



Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Arts + Culture Business + Economy Education Environment + Energy Health + Medicine Politics + Society Science + Technology

Follow Topics Explainer Flight MH370 Sydney Biennale boycott Class in Australia Privacy in practice Ukraine Health Check Paying for Health

29 June 2011, 7.01am AEST

Get rich or die trying: when gambling becomes a problem

AUTHOR



Matthew Rockloff
Deputy Director, Institute for Health and Social Science Research at Central Queensland University

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Matthew Rockloff has received funding from the Victorian and Queensland Governments.

Central Queensland University does not contribute to the cost of running The Conversation. [Find out more.](#)



Sadly, there's no magic button to stop excessive gambling. Mick Tsikas/AAPImage

The Conversation is funded by CSIRO, Melbourne, Monash, RMIT, UTS, UWA, ACU, ANU, Canberra, CDU, Curtin, Deakin, Flinders, Griffith, JCU, La Trobe, Massey, Murdoch, Newcastle, QUT, SAHMRI, Swinburne, Sydney, UniSA, USC, USQ, UTAS, UWS, VU and Wollongong.

JOBS

[Research Associate](#)
University of Western Australia

[Lecturer / Senior Lecturer](#)
University of New South Wales

[Education Specialist](#)
Australian Film, Television and Radio School

[Research Program Facilitator](#)
Monash University

[Lecturer, Health Social Work](#)
Griffith University

GAMBLING IN AUSTRALIA – Why do some people develop gambling addictions while others can dabble for years at the pokies or the track without issue?

The Productivity Commission's **2010 report on gambling** estimates more than 100,000 people in Australia suffer from severe gambling problems. This is in line with the US and Canada, where similar gambling opportunities are available.

Our understanding of gambling addiction has advanced rapidly in recent years. Older **Freudian conceptions of gambling** problems – essentially, that they stem from a repressed sexual impulse or a desire to “punish” oneself – are yielding to more likely social explanations.

A relatively new theory, from the early 2000s, the **Four Es**, identifies four psychological factors that put people at increased risk of becoming a problem gambler: esteem, excitement, excess and escape. This theory sheds some light on the psychological make-up of the problem gambler; so let's

Sign in to Favourite

3 Comments

Republish

Email

Tweet 0

Share 2

Reddit this!

TAGS

[Psychology](#), [Gambling](#), [Mental health](#), [Addiction](#), [Gambling in Australia](#)

RELATED ARTICLES

20 March 2014
[Faulty oxytocin system may cause addiction susceptibility](#)

[MORE JOBS](#)

EVENTS

March 2014

[Reinvent Your Career — University of Southern Queensland — Brisbane , Queensland](#)

[Wunderkammer: The cabinet of wonders — Deakin University — Melbourne, Victoria](#)

[Alison Locke Perchuk, Multisensory Memories: Recollecting Abbots in Image, Space & Voice — University of Sydney — Sydney](#)

[Mosaics and Multiculturalism: Discoveries at Ancient Sepphoris — University of Melbourne — Melbourne, Victoria](#)

[MORE EVENTS](#)

look at these points one by one.

1) Esteem

Problem gamblers are likely to have low self-esteem and a sense of self-loathing.

Robert L. Custer, the American psychiatrist who was instrumental in getting “Disordered Gambling” recognised as a psychiatric disorder in 1980, **described** the pathological gambler as someone who wants to “relieve some kind of psychic pain”.

Whether the problem gambler wins or loses doesn’t matter, he said – it’s being in the game that relieves the pain. Gambling eases the burden of self-loathing and allows the people betting to engage in a fantasy world of imagined wins, financial success and social acceptance.

People who agree with **survey questions** such as “the things I say and do are foolish” and “I am miserable to be around” are much more likely than others to suffer from gambling problems.

Ironically, the burden of gambling debt ultimately fuels players' low opinions of themself.

2) Excitement

Research shows people with gambling problems are more likely than others to become bored with day-to-day life. The wins of gambling are exciting and the “action” of play makes it attractive to problem gamblers.

3) Excess

Problem gamblers tend to act without thinking about the long-term consequences, and this mindlessness extends to other areas of their lives.

They often **drink too much, smoke too much and eat too much**.

Young men are much more likely to engage in risky gambling than either women or older males. A **recent small study** of gambling among Sydney-area adolescents, for example, showed 6.7% (or 17 students) had gambling problems, and all were boys. This gender difference may be attributable to the



19 March 2014

[Nothing wrong with a digital detox but wired nature is better](#)



19 March 2014

[Hug a tree – the evidence shows it really will make you feel better](#)



13 March 2014

[Bad Samaritans: why people don't step in to stop violence](#)



12 March 2014

[Totally addicted to apps: difficulty makes Candy Crush so sweet](#)

fact young men are **generally more impulsive**, in part because of higher levels of testosterone.

Although most of us can be described as “cognitive misers” – relying on mental shortcuts to solve everyday decisions – problem gamblers are especially unable or unwilling to control behaviour they know is harmful to themselves.

They're more likely to agree with survey statements such as “I usually get into trouble because I don't stop to think”.

Moreover, agreement with these statements on mindlessness **predicts** increases in people's gambling problems over time.

4) Escape

None of these psychological risks for gambling problems exists on its own – the need for escape may be the “worm at the core” of all these factors.

Most problem gamblers are conscious gambling is a convenient escape from the troubles that plague their lives – self loathing, boredom and social isolation.

Because gambling is an immediate relief from these negative feelings, problem gamblers are unwilling to inhibit their gambling: even when they know it will cause them more problems in the future. Gambling is a temporary escape from negative self-reflection.

In **one of our experiments**, gamblers were asked to describe the things they didn't like about themselves in a private audio recording. Then they played a poker machine (sometimes called “slot machines”, “fruit machines” or “pokies”).

When compared with a controlled condition where participants made no recording, people who had described themselves negatively bet faster, bet for longer and made larger bets, on average, during play.

So negative self-reflection has a direct impact on gambling behaviour, increasing gambling intensity as a way of escaping these intrusive negative feelings.

Gambling and the self

Gambling has short-term benefits and long-term costs. Except for a few high skill games, such as card-games and racing, gambling invariably produces long-term losses. Money is stolen, people are lied to, and savings are wasted in the

pursuit of an unattainable dream.

Perhaps the best hope for rehabilitation of problem gamblers is for them to find a new and more productive means of attaining personal acceptance and social approval.

People with gambling problems should benefit from engaging in activities they enjoyed prior to their gambling, and connecting with people who give them a sense of acceptance.

In fact, the active ingredient of self-help groups, such as **Gamblers Anonymous**, may provide the sense of acceptance and approval that gambling once gave. But each person must work out for themselves which activities provide them with a greater sense of wellbeing.

This is part three of The Conversation's Gambling in Australia Series. Read part one: [Gambling in Australian culture: more than just a day at the races](#); and part two: [Promotion of gambling short-changes Australian sport ... and its fans](#).

Sign in to Favourite Republish Email Tweet { 0 }
 Share { 2 }

Want to follow The Conversation?

Follow The Conversation and sign up to our **free daily newsletter**.

United Kingdom Australia

Join the conversation

To comment or recommend, or

3 Comments sorted by

 **Dean Moriarty**
logged in via Twitter

"Problem gamblers are likely to have low self-esteem and a sense of self-loathing." And here's me thinking they were completely stupid.

over 2 years ago • [report](#)



Matthew Rockloff

Deputy Director, Institute for Health and Social Science Research at [Central Queensland University](#)

In reply to [Dean Moriarty](#)

No so! I've met many problem gamblers who are very bright. People with gambling problems fail to fit common expectations. In my experience, they are very normal people - in most respects - except for their relationship to gambling (which is admittedly odd - at least to me).

over 2 years ago • report



Matt Stevens

Senior Research Fellow/Statistician/PhD

Funny how gambling articles on here get little response. Nice summary article Matt.

over 1 year ago • report

THE CONVERSATION

Community

[Community standards](#)

[Republishing guidelines](#)

[Friends of The Conversation](#)

- [Job Board](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Our feeds](#)
- [Donate](#)

Company

[Who we are](#)

[Our charter](#)

[Our team](#)

[Our audience](#)

[Partners and funders](#)

[Contributing institutions](#)

[Contact us](#)

Contact

Editorial editorial@theconversation.edu.au

Support support@theconversation.com

[Subscribe to our Newsletters](#)

AU

UK