2019-03

Alberta Gambling Research Institute Conference 2019: Blurred Lines in Gambling Research

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Alberta Gambling Research Institute

http://hdl.handle.net/1880/110151
conference proceedings

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Matthew Browne

Associate Professor Matthew Browne background is in applied statistics and psychology. He completed a Ph.D. in psychophysiological signal processing in 2002, and has worked as a quantitative research scientist for the CSIRO and the Fraunhofer Institute (Germany’s equivalent national research body) Institute for Autonomous Systems. Since 2012, Dr. Browne has been working at the Experimental Gambling Research Laboratory at Central Queensland University in Australia. Recently, he has led a number of large scale projects on gambling-related harm, pioneering a public-health based approach to assessment of the impact of gambling, and developed related instruments and methodologies.

Presentation Topic: Harm is a Unitary Construct

Harms from gambling are many and diverse, and in some cases moderated by an individual’s idiosyncratic life circumstances. However, empirical evidence shows that their occurrence is driven by a single continuous unitary factor: ‘harm’; with a clear antecedent of excessive spending, and a clear consequence in terms of detriments to health and wellbeing. Concise measurement of harm can be accomplished by selecting a set of probes that capture the underlying construct, and yield a score that can be translated into a quality of life or wellbeing decrement metric. This is true for both gamblers and affected others, although the specific probes relevant to each population are different. Using such a dimensional approach, we find that gamblers in more prevalent lower risk categories, though experiencing less impact per-person, nevertheless contribute the most to population-level impact. Future work should focus on refining the causal link (attributable faction) between harm and wellbeing.
Luke Clark

Dr. Luke Clark is the Director of the Centre for Gambling Research at UBC, and an Associate Professor in Psychology. His research on the psychology of gambling combines multiple methods including behavioural analysis, data science, functional neuroimaging, and psychophysiology. His current research focuses on three main questions: i) How do the structural features of specific gambling products (e.g. modern slot machines) relate to gambling harms? ii) How do biological and psychological traits create vulnerability to disordered gambling? iii) How can behavioural data from online gambling be used to identify at-risk individuals? He has published over 170 papers and is an assistant editor at the leading journals *Addiction* and *International Gambling Studies*. In 2015, Dr. Clark was awarded the Scientific Achievement Award by the National Center for Responsible Gaming. Website: http://cgr.psych.ubc.ca/ Twitter @LukeClark01 @CGR_UBC

Presentation Topic: **Applying Data Science to Behavioural Analysis of Online Gambling**

How can disordered gambling be identified in the online environment? Working with one year of de-identified behavioural (‘player tracking’) data from online gamblers on the BCLC’s PlayNow.com, this talk will focus on two sets of analyses. The ‘Pareto effect’ for online gambling asserts that the top 20% of users account for ~80% of revenue. I will show that Pareto calculations from slices <1 year under-estimate this effect, which exceeds 90% in a full year dataset. The top 20% also show significant engagement with voluntary self-exclusion (VSE), as a likely marker of gambling harm. Second, we have examined the predictive performance of machine learning in classifying online gamblers based on VSE status. Using relatively coarse behavioural variables, we obtain classification performance (AUROC) from 75 to 79%, with bet size variability showing the highest feature importance. Pending further validation, predictive algorithms may enable interventions to be targeted at high-risk online gamblers.

John Cunningham

Professor John Cunningham (Ph.D., experimental psychology, University of Toronto, 1995) works in the intersection between clinical and population health. His research is driven by the question, “how do people change from addictive behaviours?” To answer this question, Dr. Cunningham has combined population research methods with clinical and other research traditions. The findings from these studies have been translated into a series of brief interventions for people with hazardous alcohol use, problem gambling, or other addictions concerns, that can be applied in treatment or community settings. Dr. Cunningham currently holds a Canada Research Chair in Addictions, is a Senior Scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, and a Professor at the University of Toronto.
Presentation Topic: **Internet Interventions for Gamblers: Any Evidence It Is a Viable Option to Provide Help?**

Internet interventions for people experiencing gambling problems hold promise to provide new means of assistance to those in need. This presentation will review the research conducted to-date and discuss potential future directions for investigation. Results from four randomized trials conducted by our research group will be summarized.

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**Margo Hilbrecht**

Margo Hilbrecht is the Director of Knowledge Management and Innovation at Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO). She oversees the Evidence Centre, a repository of information resources, datasets, and other materials that help to advance knowledge of gambling-related issues among multiple stakeholder groups. Before joining GREO, Dr. Hilbrecht was the Associate Director, Research for the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. In this role, she was engaged extensively in social indicators research both at the national level and in partnership with communities across Canada. Dr. Hilbrecht continues to participate in research projects related to gambling and harm on behalf of GREO and as part of her Adjunct appointment at the University of Waterloo. She holds a Ph.D. in Recreation and Leisure Studies from the University of Waterloo, and has research expertise in quality of life, time use, and the work-leisure relationship.

Presentation Topic: **Learning from the Experts: Developing Priorities for Policy Setting to Reduce Harm from Gambling**

In October 2017, Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO) hosted a forum for research and policy experts to establish gambling research priorities for Ontario. Participants expressed considerable interest in moving beyond prevalence studies to focus on gambling related harms, but they were less certain about which harms would be most effective to target, measure, and monitor in order to capture emerging issues and meet information needs for harm reduction policy setting. To address this uncertainty, GREO conducted a sequential mixed methods study to obtain expert advice from 10 key informants considered to be leading international experts in gambling harms research. Guided by the Taxonomy of Harms (Langham et al., 2016), results indicated a high level of consensus on harm dimensions that could be targeted for policy setting, while recognizing the multidimensional nature of gambling harm. Recommendations regarding priority harms, measurement, and evaluation techniques will be discussed, along with next steps for the inclusion of policy stakeholders in future discussions.
Mark R. Johnson
Dr. Mark R. Johnson is a Killam Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Political Science at the University of Alberta. His research examines intersections between play and money, such as esports, live streaming, fantasy sports betting, gamification, gamblification, and loot boxes. He has published in academic journals including Information, Communication and Society, Convergence, Social Studies of Science, The Sociological Review, and Games and Culture. His first book, The Unpredictability of Gameplay, was recently published (Bloomsbury, 2018). Beyond academia he is also an independent game developer, a regular games blogger and podcaster, and a former professional poker player.

Presentation Topic: **Loot Boxes and the Gamblification of Digital Game Design**

“Loot boxes” are a major new element of video game design through which players spend real-world money to buy virtual “boxes” which contain an unknown set of items. These items can be either cosmetic in nature, or can directly improve the capabilities of the player’s avatar within a virtual world. The gambling element of this practice has generated extensive controversy among both policymakers and players with the first concerned about the risk to young people, and the latter concerned by the risk of a “pay-to-win” subversion of traditional gaming meritocracies. With numerous games with tens of millions of players deploying these techniques, understanding loot boxes is vital to the cutting edge of contemporary gambling studies. Drawing on ongoing research with game developers from six countries and many different kinds of game development companies, this talk will outline the functions of loot boxes, their main implementations to date, the reflections of designers on the creation of these experiences, and the complex web of ethical, legal, ludic, and financial entanglements these new digital gaming-gambling phenomena represent.

Lena C. Quilty
Dr. Lena C. Quilty is a Senior Scientist at the Campbell Family Mental Health Research Institute, CAMH, and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto. She is a registered psychologist and certified cognitive behavioural therapist. Dr. Quilty has an applied program of research, with a focus on personality and cognition in depression and addiction. Her research program includes evidence-based assessment of and early intervention in problem gambling, as well as the impact of personality and mood disorder on gambling behavior and pathology. She leads multiple participatory research initiatives, with a focus on increased access to evidence-based prevention and treatment programming to manage harms associated with gambling expansion as well as cannabis legalization. These initiatives incorporate an emphasis on knowledge user feedback and lived experience perspectives throughout. She has published over 95 scholarly articles, many in the area of cognitive behavioural therapy, addiction, gambling, and impulsivity.
Presentation Topic: Northwestern Ontario Wellness: A Participatory Research Initiative in the Context of Gambling Expansion

Social responsibility and public health initiatives are crucial during the expansion of gambling across Canada. Gambling regulators and other stakeholders require a solid evidence base to guide prevention and intervention efforts that optimally facilitate safe wagering in a novel context. Such an evidence base is currently limited; moreover, the generalizability of existing evidence to the remote regions of Ontario is unclear. The Northwestern Ontario Wellness (NOW) Gambling Response Program was initially developed in 2016, and comprises three integrated components: problem gambling prevention and health promotion; clinical service development and training; and a longitudinal research program. The objective of the NOW program is to inform and build community capacity in the Kenora and Rainy River region to mitigate the risks associated with the introduction of a casino to the area. This presentation will describe the participatory model implemented to accomplish this goal, the results of the first baseline assessment of over 650 community members, and current and future knowledge translation activities.

Simone Rodda

Dr. Simone Rodda is Senior Lecturer in Social and Community Health at the University of Auckland (School of Population Health) and an Honorary Research Fellow at Deakin University, Australia. She is currently leading multiple investigations involving the use of behaviour change strategies in brief online interventions for gambling, sugar, pornography, gaming, and caffeine reduction. Her work is informed by over seventeen years of work as a clinician, researcher, and service manager in the field of addictions across smoking, alcohol, drug use, and problem gambling.

Presentation Topic: Blending Consumer Informed Interventions for Comorbidity and Gambling

Problem gambling is associated with a range of comorbidities. Unfortunately these comorbidities do not always respond to specific gambling treatment and remain unchanged following an intervention. In addition, some gamblers are often not ready to seek or accept treatment for comorbidities because they prefer a self-management approach. A range of consumer informed brief interventions may address these barriers to change. The Change Strategies Project has developed a range of interventions built from the voices of thousands of consumers. They contain instructions on how to implement dozens of simple cognitive and behavioural strategies for change. Delivery of the intervention can be tailored to need and preference and may include individual or group training and internet or face-to-face delivery. This approach can expand the reach of clinicians through blending self-directed online interventions with face-to-face interactions.
James Sanders

Dr. James Sanders is Assistant Professor and Program Director for the Addictions Counselling program at the University of Lethbridge. A registered psychologist by training, Dr. Sanders has conducted research on the identification, diagnosis, and prevention of addiction-related disorders including gaming disorder.

Presentation Topic: **Gaming Research: Blurred Lines and Shifting Landscapes**

This presentation will discuss the history and development of gaming in relation to gambling, the convergence of these activities, and resulting challenges when conducting research in this area. Despite relatively high levels of co-involvement, there remain distinguishing characteristics between gaming and gambling activities, levels of involvement, and problematic use. Although gaming can be distinguished from gambling and internet-related activities, the scope of gaming is remarkably diverse and difficult to define within a unitary construct. As such, studying the ever-changing landscape of gaming is a challenging endeavor, but one that is needed as gaming becomes increasingly ubiquitous in our society.

Hermano Tavares

Hermano Tavares is an Associate Professor of Mental Health Care Policy at the University of São Paulo Medical School (FMUSP) and the Coordinator of the Pathological Gambling and Other Impulse Control Disorders Clinic at the Department of Psychiatry of FMUSP. Dr. Tavares has considerable experience teaching undergraduate students and supervising post-graduate students as well as running multiple administrative research and academic tasks.

Presentation Topic: **Impulsivity as a Transdiagnostic Concept**

Impulsivity has many faces and definitions, cutting across diagnostic boundaries. It is a core concept to the so-called impulse-control disorders, but it is also mentioned as central to the psychopathology of many other psychiatric conditions such as substance and behavioral addictions, personality disorders, externalizing childhood disorders, aggression directed towards others or oneself, e.g. suicidal behavior and non-suicidal self-injury. Impulsivity would be best defined by a multi-dimensional approach that contemplates the dynamics between behavior inhibition and activation. On the inhibition side the putative dimensions would be affect (A), cognition (C) and empathy (E), on the activation one desire (D) and aggression (A), performing the ACEDA acronym. The ACEDA model proposes that an imbalance in the dynamics of inhibition and activation accounts for the majority of the behavioral loss of control clinically observed, as well as for all impulsive behaviors described above. Such an imbalance could derive from the failure of a particular inhibitory dimension, or the hyperactivity of one of the primary drives (desire or aggression), resulting in the many multi-faceted nature of impulsivity. The relevance of this transdiagnostic model for the understanding and treatment of different impulsive disorders will be explored in this presentation.
Joël Tremblay
Joël Tremblay (Ph.D., psychology) is a full professor, Department of Psychoeducation, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Canada, and director of a research team in substance abuse (RISQ – www.risqtoxico.ca) His research topics concern family members and their roles in the treatment of substance abuse and gambling problems. He is specifically interested into couple treatment of pathological gambling and intervention with family members of addicted persons who do not want to modify their behaviors. He works also on tests development and planning models for addiction services.

Presentation Topic: Implementation and Efficacy of Integrative Couple Treatment for Pathological Gambling (ICT-PG) Delivered in Specialized Treatment Facilities: A Real-life RCT

Gambling disorders treatments need to be improved. Among others, a promising avenue is the inclusion of family members, specifically partners, in the treatment process. Largely inspired by the ABCT (McCrady & Epstein, 2009), and encouraged by the pioneer work of Lee and colleagues (2002), our team developed the ICT-PG, a treatment with the couple from the very first meeting. The first goal of the treatment is reduction/cessation of gambling via a traditional behavioral cognitive work (e.g., Ladouceur & Lachance, 2006). ICT-PG also targets to eliminate those behaviours in the couple that might facilitate gambling and to reinforce behaviours that support the cessation of gambling. It also aims to improve communication skills, conflict resolution abilities and mutual reinforcement behaviours as facilitators of gambling cessation/reduction. The team conducted a real-life RCT to evaluate the efficacy ICT-PG and the result showed a better improvement at follow-ups (10 and 22 months) for the couples oriented in ICT-PG compared to couples oriented to the individual treatment.

Heather Wardle
Heather Wardle is an Assistant Professor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Funded by Wellcome, she is exploring gambling behaviour among children and its relationship with technological change. She was previously a Research Director at the National Centre for Social Research, where she led their gambling research, including the British Gambling Prevalence Survey 2010. She is also Deputy Chair of the Responsible Gambling Strategy Board, an independent advisory group that provides advice to the regulator and government in Britain about gambling policy.

Presentation Topic: Socio-historical Perspectives on the Blurring Boundaries of Games and Gambling
This talk will examine the increasing intertwining of digital games and gambling and explore what this means for children who are avid consumers of digital games. Drawing on historical examples, this lecture will argue that this is not a necessarily new phenomena (game developers have always taken cues for ideas from socially and culturally popular phenomenon) and could have been anticipated, given changes in attitudes and legislative and regulatory approaches for gambling. These developments are symptomatic of the normalization of gambling whereby gambling is increasingly incorporated into everyday life. The increased reach of gaming and gambling practices into everyday life is facilitated by complex, and rapidly changing, technological infrastructures which allow greater access and opportunities for trading and gambling of digital items than ever before, supported by an eco-system of gaming developers. Drawing on research with children, the meaning of these practices will be explored as will the value propositions children attach to digital items and the broader meanings this may have for how young people grow up and understand the world. Games are never just games, but a broader representation (or challenge thereof) of cultural norms and attitudes.

Robert J. Williams
Dr. Williams is a professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Lethbridge, and also a Research Coordinator for the Alberta Gambling Research Institute. Dr. Williams teaches courses on gambling; provides frequent consultation to government, industry, the media, and public interest groups; and regularly gives expert witness testimony on the impacts of gambling. Dr. Williams is widely published and is a leading authority in the areas of: prevention of problem gambling, the etiology of problem gambling, Internet gambling, the socioeconomic impacts of gambling, the proportion of gambling revenue deriving from problem gamblers, the prevalence and nature of gambling in Aboriginal communities, and best practices in the population assessment of problem gambling.

Presentation Topic: Gambling and Problem Gambling in Canada: A National Study

Comprehensive national investigations of gambling have been conducted in many countries, but not Canada. The present three-year project addresses this deficit with the aid of a large multi-disciplinary, multi-university, AGRI-based team of researchers combined with co-funding from the Canadian Consortium for Gambling Research, the Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse and Addiction, and Gambling Research Exchange Ontario. There are three research elements to this investigation: a national Statistics Canada Survey of 28,000 Canadians in 2018; a national two-year Online Panel cohort of 10,000 Canadians in 2018 and 2019; and Independent Corroborating Investigations in 2019 in the form of key informant interviews of major provincial stakeholders and indigenous leaders, and targeted surveys of casino patrons and problem gamblers in treatment. This presentation discusses the project’s ten research objectives, timelines, and progress.
Dr. Michael Wohl is a Professor and Graduate Chair in the Department of Psychology at Carleton University. Research in his Carleton University Gambling Laboratory focuses on, among other things, factors associated with disordered gambling (e.g., loyalty program membership), facilitators of responsible gambling (e.g., monetary limit setting and adherence), and means to overcome barriers to behaviour change (e.g., nostalgic reverie for the pre-addicted self).

Dr. Wohl has published over 140 papers and is the recipient of Carleton’s Research Achievement Award, the Carleton University Teaching Excellence Award, and the Faculty Graduate Mentoring Award. Recently, he was named a Fellow of the American Psychological Society and Society for Personality and Social Psychology. To facilitate his gambling research, Wohl has received funding from the Canadian Foundation for Innovation, Ontario Problem Gambling Researcher Centre (now Gambling Research Exchange Ontario), National Center for Responsible Gambling, Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, and Manitoba Gambling Research Program.

Presentation Topic: **What is the Utility of Responsible Gambling Programs?**

Responsible gambling (RG) programs offer, among other things, the opportunity for players to set a money or time limit on their play. Such tools are known to minimize gambling-related harms. Unfortunately, few players use them, even when they are readily accessible (2-10% uptake). Moreover, although most RG programs and their associated tools are advertised as a way to prevent problematic play, players typically perceive disordered gamblers to be the target audience. Given these realities, some researchers in the field of gambling studies have suggested that RG programs are a sham, and a cover for the gambling industry. During this session, the existing literature on player perceptions of responsible gambling programs will be reviewed. Importantly, results from a recent assessment of Ontario Lottery and Gaming’s new responsible gambling program—My PlaySmart—will shed light on who expresses interest in joining RG programs, why RG programs are attractive to some players and not others, and who is most likely to benefit from enrollment in an RG program. Discussion will focus on innovative (and perhaps controversial) strategies to increase use of RG programs as well as whether efforts are best placed recruiting the recreational, the at-risk, or the disordered gambler.