

Poker Players as a Distinct Subgroup of Gamblers:

Research Findings and Practical Implications



WILL SHEAD
MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY

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Disclosure of Potential Conflict of Interest

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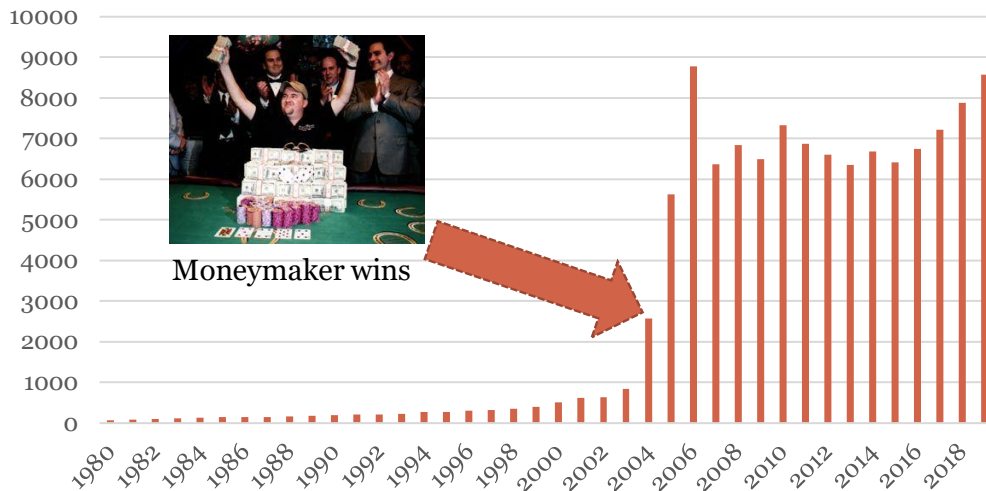
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Background

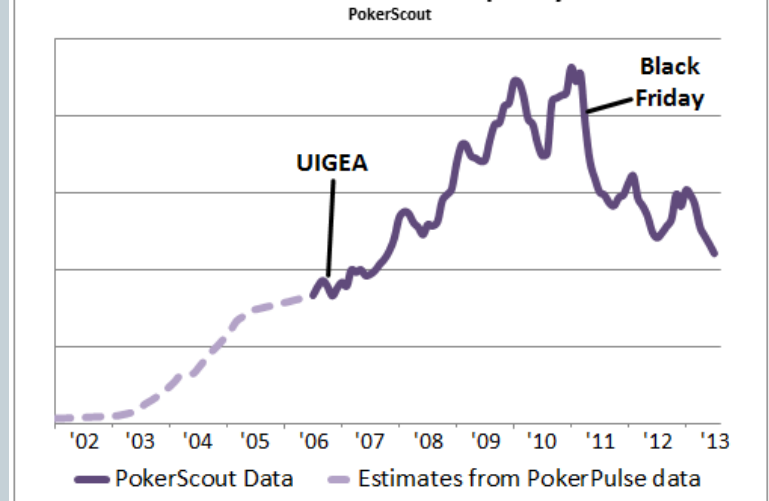
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- The “poker boom” has come and gone
- Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act of 2006
- Black Friday: April 15, 2011

Number of WSOP \$10,000 Main Event Entrants by Year



Online Poker Total Liquidity



Poker & Gambling

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- Poker players differ from other gamblers
- May need to adapt assumptions about problem gambling among poker players
 - General understanding of problems
 - Diagnostic tools
 - Prevention
 - Treatment approaches



General Objectives and Methodology

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- Objectives

1. Explore how poker players experience gambling problems
2. Examine unique reasons or motives why poker players change their gambling involvement
3. Identify barriers to help-seeking among poker players
4. Explore the manner in which help-seeking/recovery occurs in poker players

- Methodology: Three phases

1. Focus groups
2. Individual interviews
3. Online surveys



Phase I: Focus Groups

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- **Data collection:**
 - Six focus groups (approximately 90 minutes long; each with 9 to 11 participants)
 - Two groups in each of three cities (Winnipeg, MB; Halifax, NS; Las Vegas, NV)
- **Participants:**
 - 61 past and current “regular” poker players (played for money at least twice monthly)
 - Age ranged from 18 to over 60 years old
 - Wide range of poker experience
- **Discussion topics:**
 - why participants play poker
 - how poker players experience and define gambling problems
 - issues related to help-seeking and treatment accessibility for poker-related problems

Phase I: Focus Groups – General Themes

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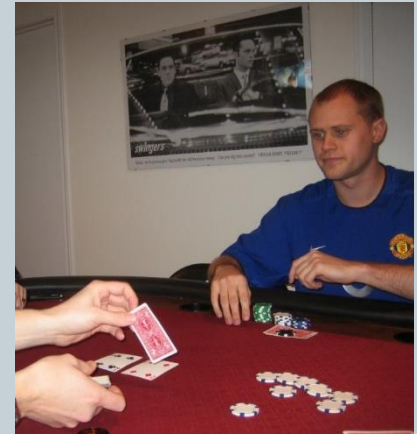
- Four main themes/concepts were identified among the conversational data:
 1. Poker is **DIFFERENT**
 2. Poker-specific gambling problems are often related to **NON-MONETARY CONSEQUENCES**
 3. A major barrier to help-seeking among poker players is **SELF-DELUSION**
 4. Current treatment options for gambling problems **MAY NOT BE A GOOD FIT** for poker players

Phase I: Focus Groups – First Theme

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Theme 1: Poker is DIFFERENT

- Poker players prefer poker over other forms of gambling for its:
 - social component
 - cognitive complexity
 - competitive element
 - opportunity to develop skill
 - control over outcomes
 - potential for long-term profitability



“I like that you can win a pot with a worse hand than your opponent. It’s exciting and challenging to read other players and pull a big bluff.”

Phase I: Focus Groups – Second Theme

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Theme 2: Poker-specific gambling problems are often related to NON-MONETARY CONSEQUENCES

- The most discussed signs of a problem were too much time spent playing, and negative impact on relationships, mood, and physical health
- There were differing views on whether one can be considered to have a problem if they are a “winning player.”

“Sometimes you have to admit, I’m a winner but I have a problem because I’m over immersed in the game.”

Phase I: Focus Groups – Third Theme

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Theme 3: A major barrier to help-seeking among poker players is SELF-DELUSION

- Reasons for not seeking treatment for a problem related to a common theme of self-delusion that may be especially prominent among poker players.
- These included: lack of insight into one's own skill level and strength of competition, unrealistic expectations about long-term outcomes, and self-serving cognitive biases of attributing wins to skill and losses to bad luck.

“Writing it down was so hard to see...it was the realization that I’m not as good as I thought.”

Phase I: Focus Groups – Fourth Theme

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Theme 4: Current treatment options for gambling problems MAY NOT BE A GOOD FIT for poker players

- Participants were largely unaware of treatment options specific to poker players.

“Poker players wouldn’t want to consider themselves in the same class as other gamblers.”

- Players often engage in self-directed measures when poker involvement seems to becoming problematic (e.g., taking a weeklong “timeout”).

Focus Groups: DSM-5 Activity

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- Participants reviewed the nine DSM-5 criteria for Gambling Disorder
- Items most commonly viewed as least applicable to poker:
 - **Is often preoccupied with gambling**
 - thinking about the game to continue to learn
 - **After losing money gambling, often returns another day to break even (chasing)**
 - continuing to play despite losses when recognizing you have an “edge”
 - **Need to gamble with increased amounts of money to achieve the desired excitement (tolerance)**
 - moving up in stakes to earn more money
- Argued that these symptoms can be normal aspects of developing/ improving as a poker player

Phase II: Interviews – Methodology

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- Individual telephone interviews with poker players were conducted to:
 - Explore topics from focus groups in more depth
 - Identify themes to develop items for Phase III (surveys)
- Reasons for reducing poker play, potential barriers to help seeking, potential strategies for changing poker involvement
- Data collection:
 - 25 interviews (approximately 45 minutes long) conducted with current and former poker players in Winnipeg, Halifax, & Las Vegas

Phase III: Online Surveys

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- Online survey administered to three subsamples of poker players using 3 different recruitment approaches:
 - 1) MTurk ($n = 281$)
 - 2) Research Panel ($n = 122$)
 - 3) Miscellaneous Recruitment Methods ($n = 66$)
- **Materials**
 - *Basic demographics*
 - *Problem Gambling Severity Index*
 - *Poker play and help-seeking*
 - **Reasons for reducing poker play**
 - Motives for help-seeking
 - Barriers to help-seeking



Survey Participants

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- 469 participants (76.8% male), $M_{\text{age}} = 38.8$
- Mean PGSI score was 3.43 ($SD = 4.32$)

| Subsample | PGSI Category | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| | Non-problem | Low risk | Moderate risk | Problem |
| MTurk (n = 281) | 24.2% | 42.0% | 16.0% | 17.8% |
| Research Panel (n = 122) | 63.1% | 26.2% | 4.9% | 5.7% |
| Misc. Recruitment (n = 66) | 24.2% | 43.9% | 16.7% | 15.2% |
| Total (N = 469) | 34.3% | 38.2% | 13.2% | 14.3% |

Former & Current Players

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- Former players (25.4%; n = 119)
- Current players (74.5%; n = 348)
 - Status:
 - Recreational: 84.4%
 - Semi-Pro: 14.7%
 - Professional: 0.9%
 - Frequency of play (past year):
 - Daily: 1.7%
 - 1-6/week: 28.4%
 - 1-4/month: 36.1%
 - Less than 1X/month: 33.9%
 - Types of poker played (past year):
 - Online only: 8.1%
 - Live (bricks-and-mortar): 64.6%
 - Both online & live: 27.3%



Reasons for Reducing Poker Play: Current vs. Former Players

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Table 1. Comparisons of Ratings of Importance of Reasons for Reducing Poker Play between Current and Former Poker Players

| Reason | Poker player status | | Chi-square test |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|---|
| | Current (n = 338) | Former (n = 131) | |
| Less time available to play | 63.1% | 42.1% | $\chi^2(1, N = 459) = 16.475, p < .001$ |
| Less access to live poker venues/opportunities | 34.6% | 33.9% | <i>n.s.</i> |
| Less access to online poker sites | 19.3% | 20.8% | |
| Lost interest in the game | 30.7% | 55.2% | $\chi^2(1, N = 457) = 23.23, p < .001$ |
| Lost too much money | 34.7% | 25.4% | <i>n.s.</i> |
| Friends/family members disapproved | 20.8% | 19.8% | <i>n.s.</i> |
| Disliked people I played with | 25.8% | 19.8% | <i>n.s.</i> |
| Suspicious of cheating | 20.7% | 17.5% | <i>n.s.</i> |
| Tougher games (better players) | 24.7% | 17.5% | <i>n.s.</i> |

Notes: Percentages indicate proportion of group that rated reason as important (i.e., 5-7). Chi-square tests considered stat. sig. at $\alpha < 0.0056$ ($\alpha = 0.05/9 = 0.0056$).

Reasons for Reducing Poker Play: Across PGSI Categories

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Table 2. Comparisons of Ratings of Importance of Reasons for Reducing Poker Play across PGSI Categories

| Reason | PGSI Category | | | | Chi-square test |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|--|
| | Non-problem (n = 160) | Low risk (n = 174) | Moderate Risk (n = 60) | Problem (n = 65) | |
| Less time available to play | 56.3% | 56.9% | 71.7% | 47.7% | <i>n.s.</i> |
| Less access to live poker venues/opportunities | 28.1% | 36.6% | 41.7% | 37.5% | <i>n.s.</i> |
| Less access to online poker sites | 15.0% | 22.1% | 18.3% | 26.2% | <i>n.s.</i> |
| Lost interest in the game | 40.9% | 38.2% | 33.2% | 30.8% | $\chi^2(3, N = 457) = 23.23, p < .001$ |
| Lost too much money | 20.0% | 29.9% | 48.3% | 54.0% | $\chi^2(3, N = 457) = 32.18, p < .001$ |
| Friends/family members disapproved | 15.1% | 17.8% | 28.3% | 34.4% | $\chi^2(3, N = 457) = 13.40, p = .004$ |
| Disliked people I played with | 22.2% | 21.8% | 23.3% | 36.5% | <i>n.s.</i> |
| Suspicious of cheating | 17.7% | 17.2% | 22.0% | 29.7% | <i>n.s.</i> |
| Tougher games (better players) | 11.9% | 22.4% | 35.0% | 39.1% | $\chi^2(3, N = 458) = 25.63, p < .001$ |

Notes: Percentages indicate proportion of group that rated reason as important (i.e., 5-7). Chi-square tests considered stat. sig. at $\alpha < 0.0056$ ($\alpha = 0.05/9 = 0.0056$).

The Aftermath of the Poker Boom

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- ***“Poker becoming tougher”*** as reason for reducing play among problem gamblers
- Points to a unique aspect of poker
 - An evolving skill element
 - Highlights a potential key area to explore with those who have a poker-specific gambling problem



Discussion

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- Findings highlight the unique experiences of poker players
- Traditional recovery strategies may be unattractive to poker players
 - Example: skill element and common expectation that a good player can win money in the long run → entering into individual or group treatment would likely involve an admission that one is a “bad” or “losing” player

Recommendations

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- Treatment: adapt traditional approaches for poker players
 - Therapists that understand what makes poker unique
 - Cognitive therapy that emphasises identification and restructuring of poker-related cognitive biases (self-serving bias)
 - Mutual support group consisting of former poker players only
- Future research: Recruit a larger sample of former/recovered poker players to examine unique recovery processes



Thank you!

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● Collaborators

- Nicholas Borodenko, Prairie Research Associates, Inc.
- Tim Melnyk

Questions

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- Any questions?

