



# GAMBLING RESEARCH REVEALS

## How do risk-related behaviours compare with gambling? An interview with Erin Gibbs Van Brunschot

If asked to provide examples of risk-related behaviours, what would you choose? Perhaps driving a motor vehicle without a seatbelt, travel in a politically unstable region, hang gliding, or crossing a raging river? In addition to these relatively extreme examples, the act of gambling is also considered to be a risk-related activity. But is the act of risking money through gambling participation really equivalent to other activities in which participants risk life and limb? Do gambling and other risk behaviours—which appear somewhat similar—actually derive from the same or different sources?

In an effort to better understand the existing academic literature pertaining to these related questions, University of Calgary sociologist Dr. Erin Gibbs Van Brunschot undertook a review of gambling and risk behaviour. She provides the following answers to questions about this research:

### **How did you become interested in undertaking research in the field of gambling studies?**

My degrees are in sociology and my primary area of interest is crime and deviance. Having considered crime from a variety of angles, a concept that repeatedly surfaces, although often indirectly, is that of 'risk'.



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The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Its primary purpose is to support and promote research into gaming and gambling in the province.\*

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To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society

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In committing crime, individuals often act on the basis of limited, wrong or non-existent information; they either take or fail to take certain precautionary measures; they avoid or seek out particular areas, activities or people; or they choose to act based on their expectations of benefit or harm. Participation in crime, either as a victim or as an offender, is often about assessing potential outcomes, and the likelihood of harm or benefit. An activity that tends to resemble the calculations associated with involvement in crime, though more socially acceptable, is gambling. While certain types of gambling are illegal, much is not only legal but state-sanctioned and is a source of leisure for many in society. Risk associated with crime and risk associated with gambling makes for interesting comparisons and contrasts.

### **Why is it important to establish the factors that are commonly associated with and used to explain both gambling and risk-related activities?**

A tendency in the literature is to consider one particular activity of interest to the exclusion of other, potentially related activities. This isn't necessarily due to a lack of awareness of related activities, but often the result of funding issues—it may be more difficult to get funding to study a wide-range of activities than it is to be more targeted. Plus, academics tend to be trained to think about one thing/behaviour at a time. However, by failing to ask questions about related behaviours, we may miss the fact that a common set of correlates is associated with a number of risk-related behaviours. By expanding our consideration of behaviour, we have a better idea of how things fit together.

### **What exactly distinguishes the concept of gambling from that of other risk behaviour in the context of your literature review?**

'Risk behaviour', of which gambling is an example, involves a number of factors—only some of which may be known. Like other risk activity, individuals who participate in gambling may overestimate what they think they know (e.g., believing that skill is the reason for success in gambling activities), or underestimate the impact that luck, or factors out of their control, may have on their success. Individual consideration of factors both known and unknown tends to vary with the activity under consideration. Part of our ability to assess or pay attention to factors that have an impact on behaviour is the context in which these behaviours occur. As with some of the other risk behaviours noted in the literature, such as alcohol use, gambling tends to reside in a social and political grey zone—drinking or gambling to excess tends to be frowned upon, while some drinking or gambling may be encouraged often by the state. Risk activities undertaken by individuals, such as gambling, must be located within particular social and legal contexts to determine to what extent these behaviours are influenced by contexts.

### **Are there fundamental differences in risking money versus risking non-monetary items of value?**

Individuals place different value on the 'resources' available to expend. For some, money is the 'currency' of choice, whereas for others, reputation or status may be of greater value than money. If we have little money to offer, then we might 'gamble' or barter with what we do have to offer—personal services, our health, etc.—in exchange for what we want. On top of what we, individually, hold as valuable and therefore worthy of potential loss, is the societal context in which we operate which dictates how we judge behaviours. As a society, we may tend to think better of those who risk the loss of money in gambling ventures than we might of those who participate in sports activities who risk the loss of their lives.

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### **Why do you think that the term ‘risk’ often implies negative outcomes?**

We have tended to misuse the term ‘risk’ as only involving the probability of a negative outcome—primarily because we want to avoid negative outcomes. However, risk implies the probability of loss or gain, which really needs to be part of how we look at risk—not just the negative associated with gambling, for example. We tend to think of gambling as only implying a probability of loss, but clearly gambling also involves the possibility of gain—individuals may win, though the probability of winning may be substantially less than the probability of losing. In sport activities involving risk, football players, for example, may potentially be seriously injured when they take to the field. At the same time, they may not be injured and may benefit both themselves and their teams by participating in the game.

### **Your review finds that participation in risk activities has been dominated by males. Why is this?**

Sociologists would argue that males have tended to be socialized to be risk-takers—willing to take chances, to be adventurous, perhaps throw caution to the wind and to embrace the possibilities of benefit or harm. Women, on the other hand, have tended to be socialized to be risk-avoiders, to take fewer chances and to be more cautious. While gender socialization today may be more varied, society may still harbor different expectations of boys and girls, with boys potentially more likely to be encouraged to ‘extend’ themselves in ways that involve risky behaviour—behaviour where the probability of success may or may not be known.

### **Are there specific gaps in the risk literature that you feel are under-explored?**

The types of links that remain somewhat unexplored in the risk literature are the types mentioned earlier—studies that attempt to directly link several types of behaviour in the same study. More of the psychological literature appears to directly establish links between types of behaviours that may be considered addictive, for example, but more of this type of research would be useful. Further, the study of gambling, not unlike other substantive areas, may benefit by considering the work done outside the substantive area of gambling that may be applicable to it.

### **Do gambling and risk-related behaviour stem from separate or similar roots?**

There appears to be links, in terms of co-morbidities, which means that certain types of behaviour may cluster together, due to particular vulnerabilities or propensities. At the same time, the literature also suggests that for others, their participation in risk behaviour is specific to only one type of behaviour, without the same clustering effect. There seems to be many pathways that lead to specific forms of behaviour—many of those pathways are both individually and socially constructed.

### **What future directions do you anticipate in gambling and risk-related research?**

I would like to see greater integration among researchers who study risk of all types. Gambling is the most self-evident form of risk-taking, but we take risks in so many dimensions throughout our lives and in everyday interaction. By broadening how we consider other behaviour and everyday risk-taking, gambling research may be pushed in new and exciting directions.



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For additional information:

*Gambling and Risk Behaviour: A Literature Review* (2009, March) by Dr. Erin Gibbs Van Brunshot is available from the following web address:  
<<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/47229>>.

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\* The Institute is funded by the Alberta  
government through the Alberta Lottery  
Fund.

ISSN 1499-2647  
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### Institute announces call for supplementary 2009/10 Research Grants

Guidelines and the application form for the 2009/10 Supplementary Research Grant Proposals are now available from the Institute web site. The deadline for research grant proposal submissions is Friday, October 23rd, 2009. Please note that "Small Grant" proposals may be submitted at any time throughout the year.

Eligibility of applicants:

- Research collaborators and co-investigators may be experts outside of academia or come from universities outside of Alberta provided that confirmation is submitted indicating that the length of their academic appointment extends beyond the research grant period.
- Only the grant holder is required to be a faculty member eligible to hold research grants at the U. of Alberta, U. of Calgary or U. of Lethbridge.

### 2008 Durand Jacobs Award winner: Jenny Horch

The Institute is pleased to announce that the International Centre for Youth Gambling Problems and High-Risk Behaviors chose University of Calgary Ph.D. student Jenny Horch as the winner of the 2007/2008 Durand Jacobs Award. Her paper, co-authored with David C. Hodgins, was entitled "Public Stigma of Disordered Gambling: Social Distance, Dangerousness, and Familiarity." It was published in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 27(5) in 2008. The Durand Jacobs Award recognizes outstanding work related to the psychology of addictive behaviours, and is dedicated to Dr. Durand Jacobs' life-long efforts to help mentor students in this field.