

Gambling research: Politics, magma and the public interest

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Gambling studies as a field of social research (as opposed to that corpus of work concerned with the pathology of the individual problem gambler) is, as contributors to the *Gambling Research* May 2009 special edition have made clear, a field strewn with obstacles. These include limited independent funding opportunities, political controversy, the operation of vested interests, and a fragmented research community. To add to this, it is as often as not perceived by academic peers as of limited scholarly interest.

Nonetheless, it is a field of inquiry which has the potential to strongly promote public health and wellbeing. As any observer of the study of substance (ab)use including tobacco control would attest, much progress in human wellbeing has been associated with social inquiry, in some cases rather more than has been achieved by focusing on the aberrant behaviour of those with the “addiction”. In a similar way, the real potential for gambling studies as a field of very productive research activity arises not so much from the direct consequences of researching “problem gambling” – the locus of so much research to date – but from the broader need to understand the dynamics of gambling as an economic, and clearly socially meaningful activity in its rapidly proliferating contemporary forms. In this light, gambling research as a specific area of study also has the potential to illuminate post-material consumption in general.

Regardless of all this potential, I suggest that the study of gambling as a field of social research is confronted by very real and pressing problems.

The first of these is the operation of vested interest. The gambling industry, and in Australia the state and territory governments which regulate and tax it, derive substantial revenues from the maintenance of the present situation, and it’s hardly surprising that they seek to maintain the status quo for as long as possible. Industry appears to be quite happy to devote whatever resources are available to achieve this outcome. State governments, for their part, are more torn. They must appear to be concerned about the wellbeing of the public (and no doubt many in government are genuinely so concerned) but the vertical fiscal imbalance in Australian government revenues makes the continuation of existing revenue streams a pressing priority. Gambling industry spokespeople made it clear to a recent Parliamentary inquiry that the industry had been keen to present their case to the Australian Labour Party government after 2007, spooked perhaps by incoming Prime Minister Rudd’s remarks about his dislike of “the pokies” (e.g., Costello, 2008; Gibson, 2008) and indeed employ government relations consultants (such as Mr Gibson) apparently to do so. Industry groups (and one might include government in this category) also have vast resources available to fund research – often commercially oriented, sometimes for what amount to propaganda purposes, and commonly to develop generally downstream “solutions” or responses to gambling’s problems. It is a matter of serious concern that most of the established names in gambling research have derived research funds from such sources in the past, as Griffiths

(2009) points out.¹ This is far from an ideal situation, and parallels that in some other areas of public health concern, such as tobacco, alcohol, and the pharmaceutical industry. Adams is right to point out the need to reduce reliance on the proceeds of gambling – on the consumption of gambling profits, as he puts it (Adams 2009). One way to address this issue is for relevant journal editors to adopt a policy of full disclosure by authors of funding sources, and any constraints on research direction, editorial control, copyright and data access, and ownership. Another complementary solution is to establish a central web-based directory of potential conflicts, housed on an independently controlled server. But ultimately, this issue is an issue of research culture as much as it is of integrity and reputation. Adams (2009) is right – we need culture change in the consumption of gambling research funding, just as we do in the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, and indeed in gambling itself. Such change has largely been achieved in tobacco research, and to a certain extent in relation to research involving pharmaceutical substances. It remains a major challenge in alcohol and, I believe, gambling research fields.

A related issue is the difficulty of obtaining access to data for research purposes (Morrison, 2009). As recently as August 31, 2009 this issue was raised in a submission to the Productivity Commission's current inquiry (Miller, 2009). Government and industry control enormous data sets including loyalty and electronic gaming machine (EGM) level data. Few of these see the light of day for independent research purposes, or otherwise. Detailed data sets are often made available with caveats attached. Queensland and South Australia (for example) publish regional EGM data, which can be productively utilised for research, but venue level data are not available. In Victoria, the situation is a little different. Local EGM venue data are now published (Department of Justice Victoria, 2009; Victorian Commission for Gambling Regulation, 2009), allowing at least some scrutiny and examination of expenditure patterns.² Why are such data important? The gambling industry made much of its capacity to utilise data for purposes of gambling intensification when attempting to achieve continuation of the Victorian duopoly (Tattersall's, 2006). Those with an interest in promoting public health and wellbeing would argue (as I and others did – see the Australian Institute for Primary Care, 2006) that the same data would be very helpful for identifying potentially harmful products and designing effective up- or mid-stream interventions.

This lack of publicly available data in most jurisdictions is a serious problem for independent gambling research, particularly that focused on the promotion of public wellbeing. This includes technical information about game sets and game maths for EGMs, and platform level data for assessment of propensity for harm (among other things). In New South Wales, although some data are theoretically available, access costs \$550 per year (\$1,100 for the current year), and data describing specific venues are not released (New South Wales Office of Liquor Gaming and Racing, 2009). This is completely unsatisfactory from a public interest perspective, let alone that of public health. It is, of course, helpful from the perspective of those who wish to slow down the pace of change – whether they perceive their opposition as the concerned groups who oppose gambling as exploitation of the vulnerable, or from the perspective of protecting monopoly or oligopoly positions. In any event, it is a helpful tactic in maintaining “the discourse of business

1 Whether I am an established researcher or not is for others to decide. But I have indeed received research funds from two Australian state government agencies, the ultimate source of which was gambling revenues. I suspect that few researchers have not received some funding from such sources, although I would contend that there are varying degrees of conflict.

2 It is noteworthy that Victorian data of this nature were released to coincide with the Victorian government's plans to de-duopolise the EGM industry, so it seems the release was less altruistic than intended to support the commercial process of bidding for individual EGM licenses, due to occur in 2010.

as usual”, a term Woolley and I have utilised to refer to the currently dominant (or orthodox) discourse of gambling regulation and practice (Livingstone & Woolley, 2007).

I do not suggest that it is easy to strike a balance between public interest, public health, private profit, and government finance. Gambling causes harm, makes massive profits, and keeps political coffers at least partly filled. These tensions are inescapable.

The challenge to gambling research, I believe, is to become much better at informing a properly very public debate. Attempts to keep the issue out of sight have repeatedly failed. It is not tenable to pretend that we can discover some objective truth in this situation, which will be accepted by all players, and thus resolve the problems that are only too apparent. McDonald (2009) is quite right – gambling is a very political issue, in the proper sense of the word (although I respectfully disagree that it is an issue which struggles to be discerned).

What I do suggest is that gambling as social research is strongly in need of a transformation of clarity in focus and intent. Those who undertake research of a socially oriented nature into gambling’s many intriguing and fascinating contours may already accept that gambling research occupies a magmatic space where politics, public interest, public health, and commercial interests concatenate. Reith (2002) in the UK and Schull (2005) in the US provide excellent examples of this understanding. The research questions we address ourselves to, the methodologies we adopt, and the solutions and data we generate will all reflect the alignments we adopt, the funding we receive, and the interests we serve. This is why issues of research funding, conflict of interest, data availability, and research intent cannot be ignored. Researchers are not neutral observers in this magmatic environment. To some extent we shape it, and the role we play in doing so needs to be made clear. The responsibility for putting our own house in order rests with the research community, and we should take it up as a matter of some urgency.

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