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Title: On gambling research, social science, and the consequences of commercial gambling

Abstract: Social, political, economic, geographic and cultural processes related to the significant growth of the gambling industries have, in recent years, been the subject of a growing body of research. This body of research has highlighted relationships between social class and gambling expenditure, as well as the design, marketing and location of gambling products and businesses. It has also demonstrated the regressive nature of much gambling revenue, illuminating the influence that large gambling businesses have had on government policy and on researchers, including research priorities, agendas, and outcomes. Recently, critics have contended that although such scholarship has produced important insights about the operations and effects of gambling businesses, it is ideologically motivated and lacks scientific rigour. This response explains some basic theoretical and disciplinary concepts that such critique misunderstands, and argues for the value of social, political economic, geographic and cultural perspectives to the broader, interdisciplinary field of gambling research.

Introduction

Delfabbro & King (2017), in their paper 'Gambling is not a capitalist conspiracy', present a critique of the body of gambling research produced by a number of scholars who write from sociological, geographic or political economy perspectives (i.e. Adams, 2013; Livingstone, 2001; Livingstone, 2005; Livingstone & Adams, 2011; Markham & Young, 2015; Reith, 2007, 2013; Young, 2010). In this paper we problematise the fundamental premise of this critique: namely, that a class-based organisation of gambling provision requires a conspiracy of gambling proprietors. We show that the arguments proposed by Delfabbro & King (2007) are based on a misunderstanding of how class processes - the set of social, economic and political processes that either create, or are articulated through, groups of people defined by their relative economic and social position – actually operate in society. We commence with a discussion of the empirical evidence regarding the socio-spatial distribution of gambling outcomes, providing a general account of how class-processes operate within capitalist economies and a specific account of how they operate in the gambling economy. We then discuss the role and agency of gamblers within this broader social formation. Finally, we explain how researchers may play a role in the production of gambling harm, before concluding with a discussion of the limitations and possible futures of interdisciplinary gambling studies.

On the relationship between social disadvantage and gambling outcomes

There is no doubt that a connection exists between the relative socio-economic disadvantage of neighbourhoods (that is, their relative position in the social gradient) and the spatial distribution of electronic gaming machines (EGMs) and gambling expenditure (Rintoul, Livingstone, Mellor, & Jolley, 2013, Doran & Young, 2010; Livingstone, 2001; Marshall & Baker, 2001, 2002). In their summary review of this research, Delfabbro & King (2017) agree in general with findings that EGMs and EGM expenditure are concentrated in areas of relative socio-economic disadvantage. Nonetheless, on p.6 they suggest that this patterning can be challenged by data from population prevalence surveys which show that some middle-class groups tend to spend more than the poorest.

This is an empirical question that may be worthy of investigation. If the association between disadvantage and gambling were a strong and consistent one, it would appear in geographically-coded administrative data as well as in gambling prevalence surveys. Yet this correlation is absent. There are three possible explanations for the disparity between collective spatial data and individual survey data. First, it is possible that the spatial data on EGM location and expenditure are biased. However, because these data are derived from complete and authoritative licensing databases, with

expenditure figures generally extracted from centralised monitoring systems, we conclude that this is unlikely. Administrative data clearly provide the most reliable source of information on gambling expenditure currently available, with the only plausible threats to its validity being biases related to temporary mobility, fraud or money-laundering. Second, it is possible that the collective spatial patterns of gambling expenditure derive from a group of middle-income earners who live in poorer areas and lose a disproportionate amount, a possible example of the ecological fallacy. Third, there are reasons to doubt the results of prevalence studies as far as geographic associations go. Because prevalence studies are generally not designed to adequately sample geographic areas, they are generally inadequately powered to capture demographic patterns between or within small areas. Thus, they are limited in their ability to attribute expenditure to particular locations. Moreover, they usually run via telephone surveys and are likely to be systematically biased by undersampling both people who live in poorer areas and marginalised subpopulations. This bias is likely to contribute to the mismatch between the spatial patterns of gambling expenditure and survey results. Where complete and authoritative administrative data and potentially biased survey data disagree, it's reasonable to accord greater credence to the validity of administrative data.

On Marxist rhetoric

However, debates over the validity of prevalence survey results are not the key issue at stake for Delfabbro & King (2017). The central concern of their paper is the interpretation of the *causes* of observed socio-spatial patterns. The argument adopted is that spatial patterns in gambling provision and behaviour may be explained entirely by processes operating at the individual level, as the result of autonomous choices made by individual gamblers and individual gambling proprietors. The role of class processes in the creation of these patterns is not so much ignored, as reified into an imaginary cartel of pernicious state actors and gambling proprietors. Delfabbro & King (2017: 7-9) thus address this 'class-exploitation conspiracy' by arguing that such an explanation is based on emotive, ideologically-laden hyperbole rather than careful science. This, they argue, produces an unhelpful, irrational and rhetorical argument that is at odds with evidence-based reasoning and, ultimately, damaging to gambling studies as a field of research. Examples cited include terminology such as 'big gambling', 'global economic project', and 'class-based exploitation'. The use of such terminology is seen as being 'akin to conspiracy theory logic'.

Delfabbro & King's (2017: 8) own use of terms such as 'Marxist' and 'conspiracy theory' to dismiss the work of certain scholars is itself 'inflated, leading and emotive', something attributed to those the subject of their critique. This is particularly so when the work critiqued is characterised as imagining a 'conspiracy enacted by a large and unified global gambling industry' - a construct that, it should be noted, never actually appears in the work of any of the researchers they criticise. Whether intended or not, such attempts to police the language and tenor of gambling scholarship by lobbying for the use of 'neutral terms' rather than 'inflated, leading and emotive language' serves to normalise the status quo, framing the scale of gambling harm in states like Australia (Browne et al 2016), the United Kingdom (Thorley et al 2016; Orford et al 2013), the United States (Welte et al 2002) and other places (Browne et al 2017; Salonen et al 2017) as natural and inevitable, rather than as the outcome of specific processes and actions that are ethically troubling. Researchers who prefer to gloss over these harms using 'neutral terms' are, we argue, remiss in their responsibility to serve the public interest.

On social and class processes in gambling outcomes

Lying behind the objection to the use of language lies a confusion about the role of class in society. Delfabbro & King (2017: 9), finding no evidence that gambling industry actors come together in an organized manner to actively strategise to target poor consumers or poor suburbs, discount the

importance of perspectives on social processes and structures in gambling research. This position, we argue, fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between individual actors (be those gambling capitalists, consumers, researchers, regulators) and systemic outcomes. The idea that groups of individuals can only exploit other groups of individuals when they do so in intentional and organised ways contradicts basic understandings of structures and processes in the social sciences. In any event, it constitutes a major category error, via the attribution of individual characteristics to systems or structures.

It is an elementary principle of sociology that individual actors, all acting separately and even selfishly or in competition, can produce unintended systemic effects or outcomes that benefit that group as a whole. Socioeconomic structures (i.e., competition in a semi-free-market, class and spatial distribution of demand, ownership of productive capacity in private hands) can be productive of social outcomes (e.g., class based patterning of gambling expenditure and harm) that may be independent of, or even contrary to, the intentions of individual actors (i.e. gamblers, capitalists and state actors). In the case of the gambling industries, the outcome has been the increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of large corporations and/or shareholders, and its ongoing diversion from modestly remunerated workers, or those who occupy more marginalised positions in society – the insecurely employed, welfare recipients, and those experiencing disability.

Again, this occurs without any sinister intent, or even organisation, communication or planning on the part of individual capitalists, apart from the rational desire to produce profits. This is not a ‘conspiracy’. It is the outcome of a social process (i.e. the provision of harmful gambling products in a semi-free market) within a social system structured by unequal socio-economic opportunities and reproduced by multiple institutions. This system benefits gambling proprietors at the expense of gamblers. The transfer of wealth from one class to another, based on the differential ownership of productive property, is part and parcel of contemporary capitalist society, as we will show.

[On capitalist economic structures and the systemic production of inequality](#)

The most famous explanation of the systemic effects of individual behaviour is provided by Adam Smith, whose *Wealth of Nations* was foundational in the formation of classical economics (Smith, 1776). Smith argued that a system in which individual capitalists are free to act independently and in their own self-interest (i.e. acting to maximise their profit) will lead to the efficient distribution of resources, maximising the benefit to society overall. Smith famously characterized the sum result of individual, self-interested decisions, unfettered by regulation, as the ‘invisible hand’ of the market. The key insight here is that the structure of capitalism produces particular social outcomes not because individual people conspire to engineer it (although some do), but because the actions of individuals occurs within social and economic structures that tend to consistently produce particular social outcomes at the aggregate level.

In this sense, individual capitalists are positioned in a manner that geographer David Harvey (2012) describes as autonomous and independent but ultimately subservient to market forces. For example, capitalists can only stay in business if they are making profits. If they pay higher wages than their competitors, or sell goods for lower prices than their competitors, then they are likely to go broke. Under competitive conditions, it is rational for a gambling proprietor to locate a venue in or near large markets, in areas with low real estate prices, or in areas where objections to the licensing of EGMs are unlikely to cause regulatory obstacles (i.e. those areas containing large numbers of working class gamblers) (see Francis, Livingstone, & Rintoul, 2017). Competitors will attempt to do the same. No ‘conspiracy’ is required: individual capitalists may or may not support overspending by the working classes – but regardless, the outcome will be a concentration of venues in working class suburbs (Marshall & Baker, 2001, 2002; Rintoul, Livingstone, Mellor, Jolley, 2013).

Individual gambling operators may be autonomous and independent and indeed in competition with one another, but ultimately they are *all* subservient to market forces, and this drives the technologically-based production of gambling along social and spatial lines.

Of course, free markets for gambling do not exist anywhere in the world and regulation is a matter of degree, as with many other products and services. State interventions to license and regulate gambling tend to ameliorate the concentration of gambling opportunities in poorer areas (e.g. through policies enforcing ‘unstimulated demand’ or ‘regional caps’), precisely because this would produce widespread and politically damaging social impacts if left to market forces alone. In contrast, and as has been shown particularly clearly in the UK debate over EGMs in betting shops, the state is also often unwilling to act to limit the supply of gambling where this can be presented as a threat to employment, or as the inappropriate restriction of consumer freedoms. These issues are further complicated where the state is a recipient of gambling revenues, and politicians are well aware of the political and lobbying power of the gambling industries (Panichi, 2013).

In the case of gambling, industry exercises influence through donations to political parties, outright political campaigning against those they see as threatening their revenue stream, making detailed submissions to inquiries and commissioning reports that support their contentions, developing close ties with government and regulators, moving state actors such as politicians into industry from government and bureaucracy, and lobbying against harm minimisation measures. (Adams, 2016). Consequently, the state is often paralysed to act against well-resourced corporations or lobby groups such as ClubsNSW (Panichi 2013) and Crown Resorts Corporation (e.g., Knight 2017) in Australia. All these actions are aimed, quite naturally, and without the need for a conspiracy of any kind, at maximising gambling revenue. In other words, extracting as much money as possible from gamblers. Of course, not all gamblers are working class or markedly disadvantaged. But EGMs in High Street betting shops, casinos, and pubs and clubs, generate the ‘grind’ income that forms the bulk of gambling profits (Queensland Government Statistician's Office, 2016; UK Gambling Commission, 2017).

On addiction as an outcome of Big Gambling

Gambling is a big business. For example, in Australia in 2014-15, total gambling expenditure was \$22.7 billion, or 2.5% of total consumer expenditure (Queensland Government Statistician's Office, 2016; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). This is more than consumer expenditure on tobacco (\$16.3 billion) and alcohol (\$15.7 billion), and comparable to total expenditure on pharmaceuticals and other medications (\$19.3 billion: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016). Clearly the gambling industries are of comparable scale to the tobacco and pharmaceutical industries, to which the adjective of ‘big’ is commonly applied. Thus, we strongly disagree with Delfabbro & King’s (2017) claim that ‘Big Gambling’ is a polemical fabrication.

The evidence overwhelmingly shows that the gambling industry has learned many lessons from ‘big tobacco’ and ‘big alcohol’ and uses very similar tactics to maximise its profits (Adams, 2013; Thomas, David, Randle, Daube, & Senior, 2015). The similarity is no coincidence. In the UK in 2011, for example, after three years as Communications Manager for the Tobacco Manufacturer’s Association, Dirk Vennix became Chief Executive of the Association of British Bookmakers. Vennix told an interviewer that, “the move was simple: the two industries share many of the same contacts within government, and both have the same challenge – ‘facing a deluge of regulatory and taxation measures’” (Welbirg, 2012, p. 18). In 2014, Chris Searle, former chairman of the Portman Group (the industry funded body which describes itself as ‘the responsibility body for drinks producers in the UK’), was invited to address the International Casino Exhibition, telling assembled executives that, ‘the gambling industry is 10 to 15 years behind the evolution of the drinks industry when it comes to

social responsibility aspects.’ Similar migration of ideas and business practices between Big Tobacco and Big Gambling has been documented in the United States. Schüll reports how the director of the gambling lobby gave a speech to a closed group of high-ranking industry executives in which “he urged his colleagues to avoid the mistakes made by their counterparts in the tobacco industry, reminding them of the infamous scene in which a panel of prominent tobacco executives raised their hands before a 1994 congressional committee to unanimously disavow any link between nicotine and addiction” (Schüll, 2012, pp. 260-261). By the mid-1990s, she observed, the gambling industry had grasped that a medical diagnosis linked to the excessive consumption of its product by some individuals could serve to deflect attention away from the product’s potentially problematic role in promoting that consumption.

As in the alcohol and tobacco industries (Babor 2010; Conway & Oreskes 2010), both great profits and great harm result from a structural economic imperative to design and market a product that is as profitable, and therefore as addictive, as possible (Schüll, 2012). This results in the concentration of expenditure and harm among a small number of consumers, with the estimated proportion of revenues sourced from people who experience significant harms estimated to be as high as 60% (Productivity Commission, 2010). Given such statistics, it is no exaggeration to argue that the ‘bigness’ of Big Gambling, or the extent of gambling expenditure, is dependent on the exploitation of addicted consumers. Such an observation does not constitute rhetoric or hyperbole, but is simply a restatement of the findings of widely-accepted epidemiological studies.

On gamblers as dupes of consumer culture

Delfabbro & King (2017: 9) also suggest that political economists and other social theorists may be guilty of a form of class prejudice or academic snobbery. Their argument is that these social theories do not grant sufficient agency to working class gamblers who choose to consume products such as gambling. Their article inaccurately asserts that critical scholars believe that gambling only takes hold because gamblers are overly ‘susceptible to marketing’ or are subject to some sort of ‘false consciousness’ (Delfabbro & King 2017: 10). To support this reading of the critical gambling studies literature, they quote Reith (2007: 51): ‘The possibility that individuals might choose to risk their money on something as insubstantial as the operation of chance seems a perversion of the very freedom of choice that liberal Western societies value so much’ (erroneously cited by Delfabbro & King as Reith, 2013). They miss the fact that Reith here is not criticising gamblers or gambling; on the contrary, she is arguing that the normative assumptions underlying the Western ideals of freedom and choice in the consumer marketplace themselves construct gambling as wasteful or irrational, especially when engaged in by poor people. Regrettably, her argument has been misread.

The more general concern with agency is a reasonable one, reflecting the long running philosophical and social theoretical tension between structure and agency or determinism and free will. However, we argue that Delfabbro & King’s (2017) conception of agency is overly simplistic. As the work of the authors they critique has unequivocally shown, any absolute idea of consumer sovereignty is difficult to sustain in the case of gambling harms, characterised as they are by the loss of control. Even in the case of gambling that does not lead to harm, an attribution of pristine, free agency ignores or dismisses the constraints under which *all* decisions, including those to gamble, or not, are made (Schor, 2007).

This position meets with some agreement from Delfabbro & King (2017: 12), although they utilise different language, suggesting that ‘[m]ost psychologists ... typically see the disorder as arising from the interaction of individual and external factors’. They defend a psychological model of individuals as relying ‘upon a series of heuristics and biases or cognitive short-cuts rather than a strict rational model’. We of course agree that gambling problems arise from the interaction of individuals and

their environments. What we question here is an unremitting research focus on the individual dispositions that lead to problems, be they cognitive biases or otherwise, rather than the social circumstances which allow such dispositions to be expressed. This is why, as social scientists, we choose to focus our research on the social processes and formations that lead to the production of risky gambling environments. None of the negative social impacts of commercial gambling since the 1990s are likely to be attributable to changes in the psychological disposition and cognitive biases of the population over the last quarter century. Rather, a series of social, political and economic changes have resulted in the proliferation of commercial gambling opportunities. A commitment to understanding the psychological processes leading to addiction may be helpful in important areas such as the development of treatment programs. However, this provides few tools for understanding the social processes involved in the production of the gambling industries.

On the complicity of research discourse in the production of harm

The proposition that psychological and other gambling researchers could possibly be complicit in the reproduction of gambling harm is disowned by Delfabbro & King (2017), especially when it may involve helping the industry to blame gamblers for their own misfortune (e.g. Young, 2013). Yet the reality remains that gambling research—even when it is well-intentioned, evidence-based, helpful, and unaffected by industry—comprises an important element in the legitimation and expansion of the gambling industries.

One discursive mechanism in particular, that of ‘responsible gambling’, is widely recognised as having been developed both as a term, and as a series of practices, by industry actors seeking to defuse some of the mounting concern about the harmful effects of their business during the wave of deregulation in the 1990s (Hancock & Smith, 2017). The strategic language of ‘responsible gambling’ distracts from the harmful nature of gambling products and from the practices of the corporate and government actors who deploy and market them (Livingstone & Woolley, 2007). If prevention or reduction of harm is the goal, it is distinctly unhelpful to argue (as do Delfabbro & King 2017) that ‘only a small proportion’ of gamblers suffer harm and that the best way to address this is to provide clinical assistance to the ‘disordered’, rather than to address the production of dangerous commodities such as EGMs. In this sense, it is antithetical to a public health approach (Markham, Young, & Doran, 2016) and may increase the stigma associated with harmful gambling (Miller & Thomas, 2017).

Gambling research is clearly not impartial. To varying degrees in different jurisdictions, the gambling industry exerts influence on the gambling research agenda (Cassidy, Loussouarn, & Pisac, 2013; Schüll 2012). In some cases this is achieved by direct funding (as in the USA and UK, in particular), in others via tripartite models for influencing research agendas. However implemented, it has led to significant lacunae in gambling research and to a generally poor quality evidence base (Adams, 2016; Livingstone & Adams, 2011).

Addressing this troubling conflict of interest should be a major priority of the field. Indeed, poor-quality research and misplaced or industry-engineered research priorities pose significant opportunity costs in such a small field. This can be illustrated with the example of the production of numerous poor-quality problem gambling prevalence studies. While prevalence studies have contributed to knowledge in some valuable ways, they consistently fail to meet their core objective: monitoring changes in problem gambling prevalence over time or across jurisdictions (Markham & Young, 2016). Yet they are routinely conducted in Australia, with 41 prevalence studies having been published over twenty-five years, resulting in an enormous opportunity cost in terms of researcher time (Markham, Young, Doran, & Sugden, 2017). As any casual observer of the political uses of gambling research is aware, the results of these studies are consistently distorted by politicians to

justify a lack of official action (Doughney, 2007). We are not arguing that those who conduct problem gambling prevalence studies have malicious motives; indeed, several of the co-authors have conducted such research themselves. Rather, we are reflecting on the *structural* problem that it is very difficult to refuse a lucrative funding brief, even when it does little to advance science or public health surveillance, and is easily misused.

Furthermore, whilst Delfabbro & King (2017: 2) are critical of other disciplines for exhibiting 'confirmation bias', they are notably silent on serious concerns about the validity of psychological research methods. As Szucs and Ioannidis (2017) have shown, the false report probability of cognitive neuroscience and of psychology papers published in top-level journals is over 50% (Szucs & Ioannidis, 2017). This is in a large part due to problems of statistical power stemming from small sample sizes and selective reporting of results. Nosek and colleagues (Open Science Collaboration, 2015) estimated the reproducibility of psychology research by replicating 100 published experimental and correlational studies from three important psychology journals, finding that 64% of the studies could not be replicated (Ioannidis, 2015). These results have, understandably, led to profound questions about the validity of the knowledge base of the psychological sciences. We are not suggesting that the work of any individual psychologists working in the field of gambling research suffers from the failures described above. We merely seek to point out that no discipline or methodology is entirely faultless, regardless of the methods adopted.

Finally, while Delfabbro & King (2017) depict psychology as a narrowly empiricist discipline with a focus on individual behaviour, this narrow focus ignores a wealth of other interests and approaches that are flourishing within the discipline. Psychology is a broad discipline, with many sub-disciplinary fields including social psychology, clinical psychology, health psychology, critical psychology and theoretical psychology. Browsing through the journals of these sub-disciplines reveals a strong engagement with a variety of research methodologies and a wide range of theoretical stances that are shared with other social sciences. Clearly, structural, political and environmental perspectives are being embraced *within* the discipline of psychology, and methods such as social constructionism, critical discourse analysis and participatory action methodologies are now widely accepted. The narrow depiction of psychology presented by Delfabbro & King (2017), and their implied dichotomy between real- and pseudo-science, is a perspective evocative of an earlier period when psychology, much like sociology and geography, was trying to model itself on physics.

Conclusions

We welcome critique of social disciplines in gambling scholarship as an opportunity to build understanding between approaches to gambling research that have often remained isolated from each other. Delfabbro & King (2017) appear to genuinely misapprehend how elementary sociological, cultural, geographic, political and economic processes operate. The fact that they fail to understand the political-economic, sociological and geographical arguments they criticise is not entirely unexpected. We are all trained in, and come to occupy, particular disciplinary cultures. We are all ignorant about the perspectives of other disciplines and bodies of knowledge to some degree, and while miscommunication in a cross-disciplinary research field is perhaps inevitable, it can also be highly productive. We have tried to shed some light on these arguments from the perspectives of our own pluralistic disciplines. We have attempted to explain how, and in what ways, the critique advanced by Delfabbro & King fails, and how we may go about better understanding the class-based processes that produce inequitable gambling outcomes and distributions of harm.

We have argued that the way we will transcend the current limitations of our field is to broaden our perspectives, widen our conceptions, and show willingness to consider the contributions available from many differing perspectives, including the non-individualistic perspectives offered by the

broader field of psychological research. Many of the authors cited and criticized by Delfabbro & King (2017) have worked collaboratively with psychologists, spent many long hours reading and engaging with the psychology literature, and endeavoured to do so as much as possible on this literature's own terms. Indeed, some of our most strident critique is directed towards our own previous research and the lessons we learned from working within the remits of what could be considered 'psychological research'. Scholars can only do their best work when they remain open to changing their opinion when presented with new facts or improved interpretations. The field of gambling studies, touching as it does on so many aspects of contemporary society, can only be adequately developed through systematic interdisciplinary dialogue.

Text 4,403 words (minus abstract)

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