

GAMBLING RESEARCH

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Substance Use and Gambling Lab at the University of Calgary by Dr. Daniel McGrath

The newly constructed Substance Use and Gambling Laboratory at the University of Calgary opened its doors in November, 2015. Dr. Daniel McGrath, Assistant Professor of Psychology and AGRI Chair in Gambling Research (U. Calgary), serves as the laboratory director. The laboratory represents a significant enhancement in the Department of Psychology's capacity to conduct cutting edge addictions-focused research. The lab space is comprised of a main office area, testing rooms, a gambling-bar lab, and an eye-gaze tracking centre.



Gambling-Bar Lab Simulates a Real-World Gambling Venue

The inspiration for the creation of the gambling-bar lab comes from other similar gambling laboratories, most notably that of Dr. Sherry Stewart and Dr. Sean Barrett at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The University of Calgary gambling-bar lab was designed to provide a realistic gambling and drinking environment which simulates real-world gambling venues. The room itself contains a modern bar, bar stools, three video lottery terminals (VLTs), and a poker table. The colours of the room are consistent with those found in real-world bars, the lighting is adjustable, and

The primary aim of the Alberta Gambling Research Institute, a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge, is to support academic research related to gambling.

MISSION

To facilitate evidence-based broad research that informs gambling public policy and educates Albertans and the wider audience about the effects of gambling.



individual areas of the room such as the poker table can be solely illuminated.

The combination of VLTs, alcohol stimuli, and room décor provide an immersive experience for research participants as well as exposure to powerful environmental cues which ultimately help to enhance the external validity of research studies. In addition, the lab will soon be equipped with a slot machine that contains a gambling simulation program. The program will allow for tighter experimental control through manipulation of gambling outcomes that are pre-determined by the researchers. A number of experiments involving drug challenge designs are presently underway or are in preparation. For instance, in one experiment, gamblers who smoke are being recruited under conditions of 'tobacco abstinence' vs. 'tobacco satiation' to examine the influence of tobacco withdrawal symptoms on gambling behaviour and craving. Other experiments will involve investigating the effects of alcohol on gambling cue-reactivity and attentional biases as well as the reciprocal relationship between event-level gambling and drinking.



Gambling a Focal Point of the Lab's Eye-Gaze Tracking Centre



The Substance Use and Gambling Laboratory is also home to an eye-gaze tracking test centre. Specifically, the lab contains a newly acquired EyeLink 1000 Plus Eye Tracker. This system is commonly considered to be one of the most precise eye trackers available on the market. Eye-gaze tracking has been widely applied in studying other addictions such as smoking, drinking, and illicit drug use; however, it has been underutilized in the gambling area. This technology allows researchers to directly measure attentional processes in real-time. For instance, participants' eye-gaze movements are recorded during the presentation of images or video and variables such as initial fixations, saccades, and dwell time can be measured. In the gambling laboratory, this equipment is currently being used for a number of AGRI funded projects. In one study, the extent to which psychological variables such

as craving, personality, and mood are related to attentional biases for gambling is being investigated. In a second project, the specificity of gambling attentional biases is being compared between primarily strategic vs. non-strategic gamblers. This technology holds great promise for numerous gambling-related research questions and will be employed to study aspects of attention in the lab for years to come.

Finally, the laboratory also utilizes a number of other technologies and software. For example, the lab has procured the Iowa Gambling Task and the Cambridge Gambling Task to study decision making as well as equipment to measure physiological indices such as heart rate and blood pressure. In addition, several

questionnaire-based studies have recently been launched using Amazon's Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing platform which provides direct access to large samples of gamblers. The combination of these spaces and technology will allow for a diverse and fruitful environment for conducting gambling research as well as for student training.

Additional information about the Substance Use and Gambling Laboratory is available from the Substance Use & Gambling Laboratory web site

<https://psyc.ucalgary.ca/gamblinglab/>. Questions regarding graduate student training opportunities should be directed to Dr. Daniel McGrath, daniel.mcgrath@ucalgary.ca



This article was authored by Dr. Daniel McGrath. The Alberta Gambling Research Institute, the Faculty of Arts, and the Department of Psychology at the University of Calgary each made significant contributions toward the construction of the laboratory.

Canada's Bankruptcy and Insolvency Act as Applied to Problem Gamblers: An Interview with Dr. Anna Lund

Dr. Anna Lund received a \$100,000 Post-Doctoral Fellowship Award from the Alberta Gambling Research Institute during 2015-16 for a project entitled "When Problem Gamblers Go Bankrupt: Towards a Better Model of Rehabilitation." Her research focuses on debtor-creditor law and combines doctrinal legal research with empirical methods to better understand how individuals interpret and apply commercial law in their work and personal lives.



What was it that attracted you when applying for a post-doctoral fellowship sponsored by the Alberta Gambling Research Institute?

I'd identified the intersection of gambling and bankruptcy as an area in need of more research during my Ph.D., and the AGRI post-doc provided me with a great opportunity to carry out that research.

Your research examines personal bankruptcy and problem gamblers. How common is it for problem gamblers to declare bankruptcy in Canada?

That's a great question - and there's no clear answer. Individuals may not perceive that gambling caused their bankruptcy, even if it was a contributing factor. And where individuals do recognize gambling as a contributing factor, there are a myriad of reasons for why they might not disclose this information to the licensed insolvency trustee administering the file. This non-disclosure is problematic because much of the research done on the "causes" of bankruptcy uses the cause listed in paperwork filled out by a licensed insolvency trustee.

Can you briefly explain the mechanics of how the personal bankruptcy process works in Canada? How would one know if a particular bankruptcy was gambling-related?

Individuals who need debt relief have two main options under the Bankruptcy and Insolvency Act: bankruptcy or a proposal. The Office of the Superintendent of Bankruptcy gives a nice overview of these two options on their web site <https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/bsf-osb.nsf/eng/br02049.html>. People should note that, even though there are two types of proposals, individuals usually file a consumer proposal unless they owe in excess of \$250,000 dollars plus the mortgage debt on their principal residence.

Would you be able to provide an example or scenario about how a gambler might find himself or herself in a position to declare personal bankruptcy?

A person who has engaged in disordered gambling may have incurred debt directly to gamble... for example, cash advances on a credit card or perhaps purchasing items on credit and then selling them to gamble. A second way the person may have incurred debt would be neglecting payment of other expenses

– like an unpaid utility bill – because he or she spent the rest of her money gambling.

Many might be surprised to find out that Canadian personal bankruptcy law takes a punitive approach to problem gamblers and may disentitle individuals from debt relief. Why do you think are they singled out in such a way?

I think there's a historical explanation for this as the punitive approach to gambling dates back a long time and reflects a traditional view of gambling as an immoral pastime. Modern legislation has not kept pace with our evolving understanding of problem gambling as a type of behavioral addiction.

Does the commission of a crime have any impact on how an application for a personal bankruptcy is adjudicated?

Yes. When a person has committed a crime, there are grounds for a court to put limits on, or entirely block, that person's ability to access debt relief through insolvency proceedings. In fact, a person doesn't even need to have committed a crime, as there are a host of activities can trigger a court to put limits on or entirely block a person's ability to access debt relief through insolvency proceedings.

One aim of your research program is to collect primary data from bankruptcy trustees and problem gamblers. How are you doing this and has it proven to be a challenge?

I interviewed licensed insolvency trustees for my Ph.D. research and I'm hoping to interview individuals who have made use of insolvency proceedings to address gambling related debt as part of my post-doctoral project. I am expecting that it will be difficult to recruit people to talk about their experiences with gambling and insolvency because these are both quite sensitive topics.

A second aim of your research is to investigate case law, legislation and academic articles relevant to personal bankruptcy and gambling. What do you expect to find from these materials and how will you use them?

One of my goals is to compare the evolving conception of addiction in domestic human rights case law and legislation with how this topic has been approached in bankruptcy. I suspect that I will find that human rights case law and legislation has a more developed conception of addiction than I've found in insolvency case law and legislation. Time will tell!

Do you have plans to continue this line of gambling research? Where do you see it going?

Yes! I've been hired on as an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Alberta, and I plan to continue carrying out my post-doctoral research project in this new capacity.

Specifically, I'd like to organize a workshop that brings together scholars and legal practitioners working on issues of addiction in different areas of the law, including human rights, labour and employment, insurance and criminal law. The goal of the workshop would be to better understand how addictions – especially behavioural addictions like gambling – raise similar, difficult questions about personal responsibility and choice across a range of areas of law.

Dr. Anna Lund has been appointed Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Alberta (effective July 1, 2016).

“I'd identified the intersection of gambling and bankruptcy as an area in need of more research during my Ph.D., and the AGRI post-doc provided me with a great opportunity to carry out that research.”

Gambling Mechanisms & Predictors Explored at AGRI Conference 2016

mechanism,

n. Psychol. An unconscious, structured set of mental processes underlying a person's behaviour or responses. [Source: OED Online].

predictor,

n. a. A person who or thing which predicts or foretells (something); b. Statistics. A variable whose value can be used in the estimation of another variable. More fully predictor variable. [Source: OED Online].



This year marked a significant milestone for the Institute in that it was the 15th iteration of the annual gambling research conference. It was held April 7-9, 2016, at the Banff Centre and the program theme "**Understanding Gambling: Mechanisms & Predictors**" was jointly arranged by AGRI Research Coordinator Dr. David Hodgins (U. Calgary) and Executive Director Glenda Wong. In addition to numerous lively conference plenary sessions, the delegates had the opportunity to attend a CCGR pre-

conference workshop on digital engagement, a research poster competition, small-group structured conversation sessions led by prominent researchers, and a tour of the Banff Springs Hotel National Historic Site.

Presentation slides have been archived and made available as PDFs from the [Completed Conference 2016 page](#) on the Institute web site.



Conference delegates at the opening reception ▼



▲ Past AGRI Executive Director Vickii Williams, Dr. David Hodgins (U. of Calgary) & AGRI Executive Director Glenda Wong



*Bill Robinson,
President and CEO
of Alberta Gaming &
Liquor Commission*



*Conference Attendees
Varghese John
& Ray Reshke*



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Central Queensland
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*Dr. Robert Williams,
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