

research snapshot

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Responsible gambling messages may increase stigma towards problem gamblers

What this research is about

The Australian government and gambling industry promote responsible gambling through advertisements, signage, and other media channels. Their messages aim to reduce harms from gambling by encouraging a range of behaviours. These include setting limit on how much to gamble, maintaining control, and self-monitoring. These messages often emphasize the individual role of gamblers in being responsible, rather than the practices by the government or the gambling industry. Some critics are concerned that the focus on personal responsibility may increase stigma towards problem gamblers.

There are two kinds of stigma: (1) felt stigma which refers to internal feelings, such as shame and guilt, experienced by problem gamblers; and (2) enacted stigma which involves discrimination against problem gamblers. The current study investigated how responsible gambling messages influenced the ways that people with a gambling problem felt about their gambling experiences. It also explored whether responsible gambling messages contributed to felt or enacted stigma.

What the researchers did

Participants were 26 people who had experienced problems with electronic gambling machines (EGMs). Participants were involved in a variety of gambling-related peer support (e.g., face-to-face groups, telephone support help-lines) and/or advocacy activities (e.g., community education, public speaking).

The researchers interviewed each participant. During the interview, they asked participants a number of questions related to seven themes: (1) experiences with gambling; (2) norms for gambling; (3) public

What you need to know

The government and gambling industry have promoted the idea of 'responsible gambling'. However, their messages may have a negative and stigmatizing impact on problem gamblers. Three ways that responsible gambling messages contribute to stigma are: (1) focusing on the personal responsibility of gamblers; (2) promoting norms for gambler behaviours, leading to self-blame and shame on the part of problem gamblers for not being able to meet those norms and control their gambling; and (3) creating negative stereotypes associated with problem gamblers (e.g., 'irresponsible', 'weak', etc.).

discussions of gambling; (4) responsible gambling; (5) community views of people with gambling problems; (6) responding to gambling problems; and (7) experiences with peer support and advocacy. The researchers also asked participants what they thought responsible gambling meant, and whether it was effective. They did not ask participants specifically whether responsible gambling was associated with stigma. Instead, participants were free to express their own views about the effects of responsible gambling.

The researchers each reviewed and identified themes within and between participants' interview transcripts. They regularly discussed and compared their interpretations. They also checked their interpretations with a small group of four participants to ensure that they had captured the participants' experiences and views.

What the researcher found

Participants believed that responsible gambling messages were ineffective in changing the behaviours of gamblers. They described that most gamblers already viewed their own gambling as 'responsible.' Participants also felt that responsible gambling messages might even encourage gambling as they promoted the idea that gambling could be controlled.

Participants thought that the government and gambling industry emphasized personal responsibility to avoid their own responsibility for gambling harm. They believed that the government and industry used these messages to create an appearance that they were minimizing harms without making meaningful changes on their end. Participants also believed that the focus on personal responsibility created a public perception that gamblers could and should control their gambling. As a result, community members would view problem gamblers negatively, such as being 'irresponsible' and 'weak'. Thus, it led to enacted stigma against problem gamblers.

Finally, participants described how the focus on personal responsibility led to feelings of shame and guilt. They talked about how they struggled with self-blame during their recovery. Also, participants talked about how responsible gambling messages promoted which gambler behaviours were the norms. If they could not meet these norms of behaviour, felt stigma resulted. Many described how they felt that they had done something morally wrong for not being able to control their gambling.

How you can use this research

The findings suggest a need for the government and gambling industry to change the way they communicate with the public about responsible gambling. Some messages should be shifted to focus on industry behaviour and the harms associated with different gambling products. This may help to reduce stigma due to a sole focus on personality responsibility. Future research should examine whether the views expressed by participants in this study are shared by a broader range of gamblers, including at-risk and non-problem gamblers.

About the Researcher

Helen E. Miller was a PhD student and **Samantha Thomas** is an associate professor in the Faculty of Health at the School of Health and Social Development at Deakin University, Australia. Helen Miller is currently an employee of the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation in Australia. To contact the researchers about this study, please write to Helen Miller at meli@deakin.edu.au.

Citation

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Keywords

Responsible gambling, stigma, peer support, advocacy, personal responsibility

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