Gambling is framed as a personal responsibility by Australian government and gambling industry

What this research is about
Historically, people who gambled excessively were seen as immoral. Today, excessive gambling is increasingly seen as a medical problem. Some researchers assert that gambling and problem gambling are often portrayed as being opposite in government, industry, and academic discussions. Gamblers are expected to be rational consumers who make informed choices. In contrast, problem gamblers are seen as failing to be disciplined and lacking self-control. This study explored how problem gambling and responsible gambling had been discussed by Australian state governments and gambling industry. It examined television campaigns and warning signs published by the state governments, as well as gambling industry websites.

What the researcher did
The researchers contacted Australian state and territory governments in August 2014. They asked for access to television campaigns in the past 2 years and warning signs placed in electronic gaming machine (EGM) venues. The researchers also searched the websites of three types of EGM venues in Australia (hotels, clubs, and casinos). They searched for web pages, documents, and videos about problem gambling and responsible gambling on those websites. The researchers analyzed the data sources for common themes. They looked for similarities and differences between government and industry, and between different government and industry data sources.

What the researcher found
The researchers identified two global themes.

What you need to know
This study examined television campaigns and warning signs published by Australian state governments, as well as gambling industry websites. In both government and industry data sources, there was a clear opposition being made between gambling and problem gambling. Gambling was described as an entertainment that had many social and economic benefits. In contrast, problem gambling was described as rare and harmful. Many industry sources emphasized that only a small number of gamblers had a gambling problem. There was no mention about people who might be at risk of problem gambling. In both government and industry data sources, gamblers were encouraged to gamble within their personal limits and monitor their own behaviour. The gambling industry was seen as having a role in responsible gambling. However, there was a heavy focus on individual responsible gambling behaviour. Overall, gambling was portrayed as an issue of personal responsibility. This portrayal created an image of problem gamblers as a deviant group who had failed to be disciplined and behave responsibly.

The first theme related to the opposition between gambling and problem gambling. The second theme related to how responsible gambling was discussed.

Opposition between gambling and problem gambling: There was a clear opposition between gambling and problem gambling in both government and industry data sources. Gambling was described in a positive way. It was portrayed as an entertainment that many
people enjoyed. Some data sources discussed the social and economic benefits of gambling. These benefits included jobs, tax revenue, and funding for social, sporting and community groups. Gambling was also described as a common and widely accepted activity that was a key part of Australian culture. In contrast, problem gambling was described as rare and harmful. Many industry sources emphasized that only a small number of gamblers had a gambling problem. There was no mention of people who might be at risk of problem gambling. The focus was on problem gamblers. Very few data sources discussed the causes or consequences of problem gambling. Some industry sources provided a list of indicators, such as finding it hard to stop at closing time. All data sources recommended help seeking or provided the details of gambling help services.

Discussion of responsible gambling: Responsible gambling was considered an aim for gambling policy and a practice for gambling venues. A key outcome was to reduce the prevalence rate of problem gambling. Government data sources had less focus on responsible gambling than industry data sources. In both government and industry data sources, gamblers were urged to gamble within their personal limits. A number of behaviours were ascribed for being a responsible gambler. These included staying in control, setting limits before gambling, and self-monitoring for signs of problem gambling. A number of mechanisms to encourage responsible gambling were also discussed. These included education campaigns to support players in making informed choice, staff intervention and self-exclusion programs. Some data sources discussed the shared responsibility between individual gamblers and the gambling industry. But the role of government was not highlighted. Overall, there was an emphasis on responsible gambling behaviours on the part of gamblers. Gambling was portrayed as an issue of personal responsibility. This emphasis created an image of problem gamblers as a deviant group who had failed to behave responsibly.

How you can use this research
Policy makers and intervention providers can use this study to understand the dominant ways that problem gambling and responsible gambling have been portrayed. Framing gambling as a personal responsibility can increase stigma. As a result, problem gamblers may be seen as less deserving of help. Government approaches should shift from a focus on irresponsible, problematic individuals to the role and responsibility of gambling industry. Future research should analyze government and industry discussions in contexts outside of Australia.

About the Researcher
Helen E. Miller and Samantha L. Thomas are with Deakin University in Victoria, Australia. Kylie M. Smith is at the University of Wollongong in Australia. Priscilla Robinson is at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. Questions about this study can be addressed to Helen Miller at meli@deakin.edu.au.

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Deviance, Foucault, gambling, responsibility, stigma

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)
Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in responsible gambling policies, standards and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

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