'Gambling Careers': a longitudinal, qualitative study of gambling behaviour

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The Study

- Five year longitudinal qualitative study
- With National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and Stirling University
- Funders: ESRC-RIGT
• Shift from dichotomous models → focus on fluid nature of gambling and natural recovery (Hodgins and el-Guebaly 2000)

• Models of ‘pathways’ and trajectories of behaviour over time (Blaszczynski and Nower 2002)

• Requires longitudinal research → shows variability of behaviour (Slutske, Jackson and Sher 2003; Wiebe, Cox and Falkowski-Ham 2003)

• Need for:
  – qualitative longitudinal studies
  – focus on social & environmental factors
The Study

• Objectives:
  – to investigate patterns of behaviour change over time
  – to explore the social dimensions of gambling

• Five year qualitative study (2006-2011)
• Cohort of 50 gamblers and problem gamblers interviewed 4 times
• Replicated in 3 year Danish study; young people aged 12 - 20
Methods

- Recruitment around Glasgow, U.K
- Gambling venues, treatment agencies, community venues
- Loosely structured interviews, approx 90 mins + NODS screen
- Analysis using ‘Framework’ software package
- Sample split into three groups
Classification of gamblers at first interview

![Bar chart showing classification of gamblers by group and gender.]

- **Group 1** (treatment): 9 males, 3 females
- **Group 2** (no treatment): 13 males, 8 females
- **Group 3** (recreational): 11 males, 6 females
Four trajectories

Danish study: ‘4 pathways’: intensification, reduction, stability, non-linearity

Progression (n=8)
Reduction (n=3)
Non linear (n=18)
Consistent (n=15)
Progression

• Profile
  – Mainly initially recruited as recreational gamblers
  – Inconsistent patterns of employment
  – Machine gambling

• Themes
  – Significant life events
    • Bereavement, birth, caring roles, changing job, changing relationship
  – Alcohol (note geographical/environmental aspect)
“I don’t think it’s a hidden factor I mean you just have to look at all the betting shops in Britain, right, they’re always strategically placed about fifty yards away from a pub. I mean, we’re sitting in a bookies right now [the interview was being conducted in a betting shop] - there’s a pub on either side of us”  (male, 20s)
Progression

• Changes in social & environmental networks
  – Moving home, changing job – physical proximity to gambling venues
  – Family, friends role in introducing &/or encouraging gambling

• Finances
  – Increased finances; e.g wages, credit
  – ‘Windfalls’
    • “I got £38,000 for the sale of my house, and I am now down to £9,000... the rest has went on gambling” (Female, 40s)
• ‘Escape routes’
  – Gambling to cope with stress, depression, loneliness

• Machine gambling
  – Beginning, or increasing play on, machines
  – Physical location/ convenience: eg FOBTs in betting shops; EGMs in bingo halls
Reduction

- **Profile**
  - Mainly initially recruited as pg not seeking help
  - Stable employment patterns
  - Large no. respondents had reduced *periods* of gambling, but only 3 reduced *overall*

- **Themes**
  - Social & environmental networks
    - Moving away from gambling venues; losing contact with gambling networks, developing non-gambling relationships
    - “when I did go and look for a bookies, I couldn’t park [my car], so that [gambling] was out...”
  (Male, 30s)
Reduction

• Significant life events
  – Bereavement, birth, caring roles, changing job, changing relationship

• Finances
  – Decreasing income = decreasing gambling
  – Prioritising other expenditures
Reduction

- ‘Maturing out’
  - Losing interest: age-related, and related to development new roles and identities (Winick 1962)

- Social support
  - Role of family & friends in reduction; e.g taking control of finances
    - “My mum had my [bank] cards and I got given £5 every day to get me to my work and my lunch, so for five months, that’s how I lived” (Male, 20s)
Consistent

- Problematic (2)
- Recreational (3)
- Abstinent (10)

- Profile
  - End category same as starting category
  - Consistent employment (excluding problematic)
• **Consistent: problematic**
  – Only 2 out of an initial 33

• **Consistent: abstinent**
  – Gamblers Anonymous
    • Self-identified ‘addicts’; impossibility of controlled gambling
  – Counselling
    • Helped reduce gambling and maintain stability
    • Different experiences. E.g personal obligations with counsellor; short term utility during crisis
• Consistent: recreational
  – Social motivation
  – Control over money ('pocket money')
  – Individual control strategies
Non Linear

• Profile
  – Many initially recruited as problem gamblers not seeking help
  – Inconsistent employment patterns

• Themes
  – Is NL characterized by similar themes seen in P and R?
  – Largely, yes
Non Linear

- Periods of progression *and* reduction influenced by
  - Social & environmental networks; life events; finances
  - Alcohol, machines, escape
  - GA, counselling, social support
• But also distinctive features
  – Many were males, low SES, aged 35-55
  – Played machines in betting shops (FOBTs)
  – Illustration: unemployed male betting shop player, 30s
  – Periods of progression → ‘bingeing’ on FOBTs, esp during periods of depression/boredom.
    • “there’s something about them; they just suck me in … it’s as if they’re programmed for me”
  – Periods of reduction → helped by social support/responsibilities and GA
Concluding Comments

- From 3 ‘groups’ of people to 4 trajectories of behaviour
- Change is the norm
- Very few gambled consistently problematically for 5 years; very few reduced overall, although many had periods of both.
- Consistent behaviour - but mainly abstinent
- Recreational players moved towards P or NL behaviour
• Contra findings on natural recovery? (Hodgins and el-Guebaly 2000; La Plante et al 2008)

• Contra ideas about controlled gambling? (Blaszczynski, McConaghy and Frankova 1991; Slutske et al., 2010)

• Supports research on ‘episodic & transitory’ nature of problems over time (LaPlante et al 2008; Slutske, Jackson and Sher 2003; Abbott, Williams and Volberg 1999, 2004).
• Behaviour characterised by complexity and fluidity
• Significant themes:
  – P and NL: alcohol, machines, insecure employment
  – R and C: social support, stable employment
• Role of employment?
• Focus on patterns of behaviour rather than ‘types’ of gamblers
  – Behaviour as social & changeable, rather than dichotomous model (minority PGs v.s majority recreational gamblers)
References


• Danish Study: