and disaffections and repulsions that people associate with wrongdoing and morality.” As Prus and Grills (2003) underline, their approach is notably distinct from the standpoints adapted by the moralists, idealists, and structuralists, and they analyze the viewpoints of the people and how they define, interpret, and engage in conjunction with others, yet they adopt the external social definition of gambling, as they state—their material is intended to address instances of anyone (person or group) doing anything that any audience (person or group) might consider deviant in some manner.

The topicality of theories of deviance increased in the wake of online gambling proliferation and the new type of data it generates (Gariban, Kingma, and Zborowska 2013). Although in many countries, “gambling has successfully culturally embedded itself within the normalised and legitimised forms of leisure such as the night-time economy, sports fandom and online forums of socialisation” (Raymen and Smith 2017:381), in contemporary studies, gambling is foremost depicted by scientists as an individual quality (Prus 2004; Volberg 2007), and an activity that “has moved from a moral to a medical framework that within a legalized gambling environment, traces a continuum ranging from non-problematic gambling activities (entertainment, excitement, thrills, etc.) to ‘pathological gambling’” (Cosgrave 2008:88).

Ethnographically informed conceptualizations of horse racing betting are conducted foremostly in reference to Erving Goffman’s works (1967; 1969). However, researchers such as Lesieur (1977), Rose-

crance (1986; 1990), Prus (2004), Allen (2006), as well as Raymen and Smith (2017) revise them within the realm of durable capitalistic history—in the USA, Australia, and the United Kingdom, where access to horse racing is much more abundant than in most other countries. To date, horse betting as “situated, career, fascinated, and persistent instances of activity that can be adequately understood only within a socially constituted life-world” (Prus 2004:9) has not been the subject of study in countries with a discontinued economic history. Specifically, countries where the audience within one generation has been operating in dramatically changed social, economic, and political contexts. One of these countries is Poland. Its political, social, and economic post-communist transformation began in 1990 and changed the organization of horse racing and the social patterns of partaking in it as an audience member.

Our research fills that gap and additionally focuses on an issue that so far has not been treated in much detail—gamblers’ perceptions of transitions in and out of gambling problems (Samuelson, Sundqvist, and Binde 2018). The focus of this paper is narrowed to analyses of how regular racing gamblers from Warsaw display their visits to the racetrack. We will show how their perspectives on their horse betting style of gambling are embraced as positively self-defining activity. Framing this research in one of the deviance theories, such as disavowal theory (Davis 1961) or the concept of techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957), would assume that a vague and deviant public picture of horse racing gamblers is a starting point of our interest in them, which is not the case.

In the early literature, gamblers are depicted foremost as adopting temporary gambling identities and as personas separate from everyday life (Huiz-

inga 1949; Caillois 1958; Goffman 1961; 1969). Partly as a result, there has been little discussion about the gamblers' self-conceptions—which also applies to current research highlighting the potential ubiquity of gambling through new technologies (Cassidy, Pisac, and Loussouarn 2013). In this study, we will argue that even the separateness of gambling in terms of time and space from everyday life, as in the case of Polish horse racing until 2019 (when online betting and transmissions from Służewiec Racetrack were launched), should not imply that the decades spent at Służewiec are of minor importance in forming a gambler's biography and self-conception.

Herman (1967) interpreted racetrack gambling by emphasizing the relationship of gambling to occupational life—where gambling offers the opportunity for individuals to make decisions with real consequences, which is often denied to them in their jobs. Concerning self-presentation, gambling can be seen as offering an opportunity to present the identity of someone who can and does make fateful decisions. Furthermore, as someone who does so with confidence, competence, and gameness (Herman 1967). In gambling, the symbolic violence of the market is acted out with the “free-willed' compliance of the subject” (Allen 2006:192).

Disentangling motives that compel people to gamble is one of the major areas of social research in that department. Yet, it also proves to be a hazardous task (Shalin 2016), especially if the researchers assign gamblers to motivational models that ignore the dynamics of their lives. In the case of Polish bettors, the origins of gambling coincide with communist times and a centrally planned economy and the later development of their biographies with democratic and capitalist macro contexts. Inspired by the arguments coined by Goffman (1967) and developed

by Prus (2004), we would like to analyze long-term gambling on horse racing as a form of human endeavor and a part of one's identity.

## **Interviews as a Tool of Ethnographic Research on the Social World of Gamblers**

Conceptualizing interviews as contextualized conversations rather than traditional researcher-dominated interviews (Mattson and Stage 2003), we assume the subjects' horse racing biography becomes especially meaningful within the context of ongoing activity and linguistic interchange.

We expanded our narrative analysis to consider the circumstances, conditions, and goals of the interviewees' accounts (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). To paraphrase the aforementioned authors, we explore the narrative reality dressed up by the storytellers for the relatively young female researchers. Through the interview analysis, we focused on what Holtgraves (1988:78) calls “a self-presentational view of gambling,” not within the gamblers' social world but during the interaction with the researchers. Undoubtedly, an appointed meeting with a hardly known researcher is a prominent type of that kind of opportunity. Despite its anonymization, giving an interview is, from its very nature, a consequential action of providing information and opinions that a researcher will transform into a generalized and public picture of the social world or social category of which the interviewee is a member.

The interview as a social research tool is entangled in several different social, psychological, and ethical contexts (e.g., Kvale 2007; Smith, Staples, and Rapport 2015; Roulston 2019). To elaborate on the methodological aspect of our ethnographic practice, we describe both our and the racegoers' social charac-

teristics. In the next step, we describe the fieldwork part of research among racegoers and appointing the meetings. That will lead to a discussion of the interview as a research tool in the case of interviewing people who are aware that a part of their life that is very important to them may be assessed negatively by society at large. We will then close with a brief characteristic of the interviewees.

At the time of the research, we were female academics with PhDs. We were younger than the interviewees by at least twenty-five years and, in a prominent number of cases, by around forty years. We had no personal connections with the horse racing social world. Before the interviews, we conducted observations at the Służewiec Racetrack to acquire a basic understanding of the game. During the second stage of the field research, we conducted regular participant observations on the racing days. Before we began inviting bettors to participate in the study, we already knew—at least by sight—those who were present in the stands every or almost every weekend, as well as particular circles of gamblers. Initially, we conducted observations together, but later on, we were usually chatting separately in the stands with the players, who also were usually alone or in groups, but rarely in pairs, spent time at the hippodrome. During the fieldwork, we got to know some of them through casual exchanges at the paddock or ticket offices. With time, once they started to recognize us, we let them know we were social anthropologists interested in the history of racing, the rules of the game, as well as their opinions on the state of horse racing in Poland.

For most bettors, our focus on them was unclear or even seemed improperly targeted, as they assumed that research on the horse racing world should focus on the best trainers, riders, and breeders. Therefore,

when explaining our motivations, we referred to the successive reforms of the horse race institutions in Poland and the threat of their liquidation. It was obvious that this was a topic relevant to their lives. Thus, we were defined in two ways—as people recording the last moments of the “dying horse races” or as people who will convey to the decision-makers the views of those who have extensive experience in horse races and gambling. That situation was complex in terms of competence. We considered our interlocutors to be experts on the issues they talked about and us as laypeople (Roulston 2019). Meanwhile, we were aware that the expectations of some racegoers about the influence of researchers on decision-makers were overestimated.

The interview situation extends beyond—and to some extent, begins even before—the interview itself (cf. Brinkmann and Kvale 2014). Scheduling the meetings was not based on establishing a personal relationship with the interlocutors (cf. Josselson 2007). The optimal recruitment strategy, in our case, was to show ourselves on the racetrack as basically external, patient observers who were mildly involved in the game. Convincing potential interviewees to take part in the research was not so much about building personal trust and rapport between the researcher and the interviewee but rather demonstrating our readiness to adopt the image of horse racing and betting culture our interlocutors wanted to convey. Thus, to abandon the aforementioned “deviant mystique” (Prus and Grills 2003).

To the degree that ethnography is invariably methodologically indeterminate, it is practically pre-determined by the researcher as the primary research instrument. “It is the fieldworker who fills the gaps left by the need to interpret methodology and ethical guidelines in situated interactions” (Schmid

2020). Gender and age were issues in the field settings and affected our abilities to build rapport with the gamblers at the racing stands and during the interviews. As Bucerius (2013:690) argues, ethnographers do not necessarily need to avoid an outsider role as “achieving status as an outsider trusted with ‘inside knowledge’ may provide the ethnographer with a different perspective and different data than that potentially afforded by insider status.” As relatively young women, we stood out at the Służewiec Racetrack, so we were sometimes treated indulgently. Our social characteristics also had their advantages during the interviews. Firstly, it seems that in our cultural context, people are more likely to expect to find a sympathetic listener in women. Secondly, our ignorance about the past was assumed because of our age—so inspiring a willingness to explain what racing and the game are like.

We should pay attention to the active role of the interlocutor during the interview, which may become for them an important element in thinking about their lives (see: Kaufmann 2010). Qualitative research methodologists attach great importance to the researcher’s reflectiveness and competence in the field of subtle control throughout the interview (Hammersley and Atkinson 1996; Kvale 2007). At the same time, researchers who work in the broadly understood naturalistic paradigm appreciate the supposed spontaneity of statements during interviews. However, the autobiographical threads analyzed by us are narratives that most of the interlocutors seemed to have thought about for years. As we will show, those who decided to be interviewed perceived that situation as an opportunity not only to present but also to interpret the events of their lives, summarize, and imbue them with positive value.

Longer interviewing during the race day was rarely an option, as potential interlocutors were too busy watching the races and betting on the results. The main challenge revealed itself to reside in the ‘different’ lives racegoers led outside of the racetrack. The separation of racing life from everyday life reflects one of the horse races mottos: “What happens at the racetrack, stays at the racetrack.” Some who initially agreed to meet with one of us soon declined, and others needed weekends to decide on the encounter outside the racetrack, while in the meantime, they chatted with us on weekends at the Służewiec Racetrack.

An interview is a conversation in which both parties pursue their goals, be they psychological, social, or scientific (cf. Kvale 2007). Sometimes those goals may change during the interview, especially for the interlocutors who—while talking about their lives—may realize that they should interpret their life stories as they tell them. It does not happen often that someone is in a situation of talking about their life—especially if that life may be perceived negatively—to a stranger whom they do not intend to know more about in return. Our interlocutors had time to prepare for the conversation and turned out to be very reflexive in their engagement in horse racing betting.

Within the context of ethnographic inquiry, the interview itself may, then, play a crucial role in eliciting information that would otherwise not be discussed in everyday life and conversation. People may become easily analytical about their and others’ experiences in an interview situation. “The interview may be seen to provide a space for the detachment and envisioning of subjectivities at a particular moment in time, and in a particular moment of experience” (Smith and Staples 2015:2).

Interviews create a social situation that is rare in everyday life. A conversation bereft of practical purpose coerces the interviewee to adopt the attitude of an observer toward themselves and strengthens the awareness that one is perceived through the prism of their “here and now” statements. If interlocutors were recruited as participants in a specific social world, then they would realize that they are also its representatives.

Our relatively young age meant that their older age was visible in the social relation of the interview, which turned out conducive to making summaries about their lives. When asked to share his story, one of the interviewees replied: “Very gladly, as I am approaching the end of my days” (Adam). Several interviewees also brought various materials to the interview—mainly photos, but also press clippings—to illustrate what they were talking about and what we were unable to experience. That shows they assumed the position of ‘teachers’ telling us about the old days and their unique biographies.

The situation of an interview between a relatively young woman and an older man, conducted in a cafe, park, or the building of the Faculty of Sociology, also didn't resemble the typical conversations that players had outside the track. Our interviewing strategy with racegoers was neither based on notions of objectivity and detachment nor friendly intimacy. These interviews also did not take the form of dialogues (Oakley 2015) because we did not have similar experiences to the interlocutors. We could say that the interview situations we created in this part of the study were thoroughly artificial. However, precisely for that reason, they offered our interlocutors the space of freedom that cannot be afforded by familiar social situations.

Gambling is simultaneously meaningful to insiders and meaningless to outsiders, as McMillen (2007) argues. In Poland, gambling advertising for horse racing is prohibited. In the Polish public discourse, horse betting, it appears, is treated as serious gambling and is almost always presented in terms of being a morally questionable activity or addiction. Additionally, as public opinion polls show, it is also negatively perceived by society (CBOS 2011), although for years, the scale of social interest in horse racing betting in Poland was, and still is, low and oscillates around 0.5%. It is unlike football betting and online betting, which are growing in popularity (CBOS 2019:154).

Our interlocutors were well aware of that as they have been encountering negative attitudes toward their activity in various situations and social circles. Only after completing all transcriptions, we fully realized how much *a priori* trust our interlocutors needed to assume—in opposition to popular beliefs—to trust that their experience would find careful listeners devoid of judgment. Moreover, they had to convince themselves that talking about ‘their races’ is equally important even outside the track, where they function in other social roles, which are not seldom unaware, as well as in the case of families who were often reluctant regarding their passions.

Elder racegoers at the Warsaw racetrack come from various social circles—from the working class to the intelligentsia, like engineers, university teachers, and journalists. Others live nearby and used to work in the factories surrounding the racetrack. In the People's Republic of Poland and during the transition, several of our interviewees were working in the gray economy. In recent years, the racetrack has been dominated by an audience who comes there



irregularly. Regular players are, almost without exception, decades-old racegoers who number more than a hundred persons (as of 2018).

## Origins of Racegoers' Gambling Biographies

Each interview opened a question on how our interlocutors came across horse racing. The question never came as a surprise. Rather, it was expected. Everyone had a long story about how they started gambling on horse races and why they do it to this day. Those two elements—first contact and justification for their further presence at the Służewiec Racetrack—emerged thoroughly in every narration and appeared strictly connected.

Family traditions, parents' work at races, and the spatial proximity of the racetrack meant that coming to the races was described as codetermining circumstances. However, those reasons were never taken as an explanation for the passion for racing. Some stories were accompanied by a memory of a friend who came to the races for the first time with an interlocutor, but "did not get involved." Thus, it is not enough to live next to the racing track, come to horse races, or even successfully bet on them to turn into a regular racegoer. The transition also needs a special life circumstance or predisposition.

Few interviews had initiation in childhood, which entailed a sense of 'eternality' of their experiences and placed those events beyond time and their control. The players' community especially appreciates racegoers who come from families that had some connection with horses before the Second World War, as breeders or owners or cavalrymen. Nevertheless, most racegoers only have their personal myth of origins in which appears at least one of the

following elements—the introductory person, the first, usually unexpected, win, or an event that depicts how, from the very beginning, the Służewiec Racetrack appeared to the interlocutor as a unique place, or at least different from the everyday world.

The introductory person was, in a few cases, the grandfather or father described as, for example, the one who named his dogs after the horses that won the Derby. Another was such a committed gambler that he left his grandson in a bar on the track, where the interlocutor was fed by kind 'aunts' from the hospitality service. Those who did not have such roots emphasized their initiation myth—a win or an anecdotal event from the first visit to the racetrack.

My family didn't have any horse racing experience, but there were echoes of, so to say, the landed gentry's past. As a ten-year-old boy, I persuaded my mother to take me to Służewiec because, in the daily *Express Wieczorny* newspaper, I read that there is the Derby. At the Derby, we were a little late because when we were walking along the road toward the track, there was such a scene—an old man was running toward the races, as racers say, "on the whip," and from the opposite side, from the side of the track, there was a man with a gloomy face and the old man exclaims to him, "What has come?! What has come?" The other answered him: "Mister of the Track," and, as is the case with one of the Bulgakov novels, he was offended for unclear reasons. I remembered Mister of the Track as the first name of the horse, and then, as I grew up, I checked which year it was, and Mister of the Track won the Derby in 1959. [Max]

The winning horse of the 'first derby' appeared several times in the interviews. Its name links personal experiences with the great history of the horse rac-

ing world and allows insiders to identify the year of horse racing initiations.

The first win was a common motive for playing races for many years. That theme is often featured in the biographies of various players as particularly captivating. Typically, all who won during the first visit to the races remember all the related details: race type, stakes, bet type, horse name, and even the exact sum of the winnings: "I hit the triple...those were the 1960s. I bet twenty zlotys, and I still remember the sum of 4936 zlotys that I won" (Mark). One of the interviewees recalls how he came to the races with his father as a seven-year-old boy, and his father asked him to choose the winning horse. The animal won, which resulted in not only the prize money but, foremost, the image of a euphoric father and his colleague.

The two of them embraced each other, the father and his friend, and they jumped and were happy. He gave me eighty zlotys...When we went home, we took a taxi, and we bought all kinds of good things, cookies, everything in the Delicatessen Shop. This is how I started going to horse races. How could I not catch the bug? [David]

A separate type of initiation myth relates to a love for horses, although it does not exclude other motives. One of the older interviewees said, "I guess I was born with a love for horses" (Max). In his case, it was a well-thought-out and mentally well-grounded interpretative frame. Max brought photos to the interview to justify his childhood fascination with horses, which was presented as inherent. A few interviewees took part in horse training sessions in their youth. From 1968, the state company managing the stables in Stuzewiec, due to staff shortages, established an 'amateur' institution. The appropri-

ate ID card enabled young people to groom and ride horses during training and amateur races ("out of passion" and without remuneration). One older man described the time when he was riding horses as the most beautiful period of his life. He has been a gambler for decades, but watching the races also stirs up memories of those emotions.

Many interviewees mentioned how good contacts in the stables provided insider information and constituted an additional source of emotional gratification in the sphere of social connections. Although cheating has evaporated from Polish horse racing with the privatization of horse ownership and training in the 1990s, so the first reason for excitement has diminished somewhat, memories of that are still adding meaning to racegoers' engagement and persistent gambling.

Some interviewees had a very distinctly developed internal interpretive framework for the several decades they have spent visiting the race track that has grown from initial events or motivations. Freedom was inextricably associated with the possibility of making autonomous decisions beyond anyone's control.

In high school, at the age of sixteen, it had already started on a more serious scale. That was in the middle of the 1980s, a really wretched time, right after martial law ended. An apathetic, disheartening time of no prospects, or so it seemed at that time. Stuzewiec was an oasis of freedom. If anybody had any business streak, they would come here, and if they had any opinions, they would pay for them. He was wrong—he lost, he was right—he won. [John]

The sense of freedom also dominates in the original narrative on the origins of passion for horse racing

embodied in the individual story of imprisonment and release.

What is very characteristic in my case, why did I—so to speak—lose myself in these races? Then, it was 1968; after 1967, I got thrown into jail—a detention ward in Białoleka—on March 15th. I got accidentally pulled off the street accused of beating a policeman [during the students' political protests]...My parents bailed me out, they never told me how much they had paid, but there had to be some price. Two months later, around May 11th, I got out, it was probably Saturday, I went home with my father, and in the afternoon, I went to the race-track, and it's the opening of the season. This event attracts loads of people, such is the tradition...It is simply amazing! In the morning, I was still locked up, and in the afternoon, I found myself in the open air, I was released...I believe it was then that I became a regular at the races, practically a regular. I kept coming to the track and never missed a race! It was this contrast between the limited space, the confined room—the jail in Białoleka—and the beautiful open space in Służewiec that attracted me so much. And I think, after all those fifty years, I think if I had wasted my life because of the races, this is all my parents' fault because they pulled me out of jail. [Adam]

The story was so salient and grounded in the man's thoughts that he repeated it four times during the interview. That is an emotional rationale, and it serves the same purpose each time—justifying Adam's long-life attachment to horse racing. Therefore, he had a story prepared in advance, which showed the uniqueness of his biography while presenting a value important also for others—the feeling of freedom.

While describing how the Polish long-time bettors presented their racegoers' biographies in the inter-

view process, it is necessary to include how the origin stories are infused with a sense of uniqueness. The sustaining mechanism of gambling persistence (Rosecrance 1986) binds present routines with a special origin. That kind of romanticized origins of one's life path often has the character of an appeal to fatefulness—so widely described by Goffman (1969)—the unpredictable, risky, or even accidental events that bring high gain. It may be an unexpected win, some specific strong feeling that one remembers for the rest of their life. Classic Goffman's (1967:179-180) concepts seem the most accurate, also for the analysis of autobiographical narrations of regular racegoers in Poland, decades later—a “defensive determinism’ is found in the belief in fate, predestination, and kismet—the notion that the major outcomes regarding oneself are already written down.” Engagement in betting on horse races at the Służewiec Racetrack is presented as not fully voluntary, entailing a work of ‘destiny’ or ‘fate’ to which a person simply surrenders. At the same time, exactly that makes their lives special. Our findings show that fatefulness may be inscribed not only in the discursive presentation of their engagement in gambling as a kind of regular activity but into the origins of interest in the horse races, which took the form of a personal, yet socially patterned, initiation myth.

## Emotions That Justify

The topic of emotions appeared spontaneously and constantly during the interviews. “This is, unfortunately, a gamble...But, the strongest emotions appeared when I was still single, then the money was big, and the emotions were big!” (Edward). The emotions the interviewees talk about can be divided into three categories related to betting, the atmosphere of the racetrack, and people who share similar passions, plus a sense of freedom.

Emotions are a fixture of memories—the interviewees emphasized they remember not just the events or wins but the emotions that accompanied them, which they miss and expect to experience again. All interviewees emphasized that the emotional state that remains in their memory for life is the euphoric sense of pride in one's ability to predict the race result. It was of particular importance in the times of the Polish People's Republic, when there were no legal paths to participate in a market economy, real economic contests, and betting pools were extraordinarily high. As Keith Hart (2013:35) writes, "For a large number of people without much money, making bets opens up the chance to participate actively in the money force, not just as a passive bystander." While referring to betting in communist times, regardless of education and occupation, interviewees were drawing attention to the strong feeling of agency. Betting in horse racing was commonly described as an intellectual contest that engages great emotions.

For me, the biggest phenomenon is that I haven't gotten dumb in those 48 years! I am limited, but I believe that thanks to horse racing, I have not gone stupid...It is [betting that is] also something good for the spirit, for the mind. Even after 50 years, I deal with it quite intensively because, in my case, it is a very intense friendship with horse races, and despite everything, I did not get stupid. At races, you play with a great amount of information, you must process this information, search, analyze, analyze, synthesize, collect, et cetera. And all this is done by the old regular racegoers. [Adam]

The above conviction of the value of engagement in betting indicates not only its intellectual but also emotional or even moral value and was mentioned by many. Talking about analytical skills was also

commonly presented as a source of pride. Some bettors said that years of betting prepared them for life in a free market economy that began to emerge in Poland at the end of the 1980s. Everyone mentioned (or elaborated) that betting on horse racing is not a typical gambling game, and a few compared it to the stock exchange: "The game itself is quite difficult because you have to take into account a lot of factors; it is not for someone who comes from the street...However, the analysis is a bit like analyzing stock exchange quotes" (Michael).

Along with the discourse of unique emotions, almost all interviewees used a narrative strategy based on referring to their professionalism. When describing their past, most depicted themselves either as professionals (Rosecrance 1990) or as harmless enthusiasts who had never seriously invested in betting yet enjoyed the emotions related to it. Only two persons described themselves as struggling from time to time with data analysis and losses. Yet, it should be emphasized that none of our interlocutors appeared to be in a neglected state or struggling with everyday life.

Therefore, they presented betting not as an addiction but as a challenging and emotionally stirring, ongoing task that can be professionally performed, provide useful skills, and help racegoers to stay intellectually fit. In the Polish People's Republic, where many aspects of everyone's lives were subjected to state planning and control, it was a rare type of experience. As Allen (2006:193) remarks, "all but the most naïve gambler operates with full cognizance that the house always holds the advantage. Are they those to be read as engaging in a form of self-sabotage, or worse, self-exploitation?" In the case of bettors in a communist country, whose professional freedom was even more restricted than in

democratic and capitalist countries, material losses were not only the price to pay for the only legal way in which one had at least a small chance to gain big money but also the only chance for gaining a sense of agency. "Betting inserts a person into money and markets as an agent who takes and makes them at the same time. There is some satisfaction in that, regardless of profit and loss" (Hart 2013:25). That seems to hold true even more to the people confined in the communist regime.

In the twenty-first century, in the current capitalist reality, Warsaw Służewiec Racetrack (except on big days in the racing calendar) attracts a far smaller audience than in the communist period. At present, regular racegoers spend a well-planned amount of their pensions on the Warsaw track, as well as any gains from previous betting. The low turnout results in small betting pools, and thus winnings are never as spectacular as in the past. As an outcome, even the most accomplished 'working' horse racing bettors cannot regard it as a significant source of income or even an accidental influx of big cash. Thus, their motivations cannot be interpreted from an economic perspective (Rosecrance 1990:348-349). Consequently, continuing a habit of regular visits and direct betting is a personal matter of choice, and determination to act regardless of socio-economic contexts, to experience emotions of agency akin to those of years ago.

The second source of emotions is the unique atmosphere at the Służewiec Racetrack arising from dealing with various people who share a similar passion. For some, the possibility of meeting extraordinary, outstanding people was related to the feeling of freedom, "You know, as a young man, when I first encountered this colorful and distinct world, the world of freedom—and by the way, I've always been crazy about freedom, this world of movie stars

and literature celebrities. I just knew that [Służewiec Racetrack] was the place for me. And I go there quite regularly" (Max).

When talking about the special emotions that result from having a unique, niche knowledge of horses and their breeding, some racegoers underlined the value of being understood by other like-minded people. They underlined how their families could not understand how one could be capable of talking for hours about horse races, "You know, usually, it is so that a real racegoer finds no understanding at home, no, there is no understanding, and running away from a nagging wife is just wonderful" (Max).

In both types of narratives, horse racing forms a social world of unique social opportunities that cannot be found anywhere else. Those outcomes confirm the thesis drawn from another qualitative study by Rosecrance (1986) on off-track horse gamblers, sports bettors, and poker players that revealed that social binding arrangements constitute, in all cases, a salient sustaining mechanism of gambling persistence.

Still, more people were underlining a unique feeling of "being in your own place" that accompanies them at the racetrack and distances their decades-long experience from the changing social and economic contexts. One of the most telling statements was: "I have left so many hours there, so much work, so many emotions, so many relations that there is such a big sentiment, attachment... After so many years, it has become such a second home, a home always associated with horses" (Matthew).

Awareness of the large amount of time spent at the races came through in many statements. It is referred to with the strong sentiment:

They [horse races] mean a lot to me because they make up a part of my life. When you have spent a significant part of your time in your life [at the racetrack], it is also connected with such a nice time that you remember fondly...For me, they are important because of the great time I spent there. I like horses, I like horse races, and I know it, I know what horse races are about. [Henry]

Time spent at Służewiec Racetrack is truly memorable to most of the regular racegoers—some interviewees eagerly recalled the names of horses and riders who won the most important races in past decades, but also the names and nicknames of the best or most colorful gamblers.

The word “freedom” returns in narratives on emotions—as the term describing the affect accompanying horse betting and being among other bettors, which translates in the analyzed narrations into the justification of a long-term attachment to horse racing. Experiencing a bunch of strong positive emotions with a feeling of freedom as the most prominent was widely presented as a justification for their long experience in gambling. Thus, the emotions that are addictive, especially a feeling of agency, not money, in the interlocutors' narratives constitute the basic justification for regular gambling.

There were very few descriptions of such emotions as disappointment, failure, or anger. Most probably, players dominated by such emotions had already withdrawn from gambling at the racetrack. Others probably decided to omit to talk about such emotions. No interviewee stated they regretted their time spent on horse races. The only negative element the interlocutors commonly mentioned was the feeling of nostalgia and even the loss of the atmosphere that accompanied horse racing in com-

munist times. Gamblers stated that horse racing was extremely important because, over time, it became part of their life.

I left so many hours there, so much work, so many emotions, so many relations that there is such a big sentiment, attachment...In the beginning, I just came by, now looked at those nearly empty stands, all those friends were standing there...After so many years, it has become such a second home, a home always associated with horses. [Matthew]

At the same time, referring to emotions allows interlocutors to present themselves as sensitive people, other than the majority, who are unable to understand the gamblers' passion. That aspect of the horse racing experience is hard to convey to people dissociated from gambling. The interviewees' endeavors to highlight the importance of emotions can be interpreted as a protective tool against possible negative assessment, which can be explained as a consequence of the inability of others to understand the emotions of the gamblers. It is a discursive tool that cannot be questioned.

### Alleviating the Discourse of Addiction

Few interlocutors spontaneously decided to refer to the discourse of addiction and provided us not only with positive interpretations of their horse racing betting biographies.

Theodor was one of three interviewees who referred directly to the addiction discourse that accompanies the issue of betting on horse races. He did so by talking about his wife's reactions to his passion.

My wife says: “You are a gambler!” I believe that I am not a gambler because a gambler, according to my

definition of gambling, first, is the one who plays beyond his abilities, that is—for example, takes a loan and loses this loan, meaning, he plays beyond his abilities. This is a gambler. Besides, the gambler just can't hold out in his game. When he is at the races, he cannot stand it, he must play. I was in Las Vegas, and there I walked around these different roulette arcades and slot machines and watched...I had money, but I didn't play it even once. [Theodor]

First, the interlocutor had his definition of gambling from which he excluded himself. He also strongly emphasized his analytical skills and the distinctiveness of betting on races from other gambling games. In his words can be noted the emphasis on the feeling of being misunderstood by others, which was also present in other narratives.

Two interviewees were talking openly about gambling addiction. Their narratives were dominated by the futile thread of hope of winning money.

With money, there was hope; it was more than hope; there was hope to win! It was very addictive. You can't call it a gamble because in horse races, it's really hard to lose, but it's definitely a passion, and it's definitely an addiction. It is a kind of addiction, and it is a big addiction. This addiction certainly has an impact on a person, and often, it is probably a negative influence. I am very lucky that this addiction somehow has a positive effect on me. Somehow, I'm happy to be addicted to horse races. [Adam]

The interviewee (a former horse racing journalist) justifies his addiction by locating himself among the professionals who generally profit from the ignorance of the non-regular public. During the interview, this interlocutor often used a strategy of reversing the dominant discourses on horse races

that appear in Polish society. This time, he agreed with the labeling of race-going as an addiction, but unlike the popular opinion, he argued that it was an addiction that was profitable for him. Yet the last one is not the most important in his narration. He discussed the positive aspects of typing and betting several times during the interview by placing three features in the foreground: intellectual stimulation, the feeling of freedom, and the feeling of happiness in his activity. Therefore, when he adopts the label of an addict imposed by society, he redefines it, which further emphasizes the uniqueness of the horse racing world. Nonetheless, in the middle of his story, he also adds, "And as I sometimes think about it, on the one hand, coming to horse racing was a lucky event for me because I am still myself all the time, and on the other hand, an unhappy event because of horse races I did not achieve what I was predisposed to. I did not use my abilities" (Adam).

Only one interlocutor internalized the popular opinion about betting on horse races and spoke more about financial losses, not positive emotions.

Well, I used to come here as a person who bets on races. After that first win, it was different. Well, but when I come... How many years? Forty-six years of visiting the racetrack, I won three seasons, that's all. Failures all the time...I was in New York...I also went to the racetrack there. Well, I had the misfortune that there was a betting point near my house, and I was finishing work earlier, so always on my way home... Instead of bringing home a few thousand dollars—it was in the nineties—I brought a lot less. Because a leopard can't change its spots, I can't change too. [Vincent]

He did not use such terms as gambling or addiction during the interview, but he certainly felt that he

could not resist the game even though he wins very rarely and has lost much betting on horse races. His narrative on the matter shows both resignation and reconciliation with his weaknesses. Yet he also had justification for his engagement in horse racing in his narrative, which was his love for horses that he also breeds.

### Conclusion: Biographical Work in the Gamblers' Narratives

Our research was not biographical as we did not conduct classic biographical interviews (Bertaux 1981; Schütze 2012). Yet, in the case of many interviews, the biographical thread—the story of one's life—was a substantive part of the narrative or even a prevailing part. The subject of the interview meant that the interviewees did not talk in detail about other aspects of their lives. That said, in all interviews, there appeared longer or shorter stories about professional work, family life, and social life. Gamblers who took part in the project treated it as another “fateful action” (Goffman 1967:164) that was consequential and might bring either gain (alleviating gambling on horse racing from the negative label) or loss (exposing oneself and their world to negative assessment). All racegoers treated the conversations with us as an opportunity to present a comprehensive interpretation of their biography. That typically began with memories about their beginnings and ended with more or less extensive reflections that summarized their whole life passion. Thus, the “narrative work”—the interactional activity, in particular, “narrative environments” (Gubrium and Holstein 2009)—was purposefully used by gamblers to convey a particular type of biographical narration on their engagement in the game. The significant differences between the wider public and racegoers clearly limited the possibility of building

a sense of the close relationship between them. Yet it enabled racegoers to perform reflexive biographical work during the interviews (Strauss 1984; Kaźmier-ska 2008).

Narrative environments of storytelling become critical for understanding what is at stake for a different and alternative view of analysis that is oriented both to the internal and especially to the external organization of stories (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). We are aware that the biographical narratives of the gamblers we have collected represent an idealized self-image that might be difficult to maintain when they are confronted with individuals who know them well or are adversely disposed toward their dedication to horse racing. Everyone stated that horse racing was extremely important because, over time, it became part of their life and character.

Gamblers perceived their attachment as a holistic activity connected with horse racing, in which the most important aspects were specific knowledge and participation in the social world, whose goals were very different from those of the professional and personal lives of the racegoers. They started their passion at the beginning of their occupational lives in a communist country and continue it to this day as pensioners living under capitalism. The findings of the current study show that when talking about their engagement in racing, bettors scarcely refer to macro-structural changes in Polish society at large.

That finding suggests that gamblers' self-conceptions, not to be mistaken with practices and routines, may be, in many respects, immune to transformations of gambling organizations and cultural contexts. Although their gambling activity was separated from everyday life in physical and social



terms, racegoers do not depict themselves as taking on temporary gambling identities. In their narratives, persistent gambling sprouts from the origins of their interest in the horse racing world. The beginnings of their interest in their narratives turn into individual initiation myths around the origins of the passion possessing properties of “defensive determinism” (Goffman 1967:179), which is important for their justifications for their continuing presence in the stands of the Służewiec Racetrack.

Biographical elements can be observed not only in the construction of the narratives of our interviewees but also in Goffman’s work. Researchers underline that it is well-known that Goffman was a passionate gambler (Shalin 2016; Cosgrave 2020). He not only conducted participant observations in casinos but also, or maybe foremost, an autoethnography, yet not directly disclosed in his texts. Assuming that, his concepts may be interpreted as elucidating not only social performances but also the autobiographical narrations of avid gamblers. The compelling thesis within “Where the Action Is” may not be a romanticized conception of gambling (Cosgrave 2008; Shalin 2016) but also a result of biographical work, which we also found in the narratives of gamblers from the Warsaw horse racetrack.

Our research reveals that emotions are a feature of such narrations along with memories—the interviewees emphasized they remember not only the events but the emotions that accompanied them. The first type of emotions that justify an attachment to horse racing are related to typing and betting on racing. Yet they are not uncontrolled or triggered by spontaneous actions or compulsively realized needs—they were presented as an intellectual passion that evokes strong emotions. The second source of emotions is the unique atmosphere

at the Służewiec Racetrack arising from interactions with people who share a similar passion. The third kind of emotion could be called the fundamental one—a recurrent theme expressing the experiences behind a deep sense of freedom that comes from undertaking the fateful actions of gambling and meeting various people who share that drive.

For our interviewees, horse races gave meaning to their lives, often very individual and unique, because they were unrelated to their family and former professional paths. Moreover, it also fits in the narrative about the uniqueness of racing in Warsaw as a special place in the city with a special social atmosphere that cannot be recreated in any way. Thus, betting at horse races is participating in a unique social reality accessible to a small group that cannot be biographically reduced to gambling. Regarding self-presentation, gambling activity provides an opportunity to present an identity of someone who can and does make fateful decisions and, more importantly, as someone who can do so with confidence, competence, and gameness (Herman 1967:83).

The bettors we talked to presented themselves as original persons with their own unusual way of life. Their biographical work was based on presenting the coherent course of their lives—from almost mythical initiation to the position of a loyal participant in the horse racing social world. At all stages, emotions were the most important factor that drove the narration of the biography. Referring to emotions allowed interlocutors to present themselves as sensitive people, distinct from the majority, who cannot understand the gamblers’ passion. We also interpret their endeavors to highlight the importance of emotions as a protective tool against the possible negative assessment resulting from the omnipresence of the addiction discourse on gambling.

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