Problem gambling: models and their ethical implications

STRUCTURED SESSION NOVEMBER 24, 2022 AT 16.30-18.20

LISBON ADDICTIONS 2022

Declaration of interests

- A grant by the Finnish Foundation of Alcohol Studies has supported research presented in the session.

Aim of our structured session

- The aim of the symposium is to critically evaluate and discuss the importance of conceptualising the phenomenon of problem gambling.

- The feasibility of a model should be justified by both scientific and ethical grounds.

- Two models are presented and their ethical implications for research, treatment and policy are explored.

The order of things

▶ Jarno Tuominen: A predictive processing account of problem gambling   20'

▶ Valtteri Arstila: Flow in (problem) gambling   20'

▶ Susanne Uusitalo: The ethical implications of how problem gambling is conceptualised   20'

▶ Discussant for the talks: Michael Egerer   10'

▶ General discussion   ~20'

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The ethical implications of how problem gambling is conceptualised

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Declaration of interests

▶ Our project has been funded with a grant by the Finnish Foundation of Alcohol Studies

▶ I declare no conflicts of interests

Outline

▶ The context

▶ The motivation

▶ The argument

▶ The ethical implications of the two theories explaining (problem) gambling

▶ Concluding remarks

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The context

▶ Gambling: behaviour where one wagers something of value to gain a reward in a situation of high uncertainty

▶ WHO: 350 million gamblers globally who have gambling related problems.

  → Understanding gambling is critical

▶ As we have seen already today, different scientific models conceptualise the phenomenon differently.

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The motivation for the argument

▶ This conceptualisation of the phenomenon by different models includes producing various reductive hypothesis to test it.

▶ They are necessary for solid research results, but there is a caveat:

▶ Narrow scope may lead to biased views if taken as the full story.

▶ The kind of choices in conceptualisation and reductive hypothesis (taken as adequate and sufficient explanation of the phenomenon) have ethical implications.

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The argument of the presentation I

▶ The feasibility of a scientific model should not only be justified by scientific grounds but also ethical grounds.

▶ An illustrative example is the conceptualisation of _agency_ in models of substance use, gambling and their "problematic" aspects.

▶ The danger of simplistic polarisations such as control/no control.

▶ These conceptualisations have scientific and ethical implications not only to theories and research but also other stakeholders and the society in general.

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The argument of the presentation II

▶ Empirical research often focuses on **problem** gambling (and problem gamblers).

▶ There is no consensus how problem gambling should be understood.

  ▶ E.g, Finnish Institute for health and welfare: "Problem gambling refers to excessive gambling where too much time or money is spent, and this has negative consequences to the gambler, their friends and family or other social surroundings".

▶ Diagnostics manuals such as ICD-10 or DSM-5 define gambling that requires medical attention by identifyining diagnostic criteria.

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ICD-10 F63.0 Pathological gambling

▶ A disorder characterized by a preoccupation with gambling and the excitement that gambling with increasing risk provides. Pathological gamblers **are unable to cut back** on their gambling, despite the fact that it may lead them to lie, steal, or lose a significant relationship, job, or educational opportunity.

▶ Most people who gamble don't have a problem, but some lose control of their gambling. Signs of problem gambling include

▶ always thinking about gambling

▶ lying about gambling

▶ spending work or family time gambling

▶ feeling bad after you gamble, but not quitting

▶ gambling with money you need for other things

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DSM-5 Gambling disorder (312.31)

A. Persistent and recurrent problematic gambling behavior leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as indicated by the individual exhibiting four (or more) of the following in a 12month period:

- a. Needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money in order to achieve the desired excitement.

- b. Is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling.

- c. Has made repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop gambling.

- d. Is often preoccupied with gambling (e.g., having persistent thoughts of reliving past gambling experiences, handicapping or planning the next venture, thinking of ways to get money with which to gamble).

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DSM-5 Gambling disorder (312.31)

A. continues

▶ e. Often gambles when feeling distressed (e.g., helpless, guilty, anxious, depressed).

▶ f. After losing money gambling, often returns another day to get even ("chasing" one's losses).

▶ g. Lies to conceal the extent of involvement with gambling.

▶ h. Has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of gambling.

▶ i. Relies on others to provide money to relieve desperate financial situations caused by gambling.

▶ Episodic (at more than one time point for at least several months) - Persistent (experiencing continuous symptoms for multiple years).

▶ Severity: Mild: 4–5, Moderate: 6–7, Severe: 8–9

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A digest of criteria and their implications

ICD-10

unable to cut **back** on their gambling, despite negative conseqences

gambling with money you need for other things

spending work or family time gambling

DSM-5

Has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of

Has made repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop gambling

After losing money gambling, often returns another day to get even ("chasing" one's losses).

Characteristic of individual behaviour

Losing control over behavior & irrationality

Losing control over their behaviour

Irrationality, spending more money than intended, spending more time than intended

- The points is to illustrate that even these construe a challenging view of a gambler , especially considering that recovery requires the gambler's individual agency (with control and rationality)

- Another example is the categories under which gambling disorder/pathological gamblings is placed under

- ICD-10-CM F63.0 is grouped within Diagnostic Related Group(s) (MS-DRG v40.0): 883 Disorders of personality and impulse control

- But there is evidence within the clinical population that it is not as simple as that

- Blaszczynski, A., & Nower, L. (2002):

  - PATHWAY 1: BEHAVIOURALLY CONDITIONED PROBLEM GAMBLERS

  - PATHWAY 2: EMOTIONALLY VULNERABLE PROBLEM GAMBLERS

  - PATHWAY 3: 'ANTISOCIAL IMPULSIVIST' PROBLEM GAMBLERS

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Understanding gambling

▶ The way in which (problem) gambling is understood has implications on how it is researched and consequently how it is controlled in the society.

▶ If the scientific framework is skewed (too narrow or other way biased) and produces evidence that is used in treatment and policy, the implications of conceptualisations are very concrete to various stakeholders, especially to individuals who gamble.

▶ Thus the ethical implications of conceptualisations of agency in problem gambling should be explored in considering the plausibility of scientific frameworks' plausibility in knowledge-production.

Theory #1: predictive processing

▶ Main idea of PP: the reduction of uncertainty is a key task in any human behaviour.

▶ Uncertainty is reduced by increasing the model fit between our internal predictions and the external environment by either

  ▶ Updating our prior beliefs, or by

  ▶ Acting upon the world

▶ Ethical grounds for considering this model:

  ▶ Tendency to see problem gambling involving faulty or simply wrong reasons for action.

  ▶ Polarisation between rational and irrational action is questioned

Predictive processing model of gambling

▶ Schwartenbeck et al. (2015) on addiction (gambling) presents shift from framing addiction as faulty inferences to a more nuanced view of generative models and belief states.

▶ This might not suffice as gamblers have reported various reasons to gamble

▶ So their actions cannot be assessed merely on the basis of their expected monetary gains.

▶ Also, even in cases where the gamblers' sole objective is to win money, it can be understood as rational – when considered boundedly rational.

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Ethical implications of PP framework

▶ As predictive processing works with bounded rationality, it allows the gamblers act rationally in seeing gambling as worthwhile **and** at the same time to maintain that there are seemingly irrational phenomena in gambling like illusion of control, near-misses and losses disguised as wins.

▶ The framework also allows heterogeneity of gamblers and the variety of prior beliefs that gamblers report to be reasons for their gambling.

▶ The framework also allows differences in behaviour of non-problem gamblers and problem gamblers without making problem gamblers automatically and categorically irrational, impulsive, compulsive.

Theory #2: Flow in (problem) gambling

► Model that takes into account the heterogeneity of gamblers and their experiences.

► Dissociative experiences common in "normal" population

► Empirical support for instance: Wanner, Ladouceur, Auclair & Vitaro (2006) report that pathological and recreational gamblers experience each dimension of flow.

► Ethical grounds for considering this model:

   ► Questioning the view that individual's controlled action always requires the possibility of deliberative control and monitor one's own behavior on a metalevel

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Ethical implications of the flow framework

- To the various kinds of gamblers:
  - Experiences of flow do not as such undermine the individual's agency in gambling
- Sheds light to understanding gambling without placing blame to "faulty" or "weak" individuals, i.e. individuals whose gambling is related to problems
- The model explains (some) motivations to gambling and offers a continuum of gambling and problem gambling rather than seeing them categorically distinct.

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Concluding remarks

► The feasibility of a model should be justified by both scientific and ethical grounds, especially when it focuses on social phenomena involving individuals.

► Frameworks should not lightly deem inidviduals with problem gambling issues as irrational or weak, as a sense of agency is fundamental requirement for individual's actions, for instance, in treatment and complying with policies such as "responsible gambling" policies.

► Frameworks should allow enough room for heterogenuity of individuals and their gambling, as too simplistic categorisations, in extreme, may lead to individuals' inclusion and exclusion in different services and policies.
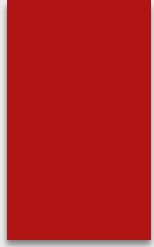
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Thank you for your attention!

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