

Position paper

Becoming hooked? Angling, gambling, and “fishing addiction”

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Abstract

Introduction: Fishing and gambling are two activities that do not appear to have much in common with each other but a few scholars have argued both are potentially addictive behaviours that share psychological and behavioural similarities. **Material and methods:** Academic literature, populist literature, and anecdotal evidence collected from online fishing discussion forums was used to ascertain whether excessive fishing could be considered as a behaviour that could be potentially addictive, and whether it had similarities with other potentially addictive behaviours (most notably gambling addiction). **Results:** A review of the relevant literature both in academic journals and more populist literature suggest fishing addiction may theoretically exist. Self-reports by fishers on online discussion forums suggest many of the core components of addiction were specifically described in relation to their fishing experiences including salience,

withdrawal symptoms, conflict with job and/or relationships, relapse, and tolerance.

Conclusion: Fishing - when taken to excess - does appear to have addiction-like properties akin to problematic drug use and/or gambling. However, the present paper does not argue that fishing addiction exists, just that some people (including fishers themselves) conceptualise their excessive behaviour as an addiction.

Keywords

Behavioural addiction; fishing psychology; fishing addiction; angling addiction; gambling addiction; problem gambling

Introduction

Fishing and gambling are two activities that on the surface do not appear to have much in common with each other. They are both leisure activities enjoyed by many people but for many, this is where the similarities stop. This opinion paper briefly explores a few different areas including (i) a more in-depth look at the psychological and behavioural similarities between these seemingly disparate leisure activities of fishing and gambling, and (ii) an exploratory examination of 'fishing addiction' by reviewing academic and populist literature that have previously addressed the topic and by examining self-reported accounts of excessive fishing on online fishing discussion forums.

In what ways are fishing and gambling similar?

In the broadest of senses, gambling and fishing are not too dissimilar. As Smith, Wynne and Hartnagel [1] have noted, the word 'gambling' in day-to-day language has broad currency and can describe a number of activities such as "*farming, fishing, searching for oil, marriage or even crossing a busy street*" (p.6). More specifically, in a chapter on stress among fisherman, Pollnac, Monnereau, Poggie, Ruiz and Westwood [2] noted that "*a fisher is basically gambling every time he/she goes out fishing*" (p.311) and that like gambling "*production per fishing trip is highly variable and relatively unpredictable*" (p.311). An earlier paper by Pollnac and Poggie [3] highlighted that marine fishing as an occupation is of a relative risky nature and state that it attracts and holds individuals manifesting an active, adventurous, aggressive and courageous personality – attributes that arguably apply to some types of competitive gamblers, such as poker players [4,5].

According to Binde [6], who describes himself as a gambling researcher that enjoys fishing in his spare time, gambling and fishing have many similarities "*especially if you consider bait casting (spinning) in relation to repetitive forms of gambling, such as slot machines*" (p.1). James [7] has also made a similar observation that "*pulling a penny slot is like casting your line. It doesn't take a lot of effort but the payout is sometimes sweet*" (p.1). In fact, both Binde [6] and James [7] have noted a number of distinct similarities and the list below combines these along with some of the present authors' own observations:

- In both activities, the participant repeats the same behaviour over and over again in the hope that they will attain something of material value.
- Both activities lead to mood modifying experiences and can be both relaxing and exciting.

- Both activities can result in the person forgetting about time and engaging in the activity for much longer than the person originally intended (because of the escape-like qualities of engaging in the activity).
- Both activities involve “near misses” that reinforce the behaviour (or as Binde [6] says “one reel symbol slightly out of place for a jackpot; bites and nibbles of fish that does not get hooked” [p.1]).
- Success in either activity may be a combination of skill and chance, and winning or catching a fish give the individuals concerned a sense of achievement and mastery. Furthermore, the person engaging in these activities may not be able to differentiate between what was skill and what was chance (“was my choice of bait successful or was it just luck that I caught a big fish?” [6, p.1]).
- In both activities, the ‘availability bias’ comes into play. More specifically, the few big successes (i.e., catching a really big fish or winning a large amount of money) are highly memorable while all the many other occasions when the person lost all their money or caught nothing are easily forgotten.
- In both activities, superstitious rituals are commonplace (wearing a “lucky” cap, spitting on the lure, etc.). As Griffiths and Bingham [8] have noted, there are certain groups within society who tend to hold more superstitious beliefs than what may be considered the norm including sportsmen, actors, miners, fishermen, and gamblers.
- In both activities, when things are not going right (i.e., not winning, not catching any fish), the person then tries the same thing somewhere else (a gambler changes table or slot machines, or goes to a new gaming venue; a fisherman changes his bait or tries another place in the river or a new river entirely).
- In both activities, one win or one fish caught is never enough.
- Both activities are potentially addictive (“ask either addict’s wife and they will confirm” [7, p.1]).
- In both activities, families forgive the person if they bring something home with them (i.e., winnings or fresh fish).
- Finally, (and somewhat tongue-in-cheek) both activities (according to James [7]) “are better with a drink in hand” (p.1).

Another similarity is that both activities can prove an expensive pastime. While this could be said comparing any two leisure activities, in a qualitative interview study of seven male high frequency betting shop gamblers, Ricketts and Macaskill [9], the gamblers justified the amount spent on gambling by contrasting the amount they spent on other leisure pursuits like fishing. As one gambler said: “Like some people go fishing... and that costs a lot more than what it does with gambling. So that’s the way I see it, really, you pay for your hobbies”.

Another qualitative interview study of seven male online poker players by Parke and Griffiths [10] highlighted that some of the players use fishing analogies to describe their card play. It emerged clearly from one interview that a player could profit in both offline and online forms of gambling by manipulating various forms of information technology. As the authors noted:

“The significance of this belief was moderated in the sense that although participants professed that such profitable control was indeed possible, they indicated that there were also negative consequences of gambling in a controlled and profitable manner. This profitable, yet restricted form of gambling was described by one participant as ‘trawling’, highlighting the demanding and onerous nature of the activity... The use of the term ‘trawling’ for such forms of controlled gambling conveys an impression that is similar to commercial sea fishing (i.e. not only is it an arduous task but also several external factors influence profitability such as luck)” [10, pp.255-256].

Binde [6] also goes on to say that it is unsurprising that individuals that want to cease their excessive gambling often find sport fishing a suitable “substitution” leisure activity. He then goes on to argue that fisherman only risk losing time rather than money but then adds:

“Sport fishing gear may cost a bit and fishermen may get the idea that better gear would make fishing more successful. There are people, however, who have problems controlling the extent of their sport fishing and who perceive it as a kind of addiction” (p.1).

Pendleton [11] draws similarities between fishing tournaments in Hawaii and poker tournaments. He cites Dr. Marc Miller, a cultural anthropologist and professor at the University of Washington, who theorized that there are four phases of tournament fishing that correspond to those found in gambling.

“The first phase is ‘squaring off’, which begins when the anglers board their boat, choose their tackle and the area they intend to fish, and go steaming off to the grounds. It is rather like the gambler with a handful of chips checking out the gaming tables, he noted, but it abruptly ends when the lines hit the water. The second is the determination phase, Miller said. Like the gambler’s blackjack table, this is where the action is. The angler is fishing and fate is in charge. It only ends when the ‘stop fishing’ signal is given. The angler enters the third phase – ‘the disclosure’ – when the fishing is over. Again like the gambler’s hand of cards, it is time for the fisherman to put his catch up for weighing and judging – to finally show what he’s got. Finally comes the ‘settlement phase’ of tournament fishing when the angler’s score is posted and the results are compared with the other fishermen in the contest, rather like when the gambler must settle up with the dealer” (p.1).

Fishing as an addiction

The notion that fishing may be potentially addictive is not something that the present authors had ever considered. As far as the present authors are aware, there has never been a study of “fishing addiction” in the psychological literature although there are a few references to it and/or compulsive fishing. Similar to James’ [7] (2013) observation above about wives knowing if their husbands are addicted to fishing or gambling, Pollnac and Poggie [3] noted that:

“A commercial crabber from Alaska said, ‘As any fisherman’s wife will tell you, fishing is an addiction. And for commercial fishermen, consider it a gambling addiction’ [12]. This is an insightful observation, fishing is like an addiction, and most fishermen would do anything to avoid the potentially painful withdrawal symptoms” (p.199).

Bill Glasser, author of the 1976 book Positive Addiction [13], noted that fishing was one of many “positive addictions” in a later paper on the topic [14]. More specifically, he claimed that he had heard numerous stories from many different individuals claiming they were ‘positively addicted “to a variety of activities such as swimming, hiking, bike riding, yoga, Zen, knitting, crocheting, hunting, fishing, skiing, rowing, playing a musical instrument, singing, dancing, and many more” (p.174). Glasser [13] argued that activities such as jogging and transcendental meditation were positive addictions and were the kinds of activity that could be deliberately cultivated to wean addicts away from more harmful and sinister preoccupations. He also asserted that positive addictions must be new rewarding activities that produce increased feelings of self-efficacy.

Glasser’s [13] own criteria for positive addictions are that the activities must (i) be non-competitive and needing about an hour a day, (ii) be easy, so no mental effort is required, (iii) be easy to be done alone, not dependent on people, (iv) be believed to be having some value (physical, mental, spiritual), (v) be believed that if persisted in, some improvement will result, and (vi) involve no self-criticism. Although ‘fishing addiction’

arguably meets these criteria, Griffiths [15] has argued that Glasser's criteria have little to do with accepted criteria for addictive behaviour such as salience, mood modification, tolerance, conflict, withdrawal, loss of control, and relapse [16]. Therefore, although Glasser believes that addiction to fishing is a positive addiction, Griffiths [16] would argue that 'fishing addiction' using Glasser's criteria is not really an addiction. Using Griffiths' criteria, fishing addiction would comprise anyone that fulfilled the following six criteria:

- *Salience* – This occurs when fishing becomes the single most important activity in the person's life and dominates their thinking (preoccupations and cognitive distortions), feelings (cravings) and behaviour (deterioration of socialised behaviour). For instance, even if the person is not actually fishing they will be constantly thinking about the next time that they will be (i.e., a total preoccupation with fishing).
- *Mood modification* – This refers to the subjective experiences that people report as a consequence of fishing and can be seen as a coping strategy (i.e., they experience an arousing 'buzz' or a 'high' or paradoxically a tranquilizing feel of 'escape' or 'numbing').
- *Tolerance* – This is the process whereby increasing amounts of time spent fishing are required to achieve the former mood modifying effects. This basically means that for someone engaged in fishing, they gradually build up the amount of the time they spend fishing every day.
- *Withdrawal symptoms* – These are the unpleasant feeling states and/or physical effects (e.g., the shakes, moodiness, irritability, etc.), that occur when the person is unable to fish because they are ill, on holiday, etc.
- *Conflict* – This refers to the conflicts between the person and those around them (interpersonal conflict), conflicts with other activities (social life, hobbies and interests) or from within the individual themselves (intra-psychic conflict and/or subjective feelings of loss of control) that are concerned with spending too much time fishing.
- *Relapse* – This is the tendency for repeated reversions to earlier patterns of excessive fishing to recur and for even the most extreme patterns typical of the height of excessive fishing to be quickly restored after periods of control.

In an online article on "The psychology of fishing addiction" [17], addiction psychotherapist Alexandria Stark asserted that although fishing addiction was not recognized in the psychiatric community, the criteria of Gambling Disorder in the DSM-5 [18] could be adapted to screen for whether someone is a fishing addict. Additionally, a paper by McKeon, Josephs, Klos et al. [19] reported seven case studies of "*unusual compulsive behaviors*" (p.516) following treatment for Parkinson's disease with dopamine agonist therapy. One of the seven cases was a 48-year-old man who had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease at the age of 43 years and was taking daily doses of levodopa [300mg], ropinirole [24mg] and selegeline [5mg]. It was reported that the man suddenly "*developed an intense interest and fascination with fishing*" [19, p.517] even though he had little prior interest in the activity. His wife reported that her husband was fishing incessantly for day after day, and that even though he caught nothing his interest in fishing did not diminish.

Pollnac and Poggie [3] who have carried out lots of research into professional fisherman have speculated that professional fisherman and gamblers may have similar personality types and similar biological pre-dispositions. They speculated that if professional fisherman had not had gone into the fishing profession, they may have ended up as drug addicts or gambling addicts. More specifically, Pollnac and Poggie [3] noted that: "*The possible existence of a genetic component related to an active, adventurous, aggressive, and courageous personality type should not be surprising. Fishermen manifesting this personality type are more successful as would be the hunters and gatherers who provided sustenance for human populations through most of the time humans have been on earth. This genetic component, which would have been*

advantageous for early humans, served us well, but when it was no longer needed, its frequency in human populations probably started a slow decline. It still exists, however, and those lucky (or unfortunate) to have it have to find other outlets for their need for novelty and adventure – risky sports and high stakes gambling, recreational hunting, marine sport fishing, and risky jobs like firefighting, policing, futures trading in the stock market, etc. Those who do not find other outlets or who may be misguided turn to self destructive behavior such as addictive gambling, crime (high risk) and substance abuse [20]. Fortunately for fishermen, the occupation of fishing, a risky occupation, can provide a certain level of adventure accompanied by various risks and hence, serve as a socially acceptable outlet for their need for action and adventure while increasing their levels of satisfaction and happiness” (p.197).

Do fisherman think their activity can become addictive?

The present authors visited various online discussion forums dedicated to fishing (e.g., *Big Fish Tackle* [www.bigfishtackle.com] and *Angling Addicts* [<http://www.anglingaddicts.co.uk>]) and located a number of fishermen that claimed their fishing was an addiction and/or had addiction-like properties. Here is a selection of self-reports that were found:

Extract 1: *“Ever since I started several months ago, all I seem to think about is fishing. My girl only allows me to go once a week on Sundays and sometimes once during the week if I beg enough. Every other day it takes a forklift to get me out of bed but on fishing day my mental clock goes off at daybreak and I’m wide awake. Anyone else love fishing so much that it affects their normal lives? Any free time I have I’m either online looking at ‘YouTube’ fishing videos, cruising BFT, playing a computer fishing game, or watching ESA (Extreme Sports Angler) on TV whenever it’s on” (tamdoankc).*

Extract 2: *“I was such an addict to fishing as well. My wife had finally cut me back to only 5 trips a week. Finally I got a job that requires me to fish every day. It pays the bill, buys her new shoes and she even lets me go fishing on my days off” (tubeN2).*

Extract 3: *“I think you’ll find most folks on this board get the shakes and withdrawal if we don’t wet a line past 10 days. November to March is too long for me” (gdn443).*

Extract 4: *“Trust me man, I know EXACTLY how you feel, along with almost every other fisherman on the board. With some people the addiction goes away, with others (like me) it doesn’t. I’ve had it since I was two [years old] (and will until I’m dead). Eventually it will stop affecting your day-to-day life so dramatically. You’ll find a way to fit it into your schedule” (Bassmata).*

Extract 5: *“[My] addiction began in 1980 with two young kids growing up on the barrier islands of Florida’s Space Coast. Daily fishing excursions before and after school fueled the passion for fishing. I struggled with the fishing addiction, before enlisting in the Air Force. A career working on the Space Shuttle brought me back home, where the fishing addiction returned” (alexh).*

Extract 6: *“I don’t nor will ever have a ‘normal’ life because of fishing. It is like a bad drug, once you try it, you need more!” (lunkerhunter2).*

Extract 7: *“My wife said ‘Fishing or me’. I don’t miss her but I miss all that money that disappeared when she went. Thank God I fish whenever I want!” (bendopolo).*

Extract 8: *“If it is just a phase then it is going to be a long one. I have had the addiction [to fishing] for years now. Some days are much worse than others... Sometimes when it is 70 degrees and the sun is shining all I want to do is go out to the waters” (rhonda1717).*

Extract 9: *“Ever wonder why we do this fishing lark. Is it an addiction like gambling? I catch a fish and I want to catch a bigger fish. And if I blank [catch no fish] I want go and*

get over my blank. I have a mate into gambling and if he wins he wants to win more and if he loses he wants to bet more to get over his bad luck. Do you see the pattern? Well I must be addicted to fishing or an angling addict" (Divedog).

Obviously the veracity of the quotes cannot be guaranteed as genuine but there is no reason to suspect that they are faked. Additionally, it is not known to what extent the accounts located were representative of excessive fishers. However, the present authors believe that the self-reports have existential value and provide informal data that could be more formally investigated in future studies. In Extract 1, the individual is totally preoccupied by fishing even though he is not fishing every day (in fact, twice a week maximum). He thinks about fishing all the time and it appears to be the single most important thing in his life. If he can't actually fish he is watching online fishing videos, watching fishing television programmes, playing fishing videogames, or on online fishing forums. Here, the individual appears to display cross-tolerance (i.e., when unable to fish will engage in other fish-related activities such as playing a fishing videogame). The only activity that makes him want to get out of bed is fishing. The description of his behaviour is arguably one of the best working definitions of salience that you could find. For want of a better word, he is totally obsessed with fishing.

In Extract 2, fishing is actually described by the individual as an addiction and that his wife made him cut back on his fishing. The way he overcame his urge to fish was to get a job that involved fishing which not only met his fishing needs but resolved the conflict in his relationship as his wife no longer cared that he was fishing every day when it became his full-time job. In Extract 3, the individual describes withdrawal symptoms if he is unable to fish and that he gets "the shakes" if he is unable to fish, similar to an alcoholic who gets the shakes (i.e., delirium tremens) when unable to drink. The individual in Extract 4 also specifically describes fishing in extreme cases as an addiction and something that has been with him (and will be with him) for life. He obviously remembers a time when it conflicted with everything in his life but has now found a way to fit it into his day-to-day schedule. He does not say how he has done this but presumably it has been achieved by either not having a relationship with someone and/or getting a job that allows fishing (or giving up a job completely and living off state benefits).

The individual in Extract 5 also describes fishing as an addiction and how he first got involved with fishing (i.e., being in Florida near water meant that fishing excursions were readily and easily available). The extract also (arguably) provides an example of relapse in that he had been able to give up fishing for a period in his life (because there was no opportunity for him to fish), only for it to return at a later point. In Extract 6, fishing is likened to drug use and that once someone has tried fishing they have to go back for more. For want of a better word they become 'hooked' (no pun intended but another linguistic example of the association between fishing and addiction).

In Extract 7, the individual describes how he was given an ultimatum by his wife, and as a consequence, he chose fishing over the relationship. Obviously his fishing was causing relationship problems and when it came to make a decision, he decided he loved fishing more than his wife and can now fish whenever he wants without his ex-wife interfering or passing negative comment on his desire to fish. By removing his wife from his day-to-day activity, the fishing presumably became a non-problematic behaviour. Extract 8 describes fishing as an activity that has become constant in the individual's life and is not just a phase that they are going through. Fishing is also described as an addiction and is something that can be triggered by a specific feature of the environment (i.e., the weather being hot and sunny). The individual in Extract 9 has actually reflected on his fishing experiences and not only describes fishing as an addiction but also notes the similarities between fishing and gambling. He sees the analogies between catching

small fish and small winnings in gambling, and the desire to want to catch bigger fish and to try to win big in gambling. This account also arguably describes tolerance in that the person needs to catch bigger and bigger fish over time.

Conclusion

The present paper attempted to examine whether – in extreme cases – fishing could be characterised as an addiction, and also attempted to argue that there are many commonalities between excessive fishing and another behavioural addiction (i.e., gambling addiction). Using academic literature, populist literature, and anecdotal evidence collected from online fishing discussion forums, it is argued that fishing – when taken to excess – does appear to have addiction-like properties and that some fishers describe their fixation on fishing as an addiction akin to problematic drug use and/or gambling.

As the selection of self-reported quotes demonstrated, many of the core components of addiction were specifically described: salience (Extracts 1 and 4), withdrawal symptoms (Extract 3), conflict with job and/or relationships (Extracts 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7), cutting down and relapse (Extracts 2, 5, and 8), and tolerance/cross-tolerance (Extracts 1 and 9). Although mood modification was not explicitly mentioned in any of the extracts (apart from statements saying that they “love” fishing), mood modification is implicit in most of the accounts as individuals would not repeatedly engage in their chosen behaviour unless the activity made them feel good in some way. Of the nine extracts, x specifically mentioned fishing can be a genuine addiction (Extracts 2, 4, 5 8, and 9) or like an addiction (Extract 6 and 9).

In the academic literature there are passing references to fishing being potentially addictive or compulsive but the empirical data supporting such an assertion are weak. In the populist literature (e.g., media reports, blogs, etc.) there is more support for the idea of fishing addiction but again, the data are at best anecdotal. There are also concerns from some researchers that when it comes to addiction that too many behaviours are now being ‘overpathologised’ [21] especially given that recent papers have been published on addictions to dancing [22], studying [23,24], air travel [25], and fortune telling [26]. No doubt, fishing would be added to this growing list.

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Take-home message

The present paper is not arguing that fishing addiction exists, just that some people (including fishers themselves) conceptualise their excessive behaviour as an addiction and that a few scholars have asserted that in extreme cases, fishing may be a behaviour that can be potentially addictive.

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