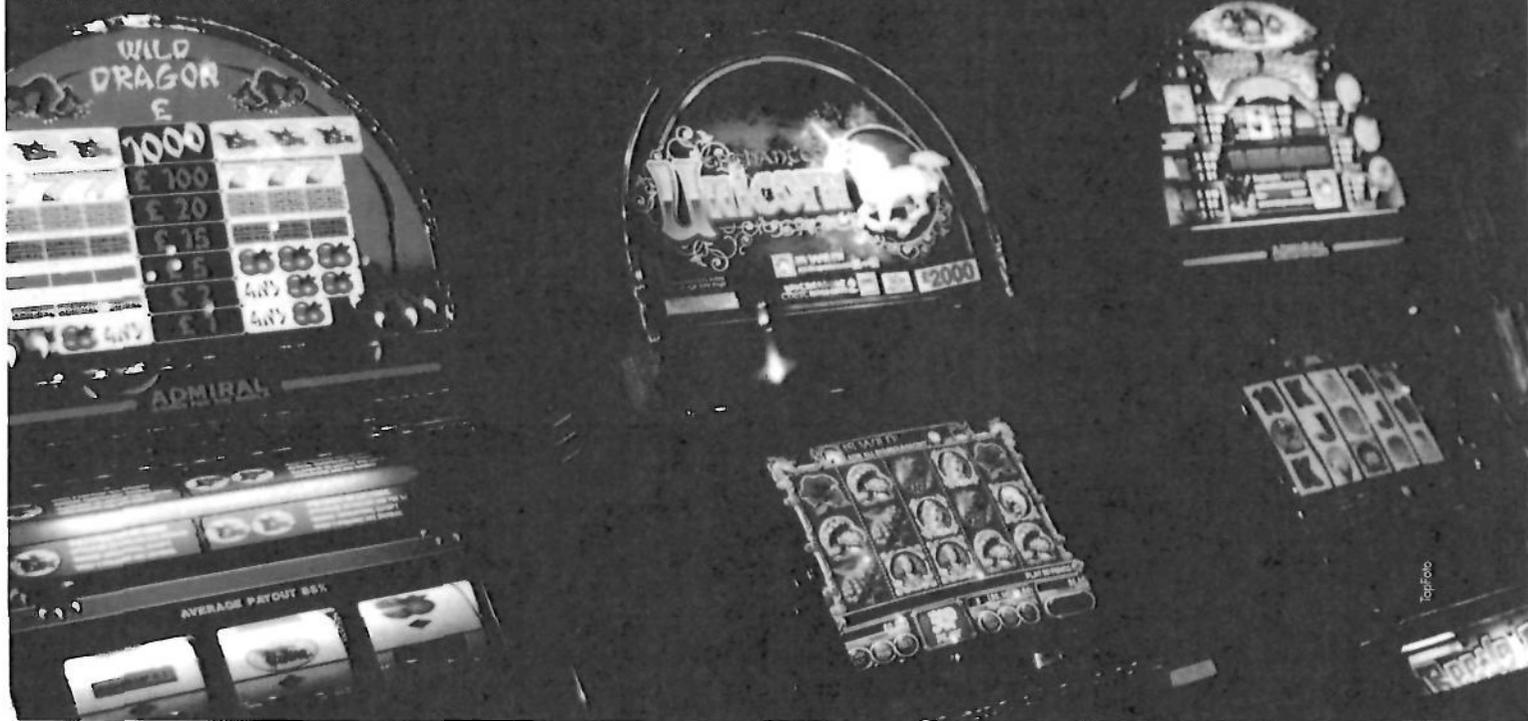


Mark Griffiths



# The psychology of gambling

Sixty-eight percent of British adults admit to having gambled in the previous year, some so excessively that it is a serious problem. What psychological processes lie behind this growing trend?

**A**lthough many people gamble occasionally for fun and pleasure, gambling brings with it inherent risks of personal and social harm. Problem gambling can affect significant areas of a person's life negatively, including their physical and mental health, employment, finances and interpersonal relationships with family members or financial dependents.

Problems that occur at the same time as the problem gambling, called **comorbidities**, may raise issues. These include depression, alcoholism and obsessive-compulsive behaviours. These comorbidities may exacerbate — or be exacerbated by — problem gambling. There is known to be a link between the availability of opportunities to gamble and the incidence of problem gambling within a community (Griffiths 2003).

## Gambling in the UK

The 2007 British gambling prevalence survey (Wardle et al. 2007) reported that

two-thirds of adults had gambled in the previous year (68%). Over half (57%) had gambled on the bi-weekly Lotto game. The other most gambled-on activities in the past year were scratch cards (20%), horse racing (17%), slot machines (14%), casinos (4%) and fixed odds betting terminals (FOBTs) (3%). Only 6% had placed a bet or gambled online. The same study found that there were approximately 300,000 problem gamblers in the UK — that equates to around 0.6% of the adult population. Of these, 1% were men and 0.2% were women. The report showed that online gambling activities and FOBTs were gambled on more by problem gamblers than other gambling activities.

## Slot machines and problem gambling

Internationally, the greatest problems are, to a considerable degree, associated with non-casino electronic gaming machines (EGMs) such as fruit machines in amusement arcades and FOBTs in betting shops

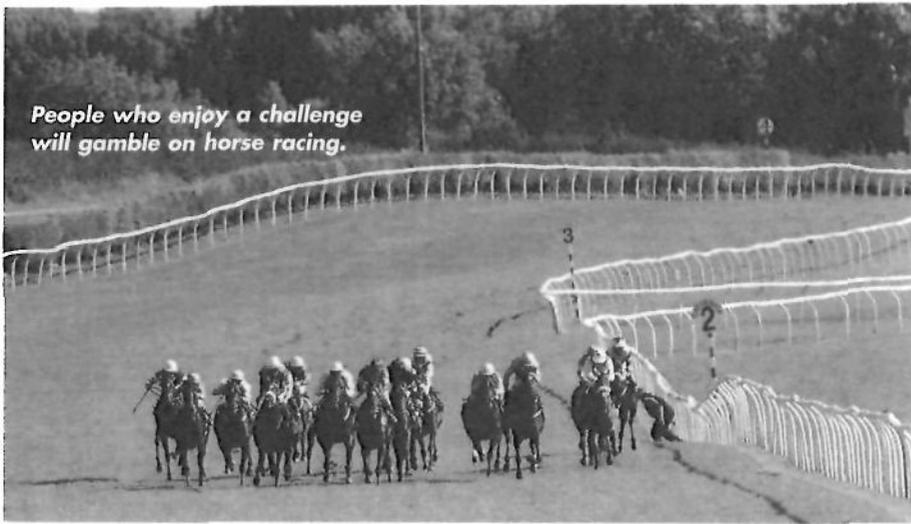
(Wardle et al. 2007). It has been found that as EGMs spread, they tend to displace almost every other type of gambling, as well as the problems that are associated with them.

EGMs are the fastest growing sector of the gaming economy, currently accounting for some 70% of revenue. Australia's particularly high rates of problem gambling are almost entirely accounted for by its high density of these non-casino machines. It is likely that Britain's relatively lower rates of problems associated with EGMs are explained by the laws that govern gambling in this country, which limit the numbers of machines in what are relatively regulated venues. All of this indicates that attention should be focused on EGMs as a source of risk.

## Motivations to gamble

Variations in gambling preferences are thought to result from both differences in accessibility and psychological motivation. Older people tend to choose activities that

*People who enjoy a challenge will gamble on horse racing.*



losing experiences into near winning ones (rationalising that if the referee had given a penalty in the last 5 minutes, they would have won the bet). These are sometimes referred to as 'near misses'. There are some gambling products (like fruit machines and scratch cards) that have lots of these 'near miss' experiences pre-programmed or predetermined in their design. From a gambler's perspective, they are not constantly losing but constantly nearly winning, something that is both psychologically and physiologically rewarding (Parke and Griffiths 2004).

For example, skilful activities that offer players the opportunity to use complex systems, study the odds and apply skill and concentration, appeal to many gamblers because their actions can influence the outcomes. Such characteristics attract people who enjoy a challenge when gambling. They may also contribute to excessive gambling if people overestimate the effectiveness of their gambling systems and strategies. People who gamble on these activities (those who gamble on horse-racing) tend to be more intrinsically motivated than lottery gamblers, in that they gamble for self-determination (to display their competence and to improve their performance). People who gamble on chance activities, such as lotteries, usually do so for external reasons (to win money or escape from problems).

Another vital structural characteristic of gambling is the continuity of the activity; namely, the length of the interval between placing the bet and learning the outcome. In nearly all studies, it has been found that continuous activities (slot machine playing) with a more rapid play rate are more likely to be associated with gambling problems. The ability to make repeated stakes in short time intervals increases the amount of money that can be lost and also increases the likelihood that gamblers will be unable to control spending. Such problems are rarely observed in non-continuous activities, such as weekly or bi-weekly lotteries, in which gambling is undertaken less frequently and where outcomes are often unknown for days.

### Situational characteristics and gambling

Other factors central to understanding gambling behaviour are the situational characteristics of gambling activities. These are the factors that often facilitate and encourage people to gamble in the first place. Situational characteristics are

minimise the need for complex decision making or concentration (bingo, slot machines), whereas gender differences have been attributed to a number of factors, including variations in how men's and women's roles in society are viewed, cultural differences and theories of motivation (Griffiths 2006). Variations in motivation are also frequently observed among people who participate in the same gambling activity. For example, slot machine players may gamble to win money, for enjoyment and excitement, to socialise and to escape negative feelings. Some people gamble for one reason only, whereas others gamble for a variety of reasons.

A further complexity is that people's motivations for gambling have a strong temporal dimension; that is, they do not remain stable over time. As people progress from social to regular and finally to excessive gambling, there are often significant changes in their reasons for gambling. Whereas a person might have gambled initially to obtain enjoyment, excitement and socialisation, the progression to problem gambling is almost always accompanied by an increased preoccupation with winning money and chasing losses.

### The bio-psycho-social approach to gambling

In gambling, many factors may come into play in various ways and at different levels of analysis (biological, social or psychological). These theories are not completely independent of one another; they work together in a unified theory of gambling. The weakness of one theory can be supported by the strength of another. This has often been discussed in terms of recommendations for an eclectic, more general approach to gambling. However, for the most part, such discussions have been descriptive rather than analytical and, so far, few attempts have been made to

explain why it might not be a good idea to rely on one single theory rather than take this combined approach.

Put simply, there are many different factors involved in how and why people develop gambling problems. Central to the latest thinking is that no single level of analysis is sufficient to explain either the reasons behind gambling behaviour or its maintenance. Moreover, this view asserts that all research should be analysed from a combined — or bio-psycho-social — perspective (Griffiths 2005). Variations in the motivations and characteristics of gamblers and in gambling activities themselves mean that findings obtained in one situation are unlikely to be relevant or valid in another.

### Structural characteristics and gambling

Another factor central to understanding gambling behaviour is the structure of gambling activities. Gambling activities vary considerably in their structural characteristics, such as the probability of winning, the amount of gambler involvement, the use of near wins, the amount of skill that can be applied, the length of the interval between stake and outcome, and the size of potential winnings.

Structural variations are also observed within certain categories of activity such as slot machines, where differences in reinforcement frequency, colours, sound effects and machines' features can influence the profitability and attractiveness of machines significantly (Griffiths 2007). Each of these structural features may (and almost certainly does) have implications for gamblers' psychological motivations and the potential 'addictiveness' of gambling activities.

For instance, a behaviour that many regular gamblers engage in is turning their

primarily features of the environment (accessibility factors such as location of the gambling venue, the number of venues in a specified area and possible membership requirements). They can also include internal features of the venue itself (décor, heating, lighting, colour, background music, floor layout, refreshment facilities) or facilitating factors that may influence gambling in the first place (advertising, free travel to and/or accommodation at the gambling venue, free bets or gambles on particular games) or influence continued gambling (the placing of a cash dispenser on the casino floor, free food and/or alcoholic drinks while gambling).

These issues may be important in both the initial decision to gamble and the maintenance of the behaviour. Although many of these situational characteristics are thought to influence vulnerable gamblers, there has been little research into these factors and more is needed before any definitive conclusions can be made about the direct or indirect influence on gambling behaviour and whether vulnerable individuals are any more likely to be influenced by these particular types of marketing ploys.

## Conclusion

Gambling and problem gambling are highly complex behaviours that are not only

influenced by individual bio-psychosocial risk factors, but also by the situational factors of the gambling environment, and structural characteristics of the gambling activity itself. Psychology plays a major role in the development of gambling problems and is a major psychosocial issue that will become of increasing importance over the coming years, as the new Gambling Act starts to take effect.

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