

Gambling – no ordinary commodity

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journals.sagepub.com/home/nad**Matilda Hellman** 

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Gambling is no ordinary commodity. As a phenomenon it is fabricated and learned socially and culturally. In order to spend money on a game, humans must not only learn the logic of the game (“four cherries in a row are worth more than three hats”) but they must also be internalised in a (il)logical bundle of justifications in terms of the value of doing so (“it is fun”; “I will become rich”, or “If I play enough times, the likelihood of winning increases”). In this issue of *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* the latter circumstance of a cultural internalisation is demonstrated by Egerer and Marionneau’s (2019) article on cultures and the convenience of gambling among Finnish and French gamblers. Their study shows that the activity has a different cultural position in the two countries: the internalising into gambling belongs in Finland to the sphere of everyday life, but in France it is connected with the peculiarities of the casino environment (see also Marionneau, 2015). This makes gambling such an intriguing case for cultural studies.

In many countries, lottery games and other gambling activities were first provided and handled by civil society associations in order

to collect incomes for their work. This is indeed a practical way of generating money: readers are likely, for example, to be familiar with school events where there is a lottery, and the revenues go to a school trip or some other venture that supports the children’s school atmosphere or educational path.

When a need arose by jurisdictions to regulate gambling more thoroughly, it was primarily for fiscal reasons (Sulkunen et al., 2018). In addition, there were a string of issues attached to this question of regulation: who was to gain revenues from gambling and how much; who was allowed to play; and where should the gambling activities take place? The bigger the gambling industry grew, the more questions followed – and appeared to have been overlooked historically.

Now that the global gambling market is worth almost 500 billion USD gross yield (Statista, 2018), there is a great societal demand for making gambling policy a more integrated object of sociological, social political, and political science research. This thematic issue of *NAD* tries to answer this need by filling a small part of the gap in the Nordic literature.

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Habits and adherent harms

Not only is gambling an activity that makes people lose a lot of money, but it also harms the wellbeing of the gamblers and their next of kin and has been shown to involve several types of stratifying effects (Oksanen, Sirola, Savolainen, & Kaakinen, 2019). Gambling-related harm disadvantageously affects the socioeconomically weak in particular, and in the study by Latvala, Alho, Raisamo, and Salonen (2019) people who perform less well at school measured in register data's Grade Point Average (GPA) are shown to be more likely to gamble more frequently and to prefer certain kinds of games.

The ways in which gambling activity levels and harms materialise in different populations become more complicated when studied in different age cohorts taking other behaviours into consideration. The study by Svensson and Sundqvist (2019) on gambling habits among students aged 15 and 17 years in Sweden shows that some types of alcohol and drug use are associated with less gambling. There were no school-related factors that showed associations with gambling except skipping classes among 11th graders, which was associated with less frequent gambling. The ways in which gambling is associated with alcohol and drug use can vary with age. In this study there were no great associations in the 15 and 17 years age groups.

Measuring gambling activities and associated harms through surveys that provide a choice of answers for their participants can involve some questions of validity. This is demonstrated in an inquiry into gamblers' interpretations of the questions posed in the screening instrument for the Problem Gambling Severity Index (Samuelsson, Wennberg, & Sundqvist, 2019). Ambiguous answers resulted from misinterpretations, recall bias, language difficulties, selective memory, and a tendency to only answer one part of a question. There are different ways ahead when such problems arise. A necessary one is to drill deeper into the art of making surveys and

questionnaires comprehensible and applicable to different kinds of populations.

Regulation

What scientific concepts can we use for understanding harm caused by gambling on a societal level over time and in relation to different interventions? In her study, Rossow (2019) turns to an alcohol research field classic: the total consumption model (TCM). In this, there is a strong association between the total consumption and the prevalence of excessive/harmful consumption in a population. This model, which has not to the same extent been trialled for gambling before, is investigated on the basis of 12 empirical studies. All but one of these studies found empirical support for the TCM. Rossow's conclusion is therefore credible: even if the literature that lends empirical support to the TCM is small, it is consistent.

The value of this result cannot be stressed enough, especially when we get into the area of regulation. Gambling operators have long stressed the importance of their own self-regulation in terms of so-called responsible gambling (RG). The value of RG is highly contested. Forsström and Cisneros Örnberg (2019) compare the two kinds of gambling markets operators in Sweden – licensed companies and non-Swedish based companies that sell their products online. Their study shows how the RG concept relies on certain constructs of problem gambling and that companies in both categories seemed to believe that provision of RG instruments on their websites was sufficient for preventing harmful gambling. While Sweden is now going through the great transformation of introducing a licence model for their gambling market regulation system, Nikkinen (2019) suggests a bolder alternative, namely the licensing of individual gamblers. He shows the ways in which such a system would include some benefits such as the possibility of educating customers of the odds of winning and the risks of harms before the gambling activity takes place. That licences would only be issued to adults

would also reduce the need for age verification on-site.

It is with great pride that *NAD* publishes this issue with so many interesting studies of high standard. And the Nordic research is likely to increase in quality and strength in the years to come: the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils in the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NOS-HS) announced in December 2018 that it will support a Nordic cooperation network in the field of gambling studies.


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