

Understanding Gambling: Impacts and Social Networks Across the Lifecourse

A briefing paper on gambling behaviour over time and its impacts on individual players and their wider social networks.

Introduction

This briefing paper presents findings from a five year qualitative longitudinal study that was designed to explore changes in gambling behaviour over time, as well as the impacts of gambling on both players and those in their wider social networks. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Responsible Gambling Trust¹, and was carried out by researchers at the University of Glasgow and ScotCen Social Research.

This summary document briefly covers the following main topics:

- how gambling behaviour changed over time among the research participants;
- the social and environmental influences on their behaviour; and
- the impacts of gambling on the individual players and those in their social network.

How the research was carried out

- In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with a cohort of fifty gamblers on up to four occasions between 2006 and 2011, and a smaller number of interviews were conducted with family and friends.
- We initially organised our sample into three 'groups' of people roughly divided into those who considered themselves 'recreational' gamblers; others who had problems and were receiving professional treatment for them (e.g. counselling), and some people who had problems but were not receiving formal help. We administered a problem gambling screen (the NODS²) to provide a more objective basis for classifying people's initial behaviour.

- The sample was selected on the basis of three primary sampling criteria: age, gender, and employment status. Participants were recruited from a variety of gambling venues, including casinos, betting shops, bingo halls and fruit machine arcades, gambling support and counselling services and through advertisements in local newspapers.
- We followed our sample for five years, talking to them at length in their homes and in gambling venues, and listening to how their gambling changed over time and how it fitted into, and around, their everyday lives. Interviews were loosely structured by topic guides designed to cover a range of themes and drew on a 'narrative' approach, with the interviewer acting as a facilitator to tease out the factors that had influenced respondents' gambling and the place that it had in their lives.
- We also conducted a small number of interviews with members of gamblers' social networks, to discuss the effects that gambling had had on them – and that they might have had on gamblers' behaviour, too.

An overview of key sample characteristics by each sweep is shown in Table 1.

¹ Grant References RES-164-25-0006 and RES-191-25-0003

² National Opinion Research Center (NORC) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) Screen for Gambling Problems

Table 1: Key sample characteristics by each sweep

Sample characteristic	Number in Sample Sweep 1 (n=50)	Number in Sample Sweep 2 (n=45)	Number in Sample Sweep 3 (n=38)	Number in Sample Sweep 4 (n=29)
Gender				
Male	33	31	26	19
Female	17	14	12	10
Age				
18-34	9	7	7	5
35-54	26	24	19	14
55+	15	14	12	10
Ethnicity				
White	43	38	34	26
Asian	5	5	3	2
Black	2	2	1	1
Marital status				
Married/ Cohabiting	18	18	16	15
Divorced/ Separated	19	18	15	5
Single	6	2	0	6
Widow	3	3	3	2
Other	4	4	4	1
Employment status				
Working	22	17	14	14
Not working	16	17	14	7
Retired	10	9	8	7
Other	2	2	2	1
Socio-economic classification				
A,B,C1	13	13	9	9
C2,DE	37	32	29	20

Gambling careers: Behaviour change over time

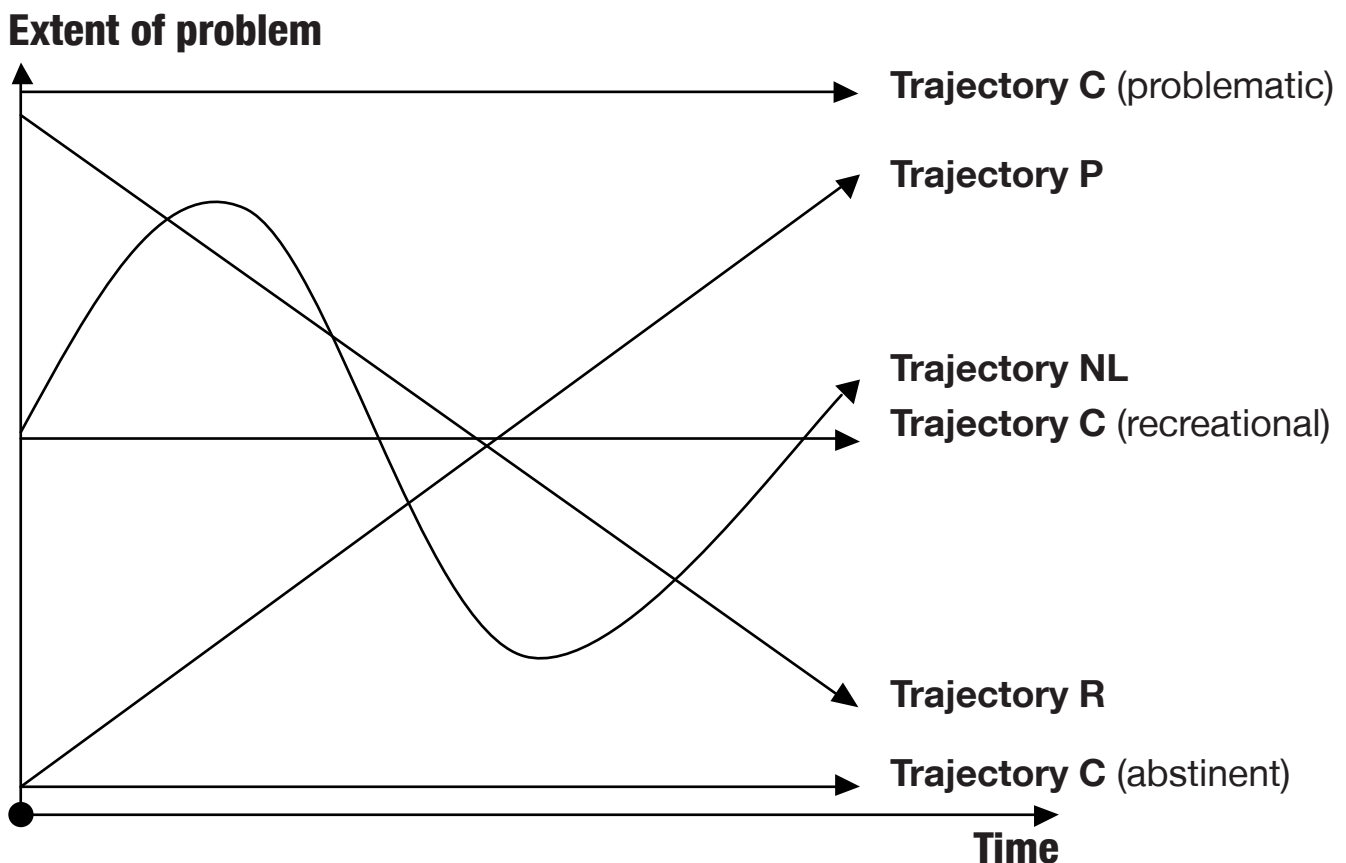
This study suggested that gambling behaviour was highly variable over time. Alongside relatively stable states of 'recreational' or 'problematic' playing, we found that gamblers' behaviour was continually changing, as they moved between phases of more, or less, problematic activity, and fluctuated between periods of greater or lesser intensity, as well as periods of problematic play. Rather than the three 'groups' of players we started the study with (recreational, problem seeking help and problem not seeking help), we found that behaviour was better described by four 'trajectories of behaviour', which we named: progression, reduction, consistency and non-linearity. This dynamic is represented by the image in Figure 1.

Most narratives of gambling behaviour tend to focus on the progressive pathway into problem gambling or the recovery pathway. This study provides evidence that for many in our sample fluidity in gambling behaviour was the norm; that is, that gamblers moved in and out of periods of problematic, heavier or reduced play.

Trajectory P: Progression. Trajectories of progression were characterised by an increase in gambling problems. Behaviour in this trajectory saw movement towards increased levels of gambling activity, with higher NODS scores by the end of the fieldwork.

Trajectory NL: Non-linear behaviour. There was no consistent pattern of behaviour in this trajectory, with individuals having periods of increased problematic play followed by periods of reduced problematic play and vice versa.

Figure 1: Four trajectories of behaviour



Trajectory R: Reduction. Participants in this trajectory moved away from problem gambling or gambled less over the fieldwork period, and also had lower NODS scores by the end of the study.



Trajectory C: Consistent behaviour. Trajectories of consistency showed little change over the fieldwork period, and were either consistently problematic, consistently recreational, or involved being abstinent from gambling altogether. So, for example, if an individual started with a classification of ‘problem player’ or ‘recreational player’ etc., they finished as a ‘problem player’ or ‘recreational player’ with no variation in between.

Characteristics of individuals with different trajectories: As a qualitative study, the sample was not intended to yield representative data about the characteristics of gamblers in general. Nevertheless, the associations – or lack of them – between particular trajectories and the characteristics of those in the sample did raise some interesting hypotheses to explore. There were no obvious demographic patterns among individuals across trajectories of Consistency, Progression and Reduction in terms of age, gender and social class. The Non-Linear trajectory however, was more likely to include men and a greater representation of those from social group DE. In general, employment patterns were more unstable and insecure among those whose behaviour progressed or was non-linear, with periods of unemployment and frequent changes of job common.

Social and environmental influences on behaviour

Social, cultural and environmental factors were key drivers of behaviour across every trajectory. The factors involved in each one were complex, and at times, it appeared that for different people, at different points in their lives, the same factors could sometimes have either positive or negative consequences for gambling behaviour. Some factors, however, seemed to emerge as especially important. For example, among people whose behaviour became more problematic over time, electronic machines, alcohol and insecure employment status were key themes. Among those whose gambling was consistent, or who recovered from problems, social support and stable employment played important roles. Insecure employment, including unemployment, appeared to be associated with non-linear behaviour.

Social networks and local environment were important in the development of gambling careers, in terms of beginning gambling, continuing to play, developing problematic behaviour, as well as recovering from problems. Family, friends and colleagues were instrumental in initiating people to gambling: in the case of family, this tended to be when they were quite young. These social networks were also important in regulating playing, for example, by expressing concern or anger if someone’s gambling was seen to become ‘excessive’, by informally helping them to cut down, or by signposting them to more formal help.

 **I was gambling all the time... the relationship was completely... going nowhere...at that point she [his partner] said you have to do something about your gambling problem.** 

Changes in social and environmental networks could play a role in both increases and reductions in gambling. Behaviour could also be tipped into problems by changes in environment, such as moving home or changing job in a way that brought individuals physically closer to gambling venues.



However, for other respondents such changes could also be associated with reductions. For example, interviewees for whom the social aspects of gambling played a key role could find themselves constrained by their own, or others' lack of time or money, caused for example, by starting work and having less time to gamble, or conversely, by having less money with which to finance their play. At the same time, while proximity to gambling venues could encourage increased playing, moving away from them could have the opposite effect and work to reduce some individuals' playing.

Availability and access were also key factors in the development of gambling careers. Those who had easy access to gambling opportunities – both geographically, as well as in terms of living in a culture in which gambling was commonplace– tended to play more, and see their behaviour as a normal part of everyday life. On the other hand, moving away from environments where gambling was readily available also encouraged reductions in playing.

Significant life events: A common feature of explanations of both increased and curtailed gambling behaviour was experience of a significant life event. We found several examples of these including bereavement, caring for sick relatives/friends, losing or changing jobs, the birth of children, and starting or ending relationships, which could either tip a gambler into problematic behaviour, or, conversely, encourage them to cut down their playing.

Finances: Opportunities to gamble could be extended by positive changes in financial circumstances resulting, for example, from 'windfalls' of various kinds or increases in wages. On the other hand, reduced finances also had the effect of encouraging reductions in gambling.

Alcohol: We heard accounts in which alcohol encouraged excessive play, with the former acting to inhibit control over gambling behaviour. It was also clear that the fact that licensed premises are often situated alongside gambling venues provides an environmental association between the two types of behaviour that moves beyond the level of the individual.

 **when I went through the drinking period ... after my [relative] died and I was gambling more because I was in that vicinity, they both go together ...there's a pub, there's a bookie and they're right next to each other.** 

Machine gambling: We found a link between increasingly problematic behaviour and starting to play machines (or play them more often), suggesting that beginning or increasing machine gambling may increase susceptibility to problematic gambling.

Informal social support from friends and family was extremely important for some people in terms of reducing gambling. Friends and family could play a key role in encouraging individuals to control their behaviour and provide practical support to help them to do so. For example, respondents talked about significant others taking control of their bank accounts and wages and sometimes limiting their spending to ‘pocket money’ in order to relieve them of responsibility and remove temptation to gamble. These practices could be carried out alongside self-help strategies such as leaving cash and credit cards at home, putting limits on time or money spent gambling, and installing blocking software on computers. For some, this kind of social support acted as a kind of ‘backup’ to formal treatment, which it helped to make more effective, while for others, it functioned as a way of controlling behaviour on its own.

Counselling: For some people, counselling provided advice and support that helped reduce problematic gambling and achieve stable behaviour. It was experienced in different ways, however. For some, recovery was sustained by frequent, regular attendance at counselling sessions, and was helped through the development of bonds with counsellors, while others used it as a means of getting through a crisis, and preferred not to continue once the crisis passed.

Gamblers Anonymous (GA): A number of people who had recovered from problems and achieved consistent behaviour through abstinence had done so through GA, and found that it provided a structure and rationale for life without gambling. These people told us about the need they felt to continue going to meetings and identify as a ‘gambling addict’ in order to prevent them returning to any kind of gambling activity, even when they had not gambled for many years.

Social motivations for playing, and control of money: The key distinguishing features of those displaying consistent recreational behaviour appeared to be the social motivation for playing, and the ability to control the money they spent. These participants talked of the enjoyment of meeting with friends when gambling, particularly in casinos and bingo halls, and the fact that these venues provided somewhere to go when other options (such as pubs, theatres and cinemas) did not appeal. Another key feature of consistent recreational behaviour was ongoing control of money: never trying to win back losses, setting limits to the time and money spent playing, and tailoring individual strategies to their own situations.

The impacts of excessive gambling

As well as extending over players’ lives, we found that the impacts of specifically problematic gambling also cascaded through players’ social networks in ways that affected the emotional and financial wellbeing of those closest to them. Interviews with the partners, children, siblings and friends of our original cohort repeatedly told us of the emotional and financial impacts of what they experienced as the uncontrolled or excessive gambling of someone close to them.

Finances: Partners and spouses - typically wives – told us of the detrimental effects of gambling on household finances. This could affect the level of income available to families and undermine the financial dynamics of the entire household. In this way, for example, mortgage payments would sometimes not be met, so partners had to re-enter the labour market to pay for household essentials, and children had to forgo school trips.

Relationships: Problematic gambling affected relationships in a number of ways. Gambling losses were felt to have made loved ones bad tempered, aggressive and emotionally detached. Together with the strains generated by financial difficulties, these interpersonal problems spread outwards through player's social networks and damaged their relationships with the people within them. As a result, relationships were undermined as lack of trust and resentment built up, and for some the impact of problem gambling could linger beyond the problem period for years afterwards.

🔴 I'll say, "I don't know how you could do this, away out at night..., and your [child's] sitting without.... That's deep in me, that feeling o' resentment. I don't think that'll ever go. 🗨️

Implications of the study

- The findings of this study show that for many people, gambling behaviour is not static but highly fluid, changing continually over time and strongly influenced by social and environmental factors.
- This has implications for understandings of gambling in general, as well as for the treatment of problems. In particular, it is important to understand the variable nature of gambling, and to target interventions at the appropriate level and also the right time in an individual's gambling career or trajectory. It is also important to recognise the role of social networks, both as entities in which problems may begin and develop, as well as support mechanisms in which they may also be ameliorated. As such, these findings have implications for policy makers and for those offering support services to gamblers or those in their social networks.

Further information

Project websites: www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/research/sociology/projects/understandinggambling/

www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/understanding-gambling/

Follow the conversation on twitter:
#GamblingCareers

A list of publications from the project can be found at: www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-191-25-0003/read

Author and Acknowledgements

Authors: Gerda Reith, Fiona Dobbie and Jane Kerr.

Gerda Reith is Professor of Social Science at the University of Glasgow, Fiona Dobbie is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Social Marketing, University of Stirling, and Jane Kerr is a Senior Researcher at NatCen Social Research.

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