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FEATURES

Born to gamble?

Gambling is one of the few activities that cuts across all barriers of race, class and culture. It is not a recent phenomenon and there are historical references to it in almost all cultures.

Given these facts, a logical question to ask is whether the impulse to gamble is ingrained in the human psyche or a socially evolved activity? In very simple terms the answer is both (at least for some people). Gambling is really just another word for risk-taking.

At one level, we all "gamble" (i.e., take a risk) every day of our lives when we drive a car, take a plane trip or cross the road. However, such definitions of gambling are too wide ranging and become almost meaningless if we try to study the topic empirically. For most people, gambling is about staking money (or something of value) on the outcome of a future event that is at least partly (if not wholly) determined by chance.

When asking questions about the longevity of gambling in our worldwide culture, the real issue is not whether the impulse to gamble is part of our social and genetic make-up (because for some it quite clearly is), but whether some people are more prone to gamble than others. This has led to the idea that there is a unique "gambling personality", that is, a trait-cluster that marks out the person as a risk taker.

One of the problems with this whole area of research is that personality is a hypothetical construct that isn't easy to define. However, most psychologists would probably agree that a person's personality is determined by the distinctive and characteristic patterns of thought, emotion and behaviour that define their personal style, and influence their interactions with the environment.

However, the use of psychometric tests in research on gamblers has not been particularly promising. Most research has been carried out on three particular personality dimensions — 'sensation-seeking', 'extroversion' and 'locus of control'.

The American psychologist Marvin Zuckerman defined sensation-seeking as the "need for varied, novel and complex sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience".

This should mean that gamblers are higher than non-gamblers on sensation-seeking measures. However, studies in this area have provided contrasting results with some supporting the theory, some showing no difference between gamblers and non-gamblers, and others showing gamblers to be lower on sensation-seeking than non-gamblers!

In studies on extraversion, the findings have again proved contradictory. Since extraverts are highly sociable, crave excitement, and enjoy noisy and active environments, the theory is that gamblers are more likely to be extraverted. Although some studies have indeed found gamblers to be more extraverted than control groups, other studies have found gamblers to have lower extraversion scores or have found no difference.

One personality trait that has received more consistent findings is that of locus of control. This personality trait refers to a person's perception of how their own efforts affect events. For instance, 'internal' individuals attribute their experiences to their own actions whereas 'external' individuals attribute their experiences to chance.

Research has shown that 'internal' individuals gamble more persistently when chasing losses because they believe all that is required is an increase in concentration and an overall improved effort in order to win.

However, one of the problems with research into locus of control is that we do

not know the direction of causality, that is, whether their particular locus of control preceded the gambling, or whether the gambling preceded their locus of control.

So why are there so few consistent results surrounding personality and gambling? One of the most obvious answers is that gambling is multi-faceted and not a unitary phenomenon. Treating all forms of gambling as equivalent in terms of underlying psychology, personality or motivation may cloud the issue rather than clarify it.

For instance, can we really say that a regular lottery player has similar underlying psychology to a regular slot machine player? Is an online poker player similar to a roulette gambler? Of course not. Psychologists have tended to clump gamblers together as if they were a unified and homogenous group of people.

In addition, demographic differences - such as age, gender, and culture - may produce very different findings in motivation to gamble. For instance, an adult horserace gambler cannot be easily compared to an adolescent slot machine player; a male sports gambler cannot be easily compared to a female bingo player; and slot machine players in the UK cannot necessarily be compared to slot machine players in the US. The notion that gamblers possess a unique set of variables or traits (genetic and/or social) is a naive over-simplification and appears to be a fruitless direction for research.

Research into gambling is still at a relatively early stage, and it is clear that a person's gambling behaviour results from an interaction between many different variables including environmental, social, psychological and biological.

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