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PROFESSOR MARK GRIFFITHS, DIRECTOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL GAMING RESEARCH UNIT AT NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY, UK, ON THE ISSUES OF PROBLEM GAMBLING AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Against all odds: the rise of gambling

In many areas of the world gambling has become a popular activity. Almost all national surveys into gambling have concluded that most people have gambled at some point in their lives, that there are more gamblers than non-gamblers, but most participants gamble infrequently.

Commissions and official government reviews in a number of countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, have all concluded that increased gambling availability has led to an increase in problem gambling. Estimates of the number of problem gamblers vary from country to country, but most countries that have carried out national prevalence surveys suggest around 0.5-2% of individuals have a gambling problem.

New criteria

In May 2013, the new criteria for problem gambling (now called 'Gambling Disorder') were published in the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), and for the very first time, problem gambling was included in the section 'Substance-related and Addiction Disorders' (rather than in the section on impulse control disorders).

Also included in the Appendix of the DSM-5 as a potential addiction was Internet Gaming Disorder (i.e. online video game addiction). Although most of us in the field had been conceptualising problematic gambling and video gaming as addictions for many years, this was arguably the

first time that an established medical body had described them as such.

For me, gambling and gaming addictions should not be considered any differently from other, more traditional chemical addictions (e.g. to alcohol or nicotine). Consequently, there is no theoretical reason why other problematic and excessive activities that do not involve the ingestion of a psychoactive substance cannot be deemed as legitimate behavioural addictions in the years to come (e.g. shopping, sex, work or exercise addiction, etc.).

Factors

Gambling is a multifaceted rather than unitary phenomenon. Consequently, many factors are involved in the acquisition, development and maintenance of gambling behaviour. Such factors include an individual's biological and genetic predisposition, their social environment, their psychological variables (personality characteristics, attitudes, expectations, beliefs, etc.), macrosituational characteristics (how much gambling is marketed and advertised, the

number of gambling venues within a jurisdiction, where the gambling venue is located), microsituational characteristics of the gambling environment (on-site cash machine, provision of free alcohol, floor layout, etc.), and the structural characteristics of the gambling activity itself (jackpot size, stake size, the number of times an individual can gamble in a given timeframe, etc.). Most research has tended to concentrate on individual characteristics (personality, genetics, family and peer influence) rather than situational and structural ones.

The introduction of national lotteries, the proliferation of slot machines, the expansion of casinos, and the introduction of new media in which to gamble (e.g., via the internet, mobile phones, interactive television, social networking sites) have greatly increased the accessibility and popularity of gambling worldwide and, as a result, the number of people seeking assistance for gambling-related problems.

Online

In addition, the rise of remote gambling via the internet and mobile phones has arguably changed the psychosocial nature of gambling. I have also published a number of studies showing that to vulnerable and susceptible individuals (e.g. problem gamblers, minors, the intoxicated, etc.), the medium of the internet may facilitate and fuel problematic and addictive behaviours.

There are many known factors that make online activity potentially problematic to a minority of individuals. They include easy accessibility, affordability, anonymity, convenience, escape, and disinhibition. Some of these factors can change the psychological experience of gambling. For instance, gambling with virtual representations of money online lowers the psychological value of the money and people tend to spend more than if they were gambling with physical cash. Also, when people lose money online it is a different psychological experience because no-one can see anyone losing face-to-face. As a result, there is less guilt and embarrassment about losing and vulnerable individuals may be tempted to spend more time and money than they had originally intended.

Convergence

One very salient trend that has implications for gambling (and arguably problem gambling) is that technology hardware is becoming increasingly convergent (e.g. internet access



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via smartphones and interactive television), and there is increasing multi-media integration such as gambling and video gaming via social networking sites.

As a consequence, people of all ages are spending more time interacting with technology in the form of internet use, playing videogames, watching interactive television, using mobile phones, social networking, etc. In addition to convergent hardware, there is also convergent content. This includes some forms of gambling that present video game elements, as well as video games, online penny auctions and television programming with gambling or gambling-like elements.

Mobility

One of the key drivers behind the increased numbers of people gambling online and using social networking sites is the rise of mobile gambling and gaming.

Compared to internet gambling, mobile gambling is still a relatively untapped area, but the functional capabilities of mobile phones and other mobile devices are improving all the time. There are now hundreds of gambling companies that provide casino-style games to be downloaded onto the gambler's smartphone or mobile device (e.g. tablet or laptop). This will have implications for the psychosocial impact of gambling and will require monitoring.

Like online gambling, mobile gaming has the capacity to completely change the way people think about gambling and betting. Mobile phones provide the convenience of allowing betting or gambling from wherever the person is, even if they are on the move.

'In-play'

One of the most noticeable changes in gambling over the last few years – and inextricably linked to the rise of mobile gaming – has been the large increase of in-play sports betting. Gamblers can now typically bet on over 60 in-play markets while watching a sports event (such as a football match).

For instance, during a football game, gamblers can bet on who is going to score the first goal, what the score will be after 30 minutes of play, how many yellow cards will be given during the game and/or in what



minute of the second half the first free kick will be awarded. Live betting is going to become a critical activity in the success of the future online and mobile gambling markets.

The most salient implication of in-play sports betting is that it has taken what was traditionally a discontinuous form of gambling – where an individual makes one bet every Saturday on the result of the game – to one where an individual can gamble again and again and again.

Gaming operators have quickly capitalised on the increasing amount of televised sport. In contemporary society, where there is a live sporting event, there will always be a betting consumer. In-play betting companies have both catered for the natural betting demand and introduced new gamblers in the process. If the reward for gambling only happens once or twice a week, it is completely impossible to develop problems and/or become addicted. In-play has changed that because there are football matches on almost every day of the week, making a daily two-hour plus period of betting seven days a week.

New technologies in the form of behavioural tracking have helped online gambling companies keep track of players by noting (among many other things) what games they are playing, the time spent playing, the denomination of the gambles made, and their wins and losses. Although such technologies can potentially be used to exploit gamblers (e.g. targeting the heaviest spenders with direct marketing promotions to gamble even more), they can also be used to help gamblers that may have difficulties stopping and/or limiting their gambling behaviour.

Social responsibility

Over the past few years, innovative social responsibility tools that track player behaviour with the aim of preventing problem gambling have been developed. These new tools are providing insights into problematic gambling behaviour. A number of European jurisdictions (such as Germany and the Netherlands) are now considering whether such tools should be mandatory for gaming operators to use, especially as such tools are already being used in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Austria.

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marketing and advertising restrictions, no gaming licences unless operators display the highest standards of social responsibility to their clientele, etc.) and gaming operator initiatives (self-exclusion programmes, information about games so gamblers can make informed choices, limit-setting tools that allow gamblers to set time and money loss limits, staff training on responsible gambling, referral to gambling treatment providers, etc.).

Problem gambling can never be totally eliminated, but harm minimisation practices can be put into place to keep the problem to a minimum. Treatment for gambling addiction should be free and paid for by gambling industry profits (either in the form of voluntary donations to a charitable trust or – if that doesn't work – a statutory levy).

In short, any jurisdiction that has legalised and liberalised gambling has a duty of care to put a national social responsibility infrastructure in place to prevent, minimise, and treat problem gambling, as they would with any other consumptive and potentially addictive behaviour (e.g. drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes, etc.)

Further reading

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