

In a glimpse

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Behavioural addictions: definitions, issues and debates

The French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (OFDT) has been exploring the issues regarding gambling since the early 2000s. In July 2020, it started to extend its scope of study towards other behavioural addictions. In order to determine research priorities and establish an overview of the state of the art, the OFDT carried out a narrative literature review.

The main potential addictive activities have been studied (gaming, sport, hypersexuality...) but gambling has been excluded because it is much better documented. Considering the extent of the themes covered, this literature review focused on definitions, concepts, methodologies, and tools with a special attention to level of consensus. Searches in scientific databases were supplemented by a “snow ball” method. A wide variety of sources (grey literature, online non-scientific contents from marketing professionals...) have been included. The disciplinary scope was as broad as possible beyond the health field (information and communication sciences, anthropology...). A total of 405 publications have been studied.

The field of addictive behaviour turned out to be marked by a large number of concepts, a multiplicity of terms, definitions and measurement tools and a by a low level of consensus. Therefore, over the course of this study, it proved necessary to elaborate a transversal analysis grid of this vast area. By drawing attention to the complexity of this field, this review allows to contextualise publications and data and help understand their significance. It highlights what is at stakes in the choice of terms, diagnostic criteria or statistical tools, and addresses the challenges of recognising some so-called addictive behaviours as genuine addictions.

Behavioural addictions: a complex field with multiple rationales

This field includes multiple and, at first glance, disparate potential objects of addiction. These are addressed either by activities (shopping, playing, sexual practice, physical exercise etc.) or by the media of these activities (Internet, screens, smartphones, etc.) These objects are delimited and referred to in a very heterogenous way. The pertaining disorders are entered into the spectrum of addictive behaviours, according to different ways and temporalities, leading to varying degrees of scientific knowledge and specific questions.

The concept of 'behavioural addictions' lies at the intersection of multiple disciplinary and conceptual approaches: psychology, psychiatry/addictology, epidemiology and neurosciences are the most legitimate ones, but other points of view are involved, such as information and communication sciences (ICS), sociology, production and marketing fields or even, depending on the practice considered, certain clinical specialities (nutritional disorders, sexology, sport medicine etc.). Each approach has its own theoretical foundations (and vocabulary), often multiple and rarely explained, as each one addresses its peers. Faced with rather research-oriented literature, the clinical world appears more pragmatic and less interested in

conceptual and semantic issues and advances by responding to the help requests from people facing difficulties. Lastly, in particular outside of the health field, the concept of addiction itself can be imperfectly understood and may lead to sometimes vague considerations.

The behavioural addiction field also covers intersecting and interrelated issues of different natures, meeting the objectives of the diversity of the actors concerned. In addition to the evident therapeutic issues, and those related to access to care, prevention or research, this field is, for example, overlapped by societal issues such as overpathologisation of common practices, especially youngster's habits, or the weight given to the responsibility of individuals vs society, etc. Some economic stakes are also raised, those of producers and sellers of addictive products, pharmaceutical firms or even research funding.

No consensus yet on definition and criteria regulating the recognition of a disorder as an addiction

In the literature, three main sets of criteria are used to compare an addictive practice with a substance addiction and to label a disorder as a "behavioural addiction". There is no consensus among experts as to whether these criteria are essential and/or sufficient. Some professionals, often clinicians, essentially base the definition of behavioural addiction on the similarity of its clinical presentation to the specific symptoms of addiction to substances and gambling. For others, it is the nature of the psychopathological processes at work and their consistency with theoretical models of addiction which define the latter. An additional point of view considers that only the neurobiological changes characteristic of substance addiction, as evidenced by neurosciences, can define behavioural addiction.

There are two approaches, in particular, to defining addiction from symptoms. The first one, which is predominant and the basis of most measurement tools, is based on the criteria used to describe substance-related disorders in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed.), considering that all addictions meet the same criteria. The second approach refuses to consider a priori a complete similarity between both types of addiction and seeks to design a model specific to the behavioural addictive disorders, using empirical data.

Unclear links between terms and meanings

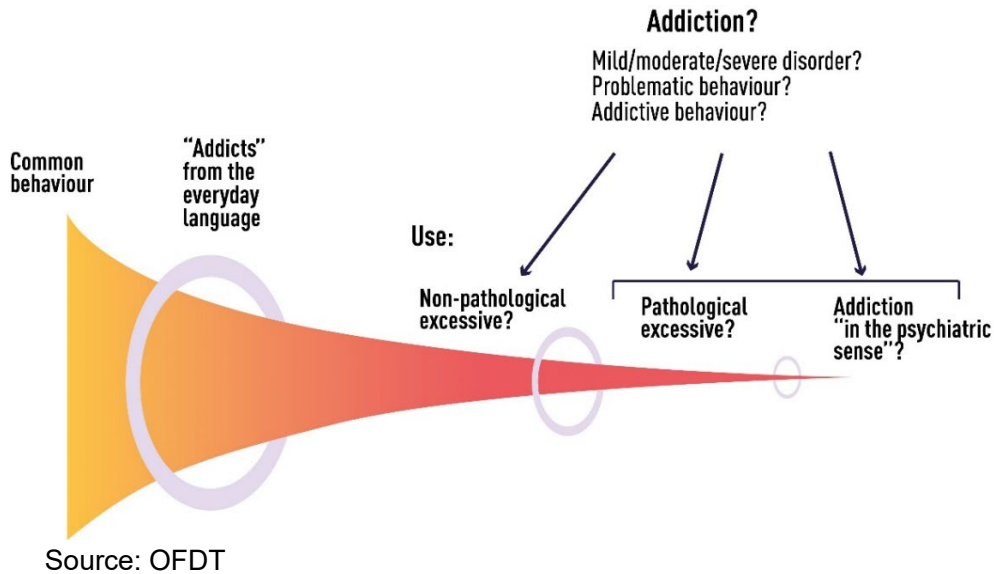
Firstly, the points of view adopted to indicate the disorders are varied: simple recognition of a disorder (e.g pathological); symptoms (addiction, dependence, out of control, excessive, problematic etc.); supposed psychopathological mechanisms (addiction, compulsive etc.); impact of terms on representations (stigmatisation), etc.

Secondly, the model of the biopsychosocial process involves the existence of a progressive increase in disorders and of a continuum of states between repeated practice and addiction as a pathological disorder. This continuity plays a major role in the heterogeneity of the vocabulary and in its meaning, especially as the terms used are often poorly defined or not defined at all. Which situations include the terms "addiction", "excessive", "problematic" or "pathological"? The word "addiction" is used by a significant proportion of psychiatrists to refer to the extreme end of the spectrum while other experts enlarge the focus towards earlier states. In addition, the term "addiction" can also refer to the addictive process itself. Moreover, what about the terms "addict" or "addictive", whose history shows that they come from the everyday language and do not respond to just one definition, in contrast to the noun form "addiction", which belongs to the semantic field of health?

Lastly, if it is shared and understood in the world of addictology, the word "addiction" is not used by the DSM or the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) which particularly reproach the vagueness of its definition, while these manuals use the adjective "addictive" to describe disorders which are not linked to substances.

All these elements are combined to complicate the quantitative phenomenon measures, sometimes insufficiently defined, and their comparison, the quantitative surveys being subject to marked methodological criticisms.

From current use to addiction, which terms go with which situations?



Several experts stress the importance to carry on working on the definition of behavioural addiction, which they consider to be a prerequisite for the recognition of the addictive nature of different practices and for the improvement of measurement tools. They insist on the lack of empirical knowledge and on the need to make progress in characterising disorders. They therefore call for the development of qualitative people-centred approaches, both in clinical populations and in the general population and highlight the value of longitudinal studies. They also suggest to conduct researches on the psychopathological processes at work, in particular by drawing on theoretical models.

Finally, when it comes to information and communication technologies, it could prove particularly useful to study in-depth and monitor how industries increase the addictive power of the activities they offer and how they induce users to spend more.

Further reading (in French)

The literature review [Les Addictions comportementales : définitions, enjeux et débats](#), 72 pages

The video [3 minutes on the differences between addiction and dependence](#) [with English subtitles]