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Why people gamble: A model with five motivational dimensions

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ABSTRACT *A motivational model of gambling participation is presented. The model comprises five motivational dimensions: the dream of hitting the jackpot and transforming one's life, social rewards, intellectual challenge, mood change induced by playing, and – the fundamental motive for all gambling – the chance of winning. The model is primarily applicable to leisure gambling in contemporary western societies, but also helps us understand problem gambling. The model integrates the wide variety of motives individuals have for gambling and makes it possible to understand the specific appeal of gambling relative to other leisure activities. Gambling taps into human biopsychology, easily evokes powerful psychological processes, and connects with profound cultural meanings.*

KEYWORDS gambling; problem gambling; motivation; conceptual model; culture

Why do people gamble?

The question ‘Why do people gamble?’ is raised mainly in two contexts. First, it is raised in society at large when gambling is discussed. Most media debaters, politicians, and others interested in social questions fully understand that people may enjoy a bit of gambling once in a while – for example, buying a lottery ticket or betting on football matches. However, there is often amazement or disapproval that such a large part of the population spends so much money on gambling (Bernhard, Futrell, & Harper, 2010; Gustavsson & Svanell, 2012). Since winning money is the overt motive for gambling, it may seem foolish to enter the games offered by commercial companies, as the player will almost certainly lose money in the long run. What is it about gambling that so strongly attracts people? Why do people gamble?

Simplistic answers are frequently offered in public debate, answers that disparage gamblers and suggest that gambling has no true positive value. It may be suggested that gambling is driven by a culturally degenerate craving for superficial entertainment, greed and materialism, a vain hope of getting rich without effort, irrational and distorted beliefs about the chances of winning, subclinical gambling addiction, and massive amounts of aggressive and deceptive advertising from gambling companies. In past centuries, the answers were typically that gambling expressed sinfulness, covetousness, moral depravity, and irrationality (Bernhard, 2007b; Dunkley, 1985).

Second, the question of why people gamble is raised in academic studies. The gambling phenomenon has been explained in a variety of ways, reflecting general theories of human behaviour current in various academic disciplines, including

psychoanalysis (Bergler, 1958), Jungian psychology (Currie, 2007), cognitive psychology (Walker, 1992), behaviourism (Skinner, 1953, pp. 104, 397), neuroscience (Goudriaan, Oosterlaan, de Beurs, & Van den Brink, 2004), civilization studies (Huizinga, 1938/1955), economics (Friedman & Savage, 1948), macro sociology (Devereux, 1980), micro sociology (Goffman, 1969), comparative anthropology (Binde, 2005a), cultural anthropology (Malaby, 2003), and existentialism (Kusyszyn, 1984). In short, an explanation of why people gamble has been proposed by virtually every general approach to studying human behaviour and motivation.

To gambling studies, including problem gambling research, the question of why people gamble is fundamental. Insofar as such studies concern gambling behaviour, and not merely the consequences of and societal responses to such behaviour, they must make some basic assumptions about the motivations of people who gamble. Since most attention is directed toward the problems arising from gambling, the joys and motivations of the great majority of problem-free gamblers are often overlooked and rarely analysed (Campbell, 1976; Nicoll, 2008; Thompson & Potts, 2011). Dickerson has observed (1984, p. 22) that most general theories of gambling ‘assume some form of human dissatisfaction or deprivation’ concerning, for example, money, rationality, and peace of mind; they thereby tend to overlook the challenges, creativity, sociability and playfulness of gambling.

This paper presents a comprehensive model of why people engage in leisure gambling. As the term ‘leisure’ suggests, the focus is on contemporary gambling in western societies. The model, which also helps us understand problem gambling, is based on a theoretical review of gambling literature (Binde, 2009b). It has evolved during the course of 10 years of research of both leisure and problem gambling in Sweden (e.g. Binde 2009a, 2011a, 2011b).

Explaining gambling motivation and involvement

A distinction can be made between motivational and involvement models of gambling behaviour (Binde, 2009b). The model presented here is motivational.

As the term suggests, motivational models take account of people’s motives for gambling in general or for participating in specific games. Motivation is here understood in the general sense, as ‘what animates us, what prompts our initiation, choice, and persistence in particular behaviours in particular environments’ (Bernard, Mills, Swenson, & Walsh, 2005, p. 137). Motivational models can be quantitative, generated by the statistical analysis of questionnaire data, or qualitative, consisting of lists of motives for gambling derived from observational studies.

Some models and analyses of gambling motivation have been based on ethnography. For example, recreational casino gambling in the USA was found to have eight motivational components: learning and evaluating, ‘rush,’ self-definition, risk-taking, cognitive self-classification, emotional self-classification, competing and communing (Cotte, 1997). Three central themes evident in the casino gambling of American senior citizens were ‘control, lift, and escape’ (Loroz, 2004). An observational study of baccarat players in Macau casinos concluded that players gamble for monetary reasons, excitement, entertainment and social values (Lam, 2007).

Another source of data for motivational analyses is betting patterns, as evidenced by betting slips and other hard facts on playing behaviour. Using such methods, a British study identified four principal motives for betting on horses: financial gain, intellectual challenge, excitement and social interaction (Bruce & Johnson, 1992). A Polish study of casino gambling investigated motivation along an axis extending from investment to hedonic consumption (Dzik, 2006).

Motives for gambling may also be derived from questionnaires. A study of a sample of Korean college students resulted in a five-factor model of gambling motivation, comprising socialization, amusement, avoidance, excitement and monetary motives (H.-P. Lee, Chae, Lee, & Kim, 2007). Another Korean study found four motivational dimensions for casino gambling: socialization/learning, challenge, escape and winning (C.-K. Lee, Lee, Bernhard, & Yoon, 2006). A study of four forms of gambling in the USA identified five motives for gambling: money, excitement, social interaction, escape from problems, and self-esteem enhancement (Fang & Mowen, 2009). American college students were found to gamble 'to win money, for fun, for social reasons, for excitement, or just to have something to do' (Neighbors, Lostutter, Cronce, & Larimer, 2002). In another study of American students, the five most common motivations among recreational gamblers were found to be winning, exploration, excitement, being with friends and being with similar people (Platz & Millar, 2001). Responses to open-ended questions on reasons for gambling, asked in two Canadian epidemiological surveys, were grouped into seven categories: coping (to reduce or avoid negative emotions), social, enhancement, financial, charitable, recreation and 'other' (McGrath, Stewart, Klein, & Barrett, 2010). A study of Chinese gamblers first used focus groups and then proceeded to a survey in order to construct an indigenous Gambling Motives, Attitudes and Behavior (GMAB) scale for Chinese gamblers (Tao, Wu, Cheung, & Tong, 2011). Five dimensions of gambling motives were found: self-worth, monetary gains, sensation seeking, boredom alleviation and learning. The 2010 British Gambling Prevalence Survey (Wardle et al., 2011) developed the Reasons for Gambling Questionnaire (RGQ). The RGQ has fifteen items that, in the analysis of the results of the 2010 survey, were grouped into five broad motivational areas: enhancement, recreation, social, coping and monetary reasons.

The second type of gambling behaviour model concerns involvement. While motivational models basically consist of a set of motives for gambling, involvement models describe processes that result in various degrees of engagement in gambling, ranging from none to excessive. Such models are usually more complex than motivational models and differ considerably from each other in terms of the factors included and processes suggested. Some models include mainly individual psychological and psychobiological factors (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002; Ricketts & Macaskill, 2003), others only sociological and cultural factors (Ocean & Smith, 1993), but most models include both individual and societal-level factors (Abt, McGurrin, & Smith, 1985; Ariyabuddhiphongs, 2006; Bernhard, 2007a; Cummings & Corney, 1987; Sharpe, 2002; Zangeneh & Haydon, 2004).

Motivational models explain why people find it at all worthwhile to gamble, while involvement models explain why some people gamble just a little and others far too much. However, the two kinds of models overlap. A motivational model may to some extent account for involvement, since individual involvement is likely to be higher if there are multiple motives for gambling and since motivational strength varies. Involvement models include motives for gambling, which are subject to enforcing, attenuating and mediating factors.

Five motives for gambling

The model presented here includes motives for gambling that are present in many of the models reviewed above. However, it differs from these in that it aspires to be more synthesizing and general in scope. In particular, it differs because it assumes that one core motive impels participation in all forms of gambling and that four



Figure 1. Five motives for gambling.

optional motives may or may not be relevant to particular games and are of varying importance to individual gamblers depending on personal dispositions and preferences (see Figure 1). The four optional motives for gambling are:

1. The dream of hitting the jackpot
2. Social rewards
3. Intellectual challenge
4. Mood change

The fifth motive is essential to gambling; it is at the core of participation in all forms of gambling and is therefore always present:

5. The chance of winning

The chance of winning is viewed as a psychobiological as well as a symbolic and cultural entity. It should not be confused with the simple motive of ‘winning money’ or the like, which is present in some other models. Money that is won has, as it will be argued here, symbolic and psychological meanings. Moreover, pure money is the medium of gambling, not what gambling actually is about. As author and poker player David Spanier wrote (2001, p. 50):

Money is the fuel of gambling; it drives it, as petrol powers a car, but the pleasure of driving a car is not about petroleum. It’s about speed, style, movement. Fuel is merely what makes the car run. In that sense, the real motives behind gambling are to be sought elsewhere.

Together, the five motives provide an answer as to why people engage in leisure gambling. They will now be discussed in turn.

The dream of hitting the jackpot

The dream of hitting the jackpot is the main motive for participating in lotteries and other games in which a small stake gives the chance to win huge sums of money. The player enjoys the pleasant fantasy of becoming rich and may intensify and extend this fantasy in various ways. In Sweden, for example, some people buy instant lottery tickets and keep them for a while without scratching them, which allows the ticket buyer to repeatedly indulge in thoughts such as ‘that ticket could be worth 10 million’ and ‘that ticket could change my life’. Such pleasant dreams often figure in the promotion of lotteries (Binde, 2009c; McMullan & Miller, 2009).

The big win is imagined to have the power to transform one’s life for the better. In Sweden, this imagery comprises not only becoming free of economic troubles and having the possibility to increase the volume and quality of personal consumption,

but primarily the realization of one's 'true self'. This is a process of self-fulfilment that includes personal development and living up to ideals of generosity and sociability (Binde, 2007b; Hedenus, 2011). In other countries, with other social and cultural values, the dream of hitting the jackpot may contain different visions of how life might be transformed (Davies, 1997; Falk & Mäenpää, 1999; Gudgeon & Stewart, 2001).

Social rewards

While gambling is a solitary activity for some people, the social dimension is important to many and makes them gamble more and in other ways than if they had to gamble alone. Gambling offers social rewards of three specific kinds: communion, competition and ostentation. More generally, the gambling environment may constitute a sociocultural world of its own that attracts people.

Communion

Gambling serves as a way of getting together and socializing with other people. Examples of this are plentiful, such as bingo playing among the elderly, friends having a good time together at the race track or casino, and people of the neighbourhood meeting in the local betting shop (Krauss, 2010; O'Brien Cousins & Witcher, 2004; Ocean, 1996). The intensity of conviviality and interaction with others may range from high to apparently low. Some people may simply like to be among others for a while, but not necessarily interact very much with them.

Competition

Gambling offers an established and readily available arena for competing with others, which makes gambling especially attractive to people of a competitive nature. Poker, for example, can be played as any other sport, with championship tournaments at the local, regional, national and international levels. Casino players may feel that they are competing with the Black Jack dealer (Ocean, 1996) and sports bettors against the bookmaker, seeing it as a challenge to 'beat the system' (Neal, 2005). Winning enhances the self-esteem of competitive players, and a desire for this may be a cause of their competitiveness.

Ostentation

Gambling provides as an opportunity to display conspicuous consumption, skilfulness, boldness, and more generally gallantry and familiarity with the ways of the world (Goffman, 1969; Holtgraves, 1988). Such ostentation – for example, at the gaming tables of a casino – gives the gambler an opportunity to gain social recognition and status.

The gambling environment

Some bounded gambling environments – most notably casinos and race tracks – form self-contained sociocultural worlds. There are specific norms, vocabularies, cultural codes and player identities, and the settings have characteristic sounds, smells, architecture and activity rhythms (Binde, 2011b; Krauss, 2010; Ocean, 1996; Scott, 1968). People may enjoy being part of such gambling scenes, as a relief from or addition to their ordinary lives. They can for a while become someone else and do something different with others. To occasional and curious visitors, such gambling environments may appear fascinating and inspire them to gamble.

Intellectual challenge

Some games offer the gambler choices that make it possible to influence the outcome. The gambler may spend much time increasing knowledge and developing skill for such games, which can provide an intellectually stimulating hobby and interest (Binde, 2011b; Kerr et al., 2009). Some gamblers only play games that they perceive involve skill and may look down with mild disdain on lottery-ticket buyers and others who play chance games. Such people are bound to lose, they think, while they themselves, because of knowledge and skill, have a chance of making money at gambling.

Two forms of gambling are especially appealing to players who like intellectual challenges. The first is poker in all its varieties. Today, poker tournaments are plentiful in casinos and on the Internet, and magazines, books, and Internet chat forums offer advice on how to play. In many countries, poker games and tournaments are broadcast on television, accompanied by commentators discussing the players' strategies and performance. Texas Hold'em and similar poker games are easy to learn, but because of their complexity the player always has something more to learn and master.

The other intellectual form of gambling par excellence is horse betting. The art of handicapping – estimating the chances of horses winning a particular race and placing optimal bets given these probabilities and the odds – involves immense amounts of information, such as records of horses' past performance, assessments of their current form, track conditions and the ability of jockeys/drivers. At trotting tracks in Sweden, there are always some players – equipped with racing forms, binoculars and stop watches – who play for moderate sums of money but spend many hours a week on their favourite hobby: horse betting (Binde, 2011b; Hansson, 2004).

Mood change

Many games have the power to change the affective and emotional mood of their players. Excitement rises when, for example, a bingo player has only one number left to score bingo, the roulette ball is jumping on the wheel and is about to come to rest on a number, when the racehorses approach the finish or when one is dealt two aces as pocket cards in Texas Hold'em poker.

Gambling may also be relaxing, just as any other hobby or leisure activity that people engage in voluntarily to wind down for a while. For instance, in horse or sports betting the player loses himself or herself for a while in the study of racing forms and filling out betting slips; it is an activity similar to solving a crossword puzzle (Binde, 2011b).

The pleasant narrowing of attention in leisure gambling has been seen as experiencing flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennet, 1971). That is, engaging in an activity with an optimal balance between opportunities and restrictions, avoiding the confusion and stress of too many choices and the boredom of too few.

The core of gambling: The chance of winning

The four motivational dimensions outlined above may or may not be relevant to particular games or to the preferences of individual gamblers. Moreover, they are found in a host of other professional and leisure activities and are not characteristic of gambling per se. However, the fifth motive – the chance of winning – is characteristic of gambling and present in all games. It is the core of gambling, what gambling is essentially about. The chance of winning is the prospect of receiving more than one has given, of winning more than one has staked. This vision is charged with emotional and symbolic power from two domains, the biopsychological and the sociocultural.

In the biopsychological domain, the brain's reward system induces positive feelings of expectation, pleasure and satisfaction when something good is anticipated and received, especially if it is better or more plentiful than the usual (for an overview, see Klein, 2006). Since expectation seems to elicit a stronger reaction than does actual reward, it has been suggested that the 'expectation system' of the brain would be a more apt term for what the scientific literature usually calls the 'reward system' (Klein, 2006).

It has been argued that 'a behavior as prevalent as gambling must be explained in terms that are consistent with natural selection' (Fiorillo, Tobler, & Schultz, 2003, p. 1902). The bio-behavioural reward for taking risks and seeking something more and better than the usual has been encoded in our genes. A burst of dopamine is released and the animal is conditioned to behave in ways that yield more and better rewards (Arias-Carrión & Pöppel, 2007). Such a neurochemical process is likely to contribute to human gambling motivation of various intensities (Platt & Huettel, 2008; Schizgal & Arvanitogiannis, 2003; Spinella, 2003). This theory is consistent with behavioural explanations of gambling (Harrigan & Dixon, 2009; Madden, Ewan, & Lagorio, 2007).

Hence, human psychobiology motivates individuals to engage in activities that offer the chance of a positive reward; we feel pleasurable anticipation and satisfaction when the reward is received. Gambling is such an activity and many gambling games and devices – most notably slot machines – are designed to intensify anticipation and make rewards salient (Harrigan, 2007; Nicki, Gallagher, & Cormier, 2007).

In the sociocultural domain, a gambling win contrasts with the rule of reciprocity governing much of social life. Human societies are built on reciprocity: people exchange goods and services (Polanyi, 1957; Sahlins, 1968). Many of these exchanges are symmetric and balanced, as one thing is exchanged for another of equal value. This is the basic principle of barter in pre-modern cultures and of commercial business in modern societies. Receiving much more than one has given is thus exceptional and pleasant. That prospect has given rise to cultural symbols and images referring to a wonderful world in which one could 'gain without losing, enjoy without sharing' (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, pp. 496–497), a world of abundance in which everybody would be happy. In European folklore, the Land of Cockaigne and the Horn of Plenty are among these cultural symbols. The Christian religion has the image of Paradise and the conception of divine grace as a free gift from God, who does not demand anything in return ('Grace', 1907–12). The secular counterpart of grace is luck (Binde, 1999, pp. 110–111; Pitt-Rivers, 1992), a concept often invoked to account for unexpected gambling wins. The free and altruistic gift is hailed as an epitome of true friendship and love.

The chance of winning thus has affinity to many powerful cultural symbols and concepts, which all have in common the agreeable prospect of receiving more than one has given or of receiving freely without obligation to return (Binde, 2007a). Gambling is thereby charged with positive cultural meanings.

The cultural meaning of winning money in gambling can be seen as a domain-specific version of the full-scale imaginary economies that anthropologists and historians have studied in various cultures, in which money and wealth are thought to be created, transformed and distributed in extraordinary ways. Examples of this include Melanesian 'Cargo' cults (Worsley, 1968), the treasure-hunting craze in the American Northeast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Taylor, 1986) and nationwide pyramid schemes (Verdery, 1995).

Winning, in modern western societies, is associated with success, satisfaction and happiness; this connection is often emphasized in the messages of gambling advertising (McMullan & Miller, 2009). In gambling, the sums won need not be huge for the psychological and symbolic value of winning to be big. For example, a minor lottery win may be interpreted as propitious sign of having good luck (Binde, 2007a, p. 150f; Reith, 1999, p. 176ff). The symbolism is not only metaphorical – gambling being a simile of the vicissitudes of life – but also iconographic. The win embodies the individual's ambitions and hope of success in life.

When a sample of gamblers is asked in a questionnaire about their motives for gambling, 'to win' or 'to win money' is often the most common choice (e.g. Neighbors et al., 2002; Platz & Millar, 2001; Productivity Commission, 1999, p. 3.13). This is not surprising, since the chance of winning is the core of all forms of gambling and money its 'fuel' (Spanier, 2001, cited above); money is gambling's tangible reward (Rosecrance, 1985, p. 30), which makes money 'the dominant language of gambling' (Filby & Harvey, 1988, p. 160). Many forms of gambling, such as roulette and slot machines, would become boring if nothing of value were at stake; money makes gambling involving, exciting and consequential.

Being a generalized measure of value, money has the capacity to charge activities with symbolic meanings connected to all those things that money can buy and accomplish (Codere, 1968; Crump, 1981, Chapter 1; Mitchell & Mickel, 1999). Money is the 'symbol of all symbols' (Gregory, 1997, p. 35). This allows the chance of winning to refract into a myriad of personal ambitions and desires. Moreover, money has general meanings that vary across individuals. Goldberg & Lewis (1978), for example, identified three categories of people with respect to their view of money: security collectors, autonomy worshippers and power grabbers. To these categories of people, money means security, freedom and power, respectively.

Lotteries and other chance games with huge sums to win inspire reflection on and discussion of existential and moral questions as well as of possible metaphysical forces. What is luck and are some people especially lucky? Do some people deserve to win big on the lottery? Is hitting the jackpot always a blessing, or might it sometimes be a curse? Does money buy happiness? Is it fair that someone becomes a multimillionaire just by entering the lottery? In Swedish gambling environments, people talk quite a lot about such things and the press writes about them in accounts of thought-provoking and astonishing events in connection to gambling wins (Binde, 2007b). Thinking about and discussing such existential, social and moral questions add cultural and symbolic meaning to gambling, and increase the motivation to participate. People wish to become involved in the world of gambling in which the chance of winning gives rise to so many remarkable and thought-provoking events.

In sum, the chance of winning has profound psychological and cultural significance. The anticipation of winning is exciting and pleasant; winning may produce a primordial joyful feeling.

Players' motives and types of games

Individuals differ from each other in their motives for gambling, which are reflected in their choices of games. As argued above, some people have no other motive for gambling than hoping to win millions that will transform their lives; consequently, they enter the lotteries and do not participate in any other form of gambling. For other people, the social dimension of gambling is important, so they prefer games with considerable social interaction. Those who seek intellectual stimulation prefer games where skill is considered to be important, such as horse betting and poker.

Bingo is an example of a game that allows players to relax and at the same time get some excitement.

What motivates some individuals to play may deter others. Some people do not like the social interaction of some games (e.g. competing with others at a poker table), do not wish to spend intellectual energy on betting, or feel uncomfortable with the mood change induced by certain games.

A current trend in the gambling industry is that players are given more and more opportunities to customize games to fit their personal preferences by adjusting the weights of motivational components and specific game features. Let us take the Swedish horse pool game V75 as an example. This is one of the biggest games in Sweden. About one million Swedes out of a population of nine million play the trotting pools every week. The V75 is played each Saturday and the task is to select the winning horse in seven trotting races. Typically, players use permutation systems to select multiple horses in some of the races. For example, betting SEK 100 (EUR 11 or USD 15) allows 200 permutations. A win may be as small as SEK 10 (EUR 1.1 or USD 1.5), while a double rollover jackpot win reaches approximately SEK 50 million (EUR 5.7 million or USD 7.8 million).

As in all other forms of gambling, the chance of winning is at the core of the V75 trotting game. The dream of hitting the jackpot is also present, since it is possible to bet a small sum and win tens of millions. The intellectual challenge is important to many players, who study racing forms and statistics for hours before creating their permutation betting systems and filling out their coupons. However, for those who find this intellectual work too demanding, there is the possibility of buying an already filled-out ticket – a ‘quick pick’ bet – which turns the game into a lottery. For some gamblers, there is a social motive. They play together with their work-mates or meet friends and acquaintances in the betting shop or at the trotting track; some are regulars at the tracks because the social world of trotting is such an important part of their lives. Others play alone. The mood-altering component is present in two ways. First, some people lose themselves in the task of studying racing forms and filling out betting coupons; second, if you are close to winning money, it is very exciting to watch the trotting races on television and especially at the track. In this very successful trotting pool game, all motivational dimensions are present and those that may deter some players (i.e. social interaction, intellectual challenge and mood change) are optional.

Offering games via the Internet removes much or all social interaction from some traditional forms of gambling, such as bingo and casino games, meaning that those who were formerly deterred by the social dimension of these games can nowadays play alone at home (Cotte & Latour, 2009; Wood, Williams, & Lawton, 2007). In Internet poker, the intellectual and competitive dimensions of live poker remain but the social context is basically limited to the opportunity to chat online with other players. Evidently, such radical changes to the motivational dimensions of games may recruit many new players.

Motivations of leisure and problem gamblers

The motivational model presented here bears some similarity to constellations of problem gambling factors identified in psychological research, such as the ‘four Es of problem gambling’, i.e. escape, esteem, excess and excitement (Rockloff & Dyer, 2006), and the three-dimensional Gambling Motives Questionnaire, including enhancement, coping and social motives (Stewart & Zack, 2008). Indeed, all the motivations of leisure gamblers are also present among problem gamblers, where they are amplified by biological, psychological, environmental and sociocultural factors.

As to the chance of winning, it is suggested that the dopamine system plays an important role in addictive behaviours, including pathological gambling (Goudriaan, et al., 2004; Meyer et al., 2004; Potenza, 2008; Zack, 2006). The exciting anticipation of winning is assumed to be at the core of the addictive process. This theory is consistent with the observation that there is a significant genetic influence on disordered gambling (Slutske, Zhu, Meier, & Martin, 2010). Operant conditioning, which, from a behaviourist perspective, is seen as contributing to pathological gambling on rapid and repetitive games, such as slot machines (Dickerson, Hinchy, Legg England, Fabre, & Cunningham, 1992), is a process that is assumed to rely heavily on the dopamine system (McClure, Laibson, Loewenstein, & Cohen, 2004). Some pathological gamblers describe the feeling of winning as comparable to a dope rush. A significant win early in one's gambling career is a risk factor for problem gambling (Turner, Littman Sharp, & Spence, 2002).

Cultural conceptions of the chances of winning include ideas about luck and destiny that may induce players to persist in gambling while disregarding the true statistical probabilities of games (Darke & Freedman, 1997; Wohl, Stewart, & Young, 2011). The joy of winning – with all of its positive psychological and cultural meanings – may be intensely attractive to people who feel that their lives are not very satisfying and have little hope for the future. Research demonstrates that problem gamblers, in contrast to non-problem gamblers, are more likely to be depressed, have other psychological problems, have been maltreated in childhood or have recently experienced a life crisis (Felsher, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2010; Kessler et al., 2008). The symbolic significance of gambling in the cultural and spiritual domains may provide motives for excessive play in individuals with certain psychic configurations (Currie, 2007; Nixon & Solowoniuk, 2005).

Some people gamble excessively because they have found that the mood-changing capacity of games can be used as a way to cope with dysphoric moods; the gambler may be driven by a strong need for excitement or use gambling to relax and escape from anxiety and stress (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998; Jacobs, 1986; Porter, Ungar, Frisch, & Chopra, 2004). Gambling for escape is particularly common in repetitive games, such as slot machines. The monotony of the game combines with its excitement, having the power to create a trance-like state in which the gambler detaches from time and space (Dow Schüll, 2002). As has been noted, escape into gambling is a continuum, extending 'from life enhancing to pathological and addictive' (Griffiths, 2003, p. 560). Mood change seems to be the motivational dimension most closely associated with problem gambling.

The social dimension of gambling may make the difference between moderate and excessive gambling for people who feel marginalized in mainstream society but perceive that they have an identity and an important social position in gambling environments, such as a casino or race track (Ocean, 1996; Rosecrance, 1985). An individual who feels small and worthless in the real world may feel like someone to be reckoned with among fellow gamblers. As suggested above, a desire to engage in competitive gambling may be motivated by a desire to enhance one's self-esteem; indeed, a Canadian study found that the biggest difference between problem and non-problem gamblers, with respect to the feelings aroused by winning, was the effect on self-esteem (Turner et al., 2002, p. 28).

The intellectual challenge of games can become a source of problem gambling if the player fails to distinguish between skill and chance in games (Wohl et al., 2011). Players may attribute wins to their own skill and losses to bad luck or accidental circumstances (Gilovich, 1983), even though in reality winning and losing are determined mostly by chance. The player thereby gains a false sense of control over

the game. The player may also interpret and accept huge losses as lessons that have to be learnt in the pursuit of mastering the game and finally making money from it. Such thinking may be very persistent despite the fact that only very few players in a few kinds of games (primarily poker and sports and horse betting) will ever be skilled and well informed enough to make money gambling.

As mentioned, the dream of hitting the jackpot and transforming one's life is characteristic of lotteries, which are generally not closely associated with excessive gambling (Binde, 2011c). Nevertheless, slot machines in casinos may offer progressive multimillion jackpots, horse and sports pools games may have huge top prizes, and other types of non-lottery games also offer the possibility of winning millions. The problem gambler may be attracted by this, especially when he or she is already trapped in a downward spiral of increasing debts – the big win may emerge as the only solution. In that case, hitting the jackpot is not a pleasant dream of a new and better life, but a desperate hope to put things right and return to life as it was before the gambling problems began.

Thus, the motivations of leisure gambling recur in excessive gambling and are amplified by individual biological and psychological vulnerabilities, irrational cognitions, factors in the interpersonal domain and by particular social and cultural contexts of gambling. It can also be expected that multiple motivations increase the risk of gambling at problematic levels. However, problem and pathological gambling often involve a behaviour not explicitly included in the model presented here – chasing losses – which some researchers consider to be at the core of problem gambling (Breen & Zuckerman, 1999; Lesieur, 1984).

Limitations and future directions

The model presented here applies to activities in which gambling is central. Gambling may be a peripheral part of other activities that have their own specific motivations. For example, people may wish to support a local sport club and therefore buy tickets in the club's lottery when they are approached by a vendor. An intention to support good causes may be a motive for entering charity lotteries, and that does not fit into the model. However, if the ticket buyer does not otherwise enter lotteries, then it is primarily a matter of charity and not of gambling; if the buyer wishes to buy a lottery ticket and chooses to enter a charity lottery, then the main motivation is relating to gambling and not to charity.

The model is limited to leisure gambling in modern western societies. It does not say anything about how common various motives are among consumers of gambling services, which is an empirical question and may vary between nations and groups of consumers. The model does not fully apply to professional gamblers, who gamble because it is their way of earning money. Motives for gambling in non-western societies may differ from those in western societies: for example, gambling may be part of religious celebrations or systems for exchanging valuables (Binde, 2005b, 2007a). The model does not answer the question of why some people do not gamble. The reasons for not gambling may be ideological, sociocultural or simply a preference for other leisure activities.

The discussion of how the motivations of leisure gamblers recur in problem gamblers is preliminary. The biological, psychological, environmental, social and cultural factors that amplify the motivations need to be systematically and comprehensively accounted for, which could be done in an involvement model of gambling and problem gambling. Such a model would have the potential to be especially useful in meeting the challenge of regulators, public health agencies, and gambling companies alike: to minimize the harms that problem gambling cause to individuals and society while allowing the leisure gambler to enjoy gambling at a reasonable level.

Conclusion

Superficially, the motive for gambling may appear to be a wish to make money. Since most of those who play at commercial games in the long run are bound to lose rather than earn money, gambling can be seen as irrational, as something that should be explained in terms of cognitive distortions, foolish greed or commercial indoctrination. It is argued here, however, that beneath the surface, gambling is about many other things than purely money. That players lose money can be seen as the price they pay for enjoying these other things; in economic terms, players derive process utility from gambling (Marfels, 2001). Five main motivations appear to underlie leisure gambling: the dream of hitting the jackpot, social rewards, intellectual challenge, mood change, and the chance of winning viewed as a psychobiological and cultural entity.

The model of leisure gambling presented here provides a comprehensive understanding of why people gamble in contemporary western societies. It sums up the wide variety of motives individuals have for gambling, makes it possible to understand the specific appeal of gambling relative to other leisure activities, and also helps us understand problem gambling. Gambling taps into human biopsychology, easily evokes powerful psychological processes, and connects with profound cultural meanings.

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Notes on contributor

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Addendum to the post-print version

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