



Do problem gamblers form three distinct subgroups? A study of the characteristics of problem gamblers in France

What this research is about

Past research suggests that problem gamblers can be separated into three groups. Group 1 includes behaviourally conditioned gamblers who are likely to have a family history of excessive gambling. They gamble excessively as a result of poor decision making and irrational beliefs about gambling. Group 2 includes emotionally conditioned gamblers who have anxiety and mood disorders. They gamble as a way to escape from stress and negative emotions. These gamblers are considered to be similar to those in Group 1 with the addition of being emotionally vulnerable. Group 3 includes antisocial impulsivist gamblers who are impulsive and tend to act without thinking about the consequences. They may also have antisocial personality disorder. These gamblers are considered to have the characteristics of those in Group 2 with the addition of impulsive traits. This study verified if the three groups could be used to describe a large cohort of problem gamblers in France. It also examined the type of gambling activities preferred by each of the three groups.

What the researcher did

The researchers used data from 372 problem gamblers who took part in the JEU cohort study. The JEU study is a 5-year study that investigates changes in gambling practices in France. The participants were clinically interviewed about their gambling habits, including how much money they spent on gambling per month and their participation in various forms of gambling activities in the past year. They completed a few questionnaires about their gambling problems, attitudes and irrational beliefs about

What you need to know

This study examined data from 372 problem gamblers in France to see if they formed distinct groups as suggested in past research. The results showed that there are distinct groups of problem gamblers who are emotionally conditioned (Group 2) or antisocial impulsivist (Group 3). But it is more difficult to isolate the specific characteristics of behaviourally conditioned gamblers (Group 1). Emotionally conditioned gamblers tend to prefer games of pure chance (e.g., scratch cards and one-armed bandits). Antisocial impulsivist gamblers are more likely to prefer games of skills (horse race and sports betting). The researchers proposed that what problem gamblers look for in gambling differs according to their impulsive and neurotic characteristics. On the one hand, there are impulsive, “active” problem gamblers who seek novelty and excitement. On the other hand, there are problem gamblers who gamble for reasons of “self-medication”, such as to escape from stress and negative emotions.

gambling, and personality traits. The participants were also asked about mental disorders, such as mood disorders, drug addiction, and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in childhood. The researchers grouped the participants who had anxiety or depression before they had a gambling problem as emotionally conditioned gamblers (Group 2). The participants who had antisocial personality disorder and the personality trait of novelty seeking were grouped as antisocial impulsivist gamblers (Group 3). Novelty seeking involves a tendency to

act impulsively and to seek out novel situations. The rest of the participants were grouped as behaviourally conditioned gamblers (Group 1). The researchers compared the characteristics of Group 2 to Group 1. They then compared Group 3 to Group 2.

What the researcher found

Compared to behaviourally conditioned gamblers (Group 1), emotionally conditioned gamblers (Group 2) were more likely to have engaged in illegal acts to fund gambling and feel irritated when trying to cut back gambling, and other addictive disorders. Group 2 gamblers had a moderate risk of suicide. There were more Group 2 gamblers who preferred games of pure chance compared to gamblers in the other two groups (e.g., scratch cards and one-armed bandits). Compared to Group 2 gamblers, antisocial impulsivist gamblers in Group 3 were more likely to have personal and work relationship problems. They were also less sensitive to reward, but more inclined to take risks. Group 3 gamblers tended to gamble alone, and had a high risk of suicide. There were more Group 3 gamblers who preferred games requiring some skills, such as horse race and sports betting. Group 1 gamblers were less likely to have mental disorders than gamblers in the other groups. They were not more likely to have a family history of problem gambling, and did not have more irrational beliefs. In terms of gambling activities, their preference seemed to lie in between those of Group 2 and Group 3. Almost half preferred games of pure chance and the rest preferred games of skills. Overall, the results showed that there are distinct groups of problem gamblers who are emotionally conditioned (Group 2) or antisocial impulsivist (Group 3). But it is more difficult to isolate the specific characteristics of behaviourally conditioned gamblers (Group 1) as past research has suggested. The researchers proposed a functional interpretation of gambling addiction, that what problem gamblers look for in gambling differs according to their impulsive and neurotic characteristics. On the one hand, there are impulsive, “active” problem gamblers who seek novelty and excitement. On the other hand, there are problem gamblers who gamble for reasons of “self-medication”. The latter may gamble to escape from

stress and negative emotions, and have depression and anxiety.

How you can use this research

Treatment and prevention providers can use this study to understand the different characteristics of problem gamblers. It may help to create more targeted treatment plans. For example, teaching emotionally conditioned gamblers how to deal with stress and negative emotions may help reduce gambling behaviour.

About the Researcher

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