

# Is Gambling Good for People?

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# Health Warning

Prime purpose of this paper is to register three protests and to articulate one plea.

- The protests are against what seems to me to be the unhealthy over-emphasis in gambling research on problem gambling
- The plea is for a change in focus in research which takes seriously the question: "Is gambling good for people?"
- I shall also point to some considerations which might suggest that the answer to this question could be affirmative

# Protest (1)

Against all the effort we expend in gambling studies on trying (mostly unsuccessfully) to make what, in the greater scheme of things, is a comparatively small social problem even smaller (viz the problem of people who gamble too much).

## Protest (2)

Against shying away, in our research, as if from something not fit to be discussed in polite (and learned) society, from the question of why most people gamble harmlessly and count gambling as something that makes their life overall better than it would otherwise be

# Protest (3)

Against our consequent failure seriously to consider, in public policy debates, whether, because on the whole and for diverse reasons, it is a good thing when people enjoy themselves, recreational gambling may also contribute to the overall health, well-being, happiness, productiveness and moral admirability of those who choose to gamble within their means for excitement, escapist entertainment, relaxation, or simply relief from loneliness and boredom.

# A Plea

That we start taking more seriously in our research the possibility that the answer to the question: "Is gambling good for people?" might, at least under some circumstances be "Yes"

# Bases for this Plea (1)

Too much gambling policy (and therefore too much funded research) is really determined by residual convictions that gambling is a *vice* (i.e. something that people ought to eschew even if they are not harming anyone else or indeed themselves). But conceptions of vice may be anachronistic and/or irrational, cp sex outside marriage, gay sex etc

## Bases for this Plea (2)

Consequently too much debate about gambling assumes that gambling is at best neutral for some and at worst ruinous for others in respect of people's leading worthwhile and fulfilling lives

## Bases for this Plea (3)

Moreover, even if gambling *were* always or mostly bad for people, this case needs to be made, rather than merely assumed, by considering serious the counter-arguments and counter-evidence. (Cp John Stuart Mill: "he who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that.")

# Bases for this Plea (4)

Finally, if we are ever to discover what the minority of problem gamblers do wrong, we need to discover what the vast majority of non- (or at least really-not-very-serious) problem gamblers (mostly) do right

# The standard answer to the Question : "Is gambling good for people?"

:  
Gambling (and legalising or liberalising the laws and regulations governing it) is bad because it leads people to become problem gamblers. **BUT:**

- Acc Howard Shaffer, severe, past-year problem gambling in USA was about 0.77% of adult US pop in 1977; between 2001-3 it was 0.6%. ([http://ncrgconference.blogspot.com/2007\\_11\\_01archive.html](http://ncrgconference.blogspot.com/2007_11_01archive.html))
- This phenomenon of steady or declining pathological gambling rates has been replicated by Abbott in New Zealand, Ladouceur in Canada, Collins and Barr in South Africa, Orford et al in UK etc
- Many people, acc the NCS, recover quite quickly and with minimal intervention; those who don't are severely co-morbid, i.e. have other serious (and probably primary) psychological disorders.
- N.B also 46.4% of adult pop have a mental disorder at some point in their lives
- Mainly because all DSM-IV-based screens are so inadequate, because there are so few PGs to study and because longitudinal studies are too expensive, we know little about how many allegedly "at risk" PGs there are, how many of them recover spontaneously, and what we can do most cost-effectively for or about them (Manson N in Ross et al forthcoming).

# So three hypotheses about why gambling may be good for people

- Gambling promotes health and happiness  
(Desai, Maciejewski, Dausey, Caldarone and Potenza: *Am J Psychiatry* 2004; Desai and Rani: 2007. ncrconference. *Loc cit*)
- Gambling is socially/economically desirable as it promotes entrepreneurship (extrapolated from Manson in Ross et al: *What is Addiction* MIT forthcoming. Feb 2009)
- Gambling promotes the virtues of stoicism  
(Kipling, Rudyard: *If*)

# Desai et al: "Health Correlates of Recreational Gambling in Older Adults"; Desai and Rani: "Are Older Adults Who Gamble Really at a Higher Risk?"

Are very cautious and

- *Don't* conclude that gambling promotes good health for anyone
- Don't ignore the fact that gambling is clearly bad for problem and pathological gamblers
- See some reason for extra worrying about the elderly irt problem gambling (e.g. early stages of dementia)
- **But do report that 80-90% of all recreational gamblers and younger non-gamblers claim to enjoy excellent health while only 62% of non-gamblers over 65 report this**
- **Also older gamblers are less depressed and have better cognitive functioning than their non-gambling counterparts**
- Suggest that this may be due because gambling promotes stimulation, socialisation and other factors associated with healthy aging
- Note that gambling (esp bingo) is the most popular recreational activity for over-65s in residential facilities

# Comments on Desai et al

- Whether gambling is conducive to better subjective health and happiness depends on what the alternatives are (e.g. watching daytime TV on one's own)
- Gambling as a way of escape from problems may be a good thing – taking time out
- Those who worry most about older people's gambling may be their heirs

# Gambling and Entrepreneurship

- Neil Manson, in a radical critique of DSM-IV criteria for PG and *all* the screens which are more or less loosely based on it, suggests that if we applied the PG questions of persistent entrepreneurs (i.e. those who don't give up after a few failures) wrongly categorise them as psychologically disordered (rather than – presumably – as the life-blood of capitalism)
- This prompts the thought (though Manson does not himself pursue it) that just as games generally seem to have evolved to teach us useful skills through play (like making war) so gambling (and the way it rewards us neurochemically) has evolved to inure us through play to risk-taking, cp roller-coasters
- Given that the vast majority of those who gamble do so harmlessly it is even possible that gambling teaches us the importance of self-discipline and prudent money management, which seem to be the key features which differentiate what recreational gamblers do right from what problem gamblers do wrong.

# Gambling and Virtue

- According to Kipling in a poem which was once a staple of British moral education you will only become a truly admirable moral agent (*inter alia*):

*“If you can make a heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on a turn of pitch and toss  
And lose and start again at your beginnings  
And never breathe a word about your loss”*

- This suggests that gambling *and losing* promotes fortitude and displays an honourable disdain for the values of materialism

# Conclusion

- I have not the slightest idea whether gambling is good for the overall well-being of at least some of those who do it; whether gambling encourages or expresses an entrepreneurial spirit; or whether it promotes the stoical virtues
- However, the fact that such issues are seldom discussed at conferences suggests to me that our research agenda may be skewed by puritanical moral assumptions we have inherited and not examined critically
- What we need to focus on more is why do so many people enjoy gambling so much and without adverse consequences, what do they get out of it, what do the majority of recreational gamblers do right which the minority of problem gamblers do wrong, what good does it do them and, indeed, what are the moral benefits for society as a whole.

# THANK YOU

- Presentation available from

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