

GAMBLING PSYCHOLOGY: MOTIVATION, EMOTION AND CONTROL

BY MARK GRIFFITHS

Motivations and influences that govern players' gambling interests are more complex than often suggested, arising as they do in a wide range of circumstances with often distinctly different consequences. An insight into the nature of player activity, the emotional effects, impact on rational decision-making and an understanding of gambling purpose varies from player to player. Here, on a personal and professional level, some of these factors are explored.



In the 20 years that I have been studying gambling, the question that I am most asked is 'Why do people gamble?' and variations on it, such as 'Why do people gamble when most people consistently lose?' All surveys of gambling have shown that there are a broad range of motivational factors that are central to gambling, and that attitudes towards gambling are positively related to availability and cultural acceptability (Griffiths, 2006).

However, this perspective fails to take into account many key findings and observations in gambling research. Surveys have also shown that not everyone gambles and some people gamble more than others (e.g., professional gamblers, problem gamblers). Research has consistently shown that people often gamble for reasons other than broad social and economic reasons.

These other motivations may vary according to personal characteristics of the gambler and the type of gambling activity. Additionally, broad social and economic theories fail to explain why certain gambling activities are more popular or 'addictive' than others (Griffiths, 2006).

GAMBLING MOTIVATION

Variations in gambling preferences are thought to result from both differences in accessibility and motivation. Older people tend to choose activities that minimise the need for complex decision-making or concentration (e.g., bingo, slot machines), whereas gender differences have been attributed to a number of factors, including variations in sex-role socialisation, cultural differences and theories of motivation (Griffiths, 2006).

Stereotypically, women tend to prefer chance-based games and men tend to prefer skill-based games. Even some games that are predominantly chance-based, men attempt to

impose some level of skill. For instance, poker -- which people regard as skill-based -- has a massive amount of luck involved.

Similarly, men often, in their own minds, change playing a slot machine from a chance-based event into a more skill-based activity via cognitive processes such as the illusion of control. The other factor to consider is that (in general) women don't like it when other people see them losing. On a slot machine, no-one sees the player is losing so it's very often a very guilt free, private experience. Men, on the other hand, even when they lose big, there's a machismo attached to it that says: "Yes, I've lost £500 but I can afford it."

Variations in motivation are also frequently observed among people who participate in the same gambling activity. For example, slot machine players may gamble to win money, for enjoyment and excitement, to socialise and to escape negative feelings (Griffiths, 2002). Some people gamble for one reason only, whereas others gamble for a variety of reasons. A further complexity is that people's motivations for gambling have a strong temporal dimension; that is, they do not remain stable over time.

As people progress from social to regular and finally to excessive gambling, there are often significant changes in their reasons for gambling. Whereas a person might have initially gambled to obtain enjoyment, excitement and socialisation, the progression to problem gambling is almost always accompanied by an increased preoccupation with winning money and chasing losses (Griffiths, 2006).

Gambling is clearly a multifaceted rather than unitary phenomenon. Consequently, many factors may come into play in various ways and at different levels of analysis (e.g., biological, social or psychological). Theories may be complementary rather than mutually exclusive, which

suggests that limitations of individual theories might be overcome through the combination of ideas from different perspectives. This has often been discussed before in terms of recommendations for an 'eclectic' approach to gambling or a distinction between proximal and distal influences upon gambling. However, for the most part, such discussions have been descriptive rather than analytical, and so far, few attempts have been made to explain why an adherence to singular perspectives is untenable (Griffiths & Larkin, 2004; Griffiths, 2005a).

GAMBLING PSYCHOLOGY

Gambling is one of those activities where people effectively can get something for nothing, which is why some people will take risks. The attraction of a lottery for example is that, for a very small stake, the punter can have a life-changing experience (and things are further complicated by the fact that most lottery players don't see the activity as gambling) (Griffiths & Wood, 2001). People who enjoy playing roulette or betting on a football match enjoy the betting or gaming experience itself. In short, each gambling activity has its own unique psychology (although there are undoubted overlaps).

Most economists claim that gamblers are primarily driven by the profit motive. However, the psychological evidence is overwhelming that other desires affect gambling actions. Put simply, for most gamblers, our actions contradict the desire to maximise profits. Whilst I am no Freudian, there appear to be a whole range of unconscious factors at play in gambling situations (Griffiths & Delfabbro, 2001).

For instance, if players make a successful bluff during a card game, it's human nature to want to let people to know how smart they are. The golden rule in poker is never to give anything away, but the human psyche works in such a way



that we usually want to show off once in a while. Our psychological make up also means that we let pride get in the way of minimising losses. There are always games that should have been avoided but players end up staying in them long after they knew it was a mistake. None of us like to lose to who we think are weaker players, or admit that the game was too hard. How many times does a player continue playing because they want to try and get the better of a great player or show off because there is someone they are trying to impress? Although it's a cliché, pride before a fall is commonplace. These short-term psychological satisfactions will almost always have a negative impact on long-term profits.

Because there are many non-financial types of rewards from many different sources while gambling (Griffiths, 1999), some people view losses as the price of entry. To these players (and I include myself as one of them), winning may be a bonus. However, most of us don't like losing – and we especially don't like persistent losing, regardless of whether there are other types of reinforcement. In the cold light of day, we are all rational human beings. In the height of action, rationality often goes out the window. I've done it myself at the roulette table and standing in front of a slot machine. While gambling I have felt omnipotent. It is only after I walk away penniless that the non-financial rewards are short-term and not worth it (Griffiths, 1990).

INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

Understanding our own psychological motives is clearly important while gambling. Most players know the strategies they should be adopting but fail to apply them in real gambling situations. Players do not lack the information. It is far more profitable to learn why we don't apply the lessons we have already learned, then ensure that we apply them. Until we understand and control our own motives — including the unconscious ones — we cannot possibly play to our best ability.

Despite studying problem gambling, I am most definitely not anti-gambling. I'm pro-responsible gambling. To be anti-gambling would be hypocritical as I'm an occasional gambler myself and in the small minority of players who regularly go to the casino. I enjoy playing roulette. I used to call it 'research' but now play for pleasure.

I personally see gambling as buying entertainment. When I go to the casinos in my home town, I'll have a cordon bleu meal, a drink and spend my twenty or thirty pounds that I have put aside to play. When I go in at 6pm and leave at 11.30pm, I know that the amount of money I have spent equates to a good value leisure experience. It is the same as going to a football match or a rock concert. When individuals start gambling to win money, and that is their only objective, that is when problems can start. That's when a proportion of vulnerable people can get into difficulty.

WINNING PSYCHOLOGY

As an academic who studies the psychology of gambling, I expect to lose in the long run. However, that is not to say that I don't have a set of rules that I apply in gambling situations (see Griffiths, 2005b). Some might say my rules are about the psychology of winning but I would prefer to describe them as the psychology of minimising losses! In some situations, there is a very fine line between psychology and common sense. In short:

1. I never gamble without some kind of pre set plan. Winning gamblers set themselves win/loss goals before they enter a betting shop or casino. Only foolish gamblers play hand after hand or bet upon bet without direction. Planning and goals are the catalyst to life success and gambling is no different.
2. I never let the excitement of a gambling environment detract from the pre-set plan I entered with. For instance, when I am in a casino, I remember that the alcohol, the music, and the attractive women are there for a reason. They are there to make me spend more money. I only do what I planned to do and I don't get side tracked.
3. I always remember that the excitement of gambling itself can lead to irrational thought processes. Psychological research has consistently shown that when gamblers are in the thick of their gambling 'action', they tend to be more irrational in how they think. Irrationality leads to poor decision-making and pre-set plans often go out of the window. Just like alcohol, gambling can make the player do things that they would never have done in the cold light of day.
4. I am never tempted to use in-house cash machines and ATMs. Although they provide an ultra-convenient way to get more cash, they are there – in general – for one purpose. To entice those who are gambling not to stop or go home when they have run out of money that they walked in with. By walking out of the casino to get more money, there is more of a chance that I will have time to reflect during this 'cooling off' period and not return. The psychology of casino management is to keep punters in there as long as possible. When it comes to in-house cash machines, I'm invariably paying over the odds to get the money out in the first place. I always find it sad to see the desperation on some gambler's faces as they are waiting in line to get some money out.
5. I always make sure that I have the proper bankroll for the strategy and denominations that I intend to gamble with. The general rule that seems to do the rounds on most reputable websites and advice books is to take at least three times 400 credits of the highest denomination you are going to gamble with. There are obviously variations to this rule depending on the strategy you employ, but by and large this is the rule.
6. I only stay at the same betting shop, gaming table or slot machine for a pre-set amount of time. I always move onto another area or establishment if I feel physically or psychologically uncomfortable. This gives me a 'cooling off' period. If possible (and I am the first to admit it's not always), I try to spread my gambling around. In most big towns and cities there are numerous gambling establishments. In my research experience, those gamblers who sit at the same tables or machines for hours and hours are often miserable and unsatisfied gamblers. They are playing *with* money rather than for it.
7. Where possible, I ignore promotions. As a general rule, gambling promotions are the highest money earners for the gambling establishment's marketing department. They are designed to get me in the gaming establishment or to get me gambling on something new. I avoid gambling with offers that seem too good to be true. They usually are!
8. I gamble at the establishment of my choosing and not

where someone else advises me to gamble. This is all part of sticking to my pre-set plan and not letting others influence my gambling behaviour.

9. I have learned to think for myself. General advice is one thing. Winners learn to sort things out for themselves and not rely on others. They are comfortable with how they approach their gambling. I also disregard rumours. Gambling can often invoke certain urban myths, such as "your first bet after opening an Internet gambling account is always a winning one". Banking on such speculation while gambling is a recipe for disaster. Only factual information is used to inform my decision-making.
10. Finally, I do my own 'research'. As with any other product that involves the exchange of money, a gambler needs to do research to establish the best deals around. This is especially useful on Internet gambling sites but can be applied to offline gambling too.

CONTROL PSYCHOLOGY

One of the most psychologically interesting questions concerning gambling is 'Why do so many people play so badly?' It's clear that most players know better, but they appear to make the same mistakes repeatedly. Take poker as an example. Given the hundreds of thousands of poker strategy books that are sold every year, we can only reach the conclusion that just a small percentage of poker players apply the skills they have read about.

My hunch is that most people understand what they have read but when it comes to playing a competitive hand it's simply more 'fun' to play badly than to play well. I'm not saying losing is more fun than winning (because quite clearly it isn't), but the pursuit of profit maximisation forces players to do things they don't like doing. On a psychological level, maximising profit makes extreme demands. Therefore, only a few, extraordinarily disciplined people play their best game most of the time – and nobody always plays it.

At a fundamental level, what separates good (professional) gamblers and novice or problem gamblers is the factor of self-control. The general rule of thumb for players is to avoid becoming emotionally involved in the game. Inducing emotional (rather than logical) reactions from gamblers is what makes the gambling industry so profitable. By remaining unemotional, players can protect themselves from recklessly chasing losses and avoid going on 'tilt'. Online gamblers are particularly at risk from engaging in chasing losses for the simple reason that they have 24-hour access from and are constantly subjected to temptation. Furthermore, they often lack a 'social safety net' to give objective appraisals.

There are ways to avoid becoming emotionally engaged. These include reflective 'time outs' and having an objective attribution of outcomes. Reflective time-outs equates to playing slowly, making gambling decisions with accrued knowledge (i.e., knowledge of probability and of opponents). It is advisable after a 'bad beat' for players to be disciplined enough to sit out one or two hands to regain composure before playing again. Extending the concept further it is probably wise after a particularly ineffectual session to sustain play for an elongated time-out. Reckless and unintelligent play from knowledgeable players emerges from not being able to deal with frustration appropriately.

Determining objective attributions of outcomes involves

the player having an external locus of control when assessing the cards they have, and an internal locus of control regarding what the player does with the cards available to them. The mantra of poker players is that 'You can only play the hand you were dealt'. All players will experience streaks of desirable and poor hands, and it is how the player responds to these streaks that will determine their success. It is very easy for players to become frustrated while in a negative streak. It is also easy in a positive streak to become narcissistic and complacent. It is the knowledgeable player that understands probability and who realises that over a continuous playing period that streaks (both positive and negative) are inevitable and transient.

USING PSYCHOLOGY

I have to admit that I am not a good poker player. However, if I was, I would certainly try to use the psychology of non-verbal communication to my advantage. Back in 2003, Peter Collett published a book on the psychology of 'tells' (Collett, 2003). Professor Collett deliberately lifted the core topic of his book from the non-verbal world of poker players. A 'tell' is basically an action that reveals what a person is thinking and are often so tiny that they may not even be noticed. In poker, many players try to infer what kind of hand a person has by looking at the way the card player holds their cards, gazes at the chips or scratches their face.

Tells can be both conscious and unconscious. Collett spent time studying politicians and has highlighted the 'tells of power' such as the way George W. Bush bites the inside of his cheek when he is highly nervous or anxious, and Bill Clinton's tendency to bite his lower lip as a way of demonstrating his sincerity. Most of these behaviours are intended to be hidden, but are what we psychologists call 'emotional leakage'. Many psychologists have carried out research into non-verbal communication. However, as soon as a non-verbal 'rule of thumb' is well known by the general public, the knowledge can be used to their advantage.

When it comes to playing poker (or any card game of skill for that matter), an already skilful player will have the upper hand if they can learn to read the non-verbal cues of the other players. One of the problems is that most 'tells' differ from person to person. The trick is to try and memorise what the person did at a particular point such as the way they act when they raise the amount of money being staked, or the behaviour they display just before they are about to fold.

Unconscious tells are linked to negative emotions such as anxiety. If a player has been dealt a bad hand, naive players are likely to show their psychological discomfort through nervous reactions such as unconscious leg or finger tapping. Serious poker players will already know all about tells and will usually have learned to develop their own type of 'poker face' to bluff opponents.

This is all part of the psychological battle in playing most card games of skill. There are also what have been described as 'transition tells' where people display common but repetitive behavioural patterns in times of uncertainty and/or where people cross psychological boundaries. Collett (2003) provides the examples of politicians such as Gordon Brown who plays with his shirt cuffs and strokes his hair. Obviously, with so much television footage, psychologists have a much easier time in trying to analyse the unconscious everyday tells of those in the public eye.

Playing cards with someone you've only met a few times

where there is no opportunity to replay the event over and over is clearly much harder! But some good poker players do appear to have the ability to read other players and it is this ability that can separate the very good poker player from the great.

Players can also learn to use false tells as a way of bluffing their opponent. The most common that Collett (2003) has described is the 'power tell' which is often used by political leaders in some of their actions (such as the way they walk). Just like at the way George W. Bush walks next time you see him on television. His arm swing and swagger. His shoulders are very exaggerated. He is trying to show the public that he is the leader of the Western world and what a powerful position he is in.

In a game of cards, poker players will also try to assert their dominance by using more subtle 'power tells' by smoking a cigar in a particular way or showing off when shuffling the cards before dealing. The whole point of power tells is to look sincere and dominant and they can be used in a wide variety of contexts including poker. In essence, power tells are about 'one-upmanship' and this is the bedrock of most skill-based card games.

Even the language of power tells is lifted from the gambling world. In everyday human behaviour, Collett describes power tells as behavioural actions which "raise the stakes" and allow people to metaphorically or symbolically "put their cards on the table". While power tells are usually conscious and deliberate, most non-verbal human behaviour is totally unconscious and the vast majority of people can't help but show their inner thinking through actions such as folding their arms.

The whole area of non-verbal communication is a fascinating area of psychological study. Human behaviour is complex and there are too many individual differences to predict what any given person will do in a given situation (such as playing poker). However, by learning to understand what all these unconscious movements mean, we can start to gain access to the window of the gambler's mind.

HEDGING ONE'S BETS

When I started researching in gambling in October 1987, I remember being asked by my supervisors how I was going to do research in the area. I also remember one of my supervisors jokingly saying to me "The best way you could study the problem is to become a gambler yourself!" To some extent I took this throwaway comment on board and did start gambling during my PhD (even though at the time I called it 'research').


Rather than become a compulsive gambler I became a compulsive "gambler watcher"! I find it hard to go into a pub, wait in a chip shop queue, or walk past amusement arcades without watching the players(s) at the slot machines. Gambling has become an important part of my life (both personal and professional). My favourite strategy in gambling involves sports betting. When it comes to gambling on sports matches I try to employ strategies that leave me feeling good whatever the outcome. That is why (from a psychological perspective) I tend to bet against my own team. My logic has always been that I win either way. If my team wins I am on a high. If my team loses I at least have the winnings to soften the blow of my team losing. Before the 2003 Rugby World Cup Final I put £50 on Australia to beat England. Best £50 I ever lost! **CGI**

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