

Gambling Motives, Cognitions, and Personality of Frequent Electronic Gambling Machine Players

Summary Report for the Manitoba Gambling Research Program

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Significance

Most people who gamble do so without significant harm to themselves or others, but there is also an important minority of problem gamblers who may experience considerable distress and impairment from their excessive gambling. There is growing evidence that problem gamblers differ from nonproblem gamblers in several important ways. Problem gamblers are much more likely than nonproblem gamblers to hold beliefs about the games they play that are unrealistic and superstitious. Problem gamblers are also more likely than nonproblem gamblers to play as a temporary way to escape their concerns, as well as having fun and socializing. There are also important differences in personality, with problem gamblers being more impulsive and having higher scores on as Neuroticism (a tendency to be emotionally variable, pessimistic, and anxious or fearful) and lower scores on Conscientiousness (a tendency to show poor self control and persistence). These findings in the published research literature give interesting insights into the thinking, motivation, and character of problem gamblers. This study integrated these findings into a model of problem gambling among people who play Electronic Gambling Machines (EGMs) often.

Research Questions

The major focus of the study was on how some stable personality traits may increase the likelihood of distorted thinking about EGM gambling, how they may contribute to having unusual motivations to gamble, and how these motives and beliefs may in turn increase problem gambling behavior.

Methodology

To examine relationships among these cognitive, motivational, and personality variables, we obtained a sample of 273 people from Brandon, Manitoba who said that they play Electronic Gambling Machines at least twice a month. They completed an anonymous set of standardized questionnaires that have been used in published research to measure gamblers' thoughts, motives and personality. They also completed the problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), which is a questionnaire used to assess prevalence of problem gambling symptoms. We used a statistical method known as 'mediation analysis' to test how well scores on the PGSI could be explained by people's scores on the measures of gambling motives, thoughts and personality.

Key Findings

We found that individuals' PGSI scores could be predicted from their scores on escapist motivation to gamble, their distorted beliefs about gambling, and three personality traits. These traits were high Neuroticism, low Conscientiousness, and low Extraversion (indicating a tendency to avoid other people and to be unhappy). We also found that the reason why people with high Neuroticism tended to have higher PGSI scores was because they tended to have more distorted beliefs about their gambling. One reason for this finding might be that these emotionally variable and anxious people are powerfully affected when they face the inevitable disappointment that comes from losing money at gambling. Cognitive distortions may emerge out of their vain attempts to attribute the unpleasant outcomes to understandable mechanisms, yet these unrealistic beliefs sustain continued gambling. We also found that the reason why people with low Conscientiousness tended to have high PGSI scores was because they tended to gamble as a means of escaping unpleasant moods. One reason for this finding might be that these people lack the self-management skills to handle negative emotional states by proactively facing their problems. Instead they turn to gambling much like some people turn to drugs and alcohol to escape.

Conclusions

The results of this study advance current understanding of problem gambling by integrating current knowledge of gambling beliefs, motives, and players' personality into a unified model. It explains why some people have personality features that make them more prone to problem gambling than most people. More importantly, it suggests the mechanisms of cognitive distortion and motivation through which the personality traits have their effects on problem gambling behavior. These conclusions are exciting, but we caution that they are made on the basis of an anonymous self-report survey in a sample that may or may not represent the wider population of gamblers accurately. In future research, we would like to test these ideas again using a different sample of players and with different questionnaires. We expect to find that these results are reliable and give us a more clear picture of the links between personality, motives and distorted beliefs in the course of problem gambling.



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