

Research Summary

Partner Influences on Gambling: An Exploratory Study

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Research Topic

Healthy families play a central role in maintaining the health of Canadians.

The purpose of this research was to explore in what ways, and with what degree of success, Ontario adults try to regulate their partner's gambling behaviour.

This study was based on a sociological model of behaviour change, focusing on the ways that individual behaviour may be constrained or influenced by their social structure.

The objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To describe the extent and character of problem gambling in a sample of Toronto residents;
2. To examine the extent and character of marital problems associated with problem gambling;
3. To describe the degree of **network embeddedness** of couples -- the degree to which they occupy each other's worlds;
4. To find out how the gambling problem, marital problem, and network embeddedness affect readiness for treatment.

Definition of Terms

Network Embeddedness: Term used in Sociology to describe a social relationship (e.g., between partners).

Exploratory Research: Studies undertaken in areas where there has been little or no research to date. As initial forays into new areas of inquiry, exploratory research looks for associations and relationships that might form the basis for more detailed inquiry. Data gathering is no less valid in exploratory research, but the findings may be limited to the sample studied and usually cannot be generalized to whole populations.

Cross-sectional Study: Research design that involves observing the same group of participants at the same point in time.

Self-selected Sampling: Participants volunteer to be included in a study after being asked or in response to an advertisement. This sampling technique is quick, easy, and has the ability to reach a wide variety of participants.

Gamblers Anonymous: 12-step program (modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous) and support group to assist people who are attempting to stop gambling.

Gam-Anon: Self-help organization for the partner, family, or close friends of problem gamblers.

¹ **About the Principal Investigator:** Lorne Tepperman, Ph.D. is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto.

Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI): Nine questions included on the CPGI that are scored to determine problem gambling severity: (1) chasing losses; (2) Escalating to maintain excitement; (3) borrowing/selling to get gambling money; (4) betting more than can afford; (5) feeling guilty; (6) criticized by others; (7) harm to health; (8) financial difficulties to household; and (9) sense of having a gambling problem.

Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI): An instrument designed to assess gambling behaviour in general populations, geared towards the gambling opportunities available in the Canadian context. Its four levels of gambling (Severe Problem, Moderate Problem, Mild Problem, and, Non-problem) render it more accommodating to the continuous nature of problem gambling.

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS): 32-item self-report measure used to assess the quality of a couple's relationship.

Network Embeddedness Scale: Instrument used in Sociology to assess the significance of social networks.

Longitudinal Study: Research design that involves observing the same group of participants over time (i.e., days, months, or years).

Research Design & Methods

- This research was an **exploratory, cross-sectional** sociological study.
- 90 adults from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) were **self-selected** to take part in this study.
 - 59 self-declared as having (or potentially having) a gambling problem.
 - 31 self-declared as *partners* of people who have, or potentially have, a gambling problem.
- 10 couples and 1 additional participant² took part in an extra couples component of the study.
- The sample was recruited via advertisements placed in newspapers, local educational gambling websites, and, with permission, at meeting places of **Gamblers Anonymous** and **Gam-Anon**.
- Participants were required to meet the following criteria in order to be included in the study:
 - had been living with an intimate partner within the 6 months prior to the study;
 - scored in the at-risk or problem range, or had partners who scored in the at-risk or problem range, on the **Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI)** of the **Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI)**; and
 - felt that gambling was a problem within their relationship.
- Qualified participants were asked to invite their partners to an in-depth interview at the University of Toronto.
- For initial interviews, a survey instrument containing approximately 90 closed-ended questions and an interview protocol containing approximately 30 open-ended questions were used.
- Couples willing to participate in the separate couples interview component were asked an additional set of 20 open-ended questions.
- Three questionnaires were developed, containing questions that fell into four main categories:
 1. Gambling – history of the problem gambler's gambling;
 2. Stages-of-change – thoughts about gambling and the problem gambling partner's motivation to change;
 3. Relationship – couples' closeness and embeddedness as measured by the **Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)** and **Network Embeddedness Scale**;
 4. Background – basic demographic questions, including age, sex, marital status, marital history, education, occupation, income, size of community lived in, and ethnic ancestry.

² The additional person interviewed was married and his spouse did not participate in the study.

Results/Discussion

- All participants were at least 18 years of age, with the majority between the ages of 25-59 years.
- Of the 59 gambling participants:
 - 36 were male and 23 female;
 - nearly 85% held at least a high school diploma, with 27% of these having some post-secondary/college/trade school education and 36% having completed post secondary or higher;
 - close to 50% were employed full-time, 19% worked part-time, 12% were students or retirees, 10% were unemployed, and 10% were “other”;
 - 80% had an average annual household income below \$50,000, with 50% below \$30,000.
- Of the 10 couples (and 1 additional individual):
 - 6 were married and 4 were cohabiting, including 1 gay couple;
 - 2 had dependent children living with them, 4 had adult children (including 1 couple who had an adult child living with them), and 5 did not have children;
 - 6 participants were East Indian, 4 were Chinese, 3 were French, 2 were native Indian/Inuit, 2 were English/British, 1 was Canadian, and 1 was German;
 - ages of participants ranged from the early 20’s to early 60’s;
 - 6 participants had some high school, 2 completed high school, 6 had some postsecondary training, and 5 completed post secondary education.
 - 7 participants were employed full-time, 2 were employed part-time, 2 were students, 4 were retired, 1 was a homemaker, and 2 were unemployed.
 - 8 participants had annual incomes less than \$20,000, 2 less than \$30,000, 3 less than \$40,000, 3 between \$50,000 and \$70,000, and 2 greater than \$80,000.

Games played

- The most popular gambling activities reported were:
 - lottery tickets – 83%;
 - scratch tickets – 75%; and
 - slots at a casino – 51%.

Gambling behaviour

- The average age participants started gambling was 17 years.
- 33% gambled daily, 53% gambled at least once a week, and 9% gambled about twice a month.
- 61% reported they gambled alone.
- 78% stated they had been worried about their own gambling behaviour.
- Partners of gamblers were less likely to describe gambling as a game of skill or intelligence.
 - 51% of gamblers said it was a game of skill, and 28% of their partners agreed.
 - 46% of gamblers said it was a game of intelligence, and 31% of their partners agreed.
- Partners were more likely than gamblers to consider gambling a social event.

Extent and character of problem gambling

- Most participants fell into the CPGI problem gambling category (score of 8 or more on the CPGI).
 - The average CPGI score was 15.
- 7 out of the 59 participants who self-declared as having a gambling problem scored below 8 on the CPGI.
- Much of the participants’ gambling behaviour could be considered high risk.
 - Only 12% consistently gambled within their limits, never betting more than they could afford to lose.
 - 72% indicated they would usually or always return [to the gambling venue] another day to try to win back the money they lost.
 - Close to 60% reported they needed to gamble with larger amounts of money each time to restore the feeling of excitement for gambling.

- 45% reported they sometimes experience financial problems at home because of their gambling, and 41% stated they usually or always experience these problems.
- Over 57% admitted to having people criticize them for gambling or tell them they have a gambling problem.
- Only half of the participants felt they had a gambling problem or felt guilty about their gambling.

Extent and character of marital problems associated with problem gambling

- Most marital relationships showed great strain and turmoil.
- Gamblers were more likely to consider divorce than their non-gambling partners.
- Gamblers were more likely than their non-gambling partners to say they regret getting married or living with their non-gambling partner.
- In general, partners were unaware of the emotional turmoil the gamblers were experiencing and the extent of their gambling-related difficulties.
- Neither the gamblers nor their partners believed partners can influence or moderate gambling behaviour.

Degree of couples' embeddedness

- Gamblers and their partners knew only some of the other's best friends and co-workers by first name.
- Some best friends and co-workers in the gamblers' and their partners' networks knew their friends' or co-workers' partner by first name.
- Siblings and parents on both sides of the partners usually knew the significant other of their children and siblings.
- Responses were summed to create a composite score of couple embeddedness. The average score of participants was 36.2 out of a possible score of 60.

How the gambling problem, marital problem, and embeddedness affected readiness for treatment

- Generally, as gambling problems increased, the quality of marital relations decreased, and vice versa.
- Participants who scored highly on the Network Embeddedness Scale usually knew their partner's innermost hopes and fears and had a close relationship with their partner.
- Problem gamblers tended to have less stable or close relationships with their partner.

Limitations

- As this is an exploratory study, findings must be interpreted with caution.
- Individuals and couples self-selected to participate in this study; therefore, the sample was not random and might not represent general attitudes and behaviours.
- This study had difficulty recruiting partners of people with gambling problems. As a result, the partner sample cannot claim to be representative of the general population of partners and the sample may be biased.

Conclusions

- Problem gambling has a dramatic effect on the financial, social, and psychological lives of gamblers and their partners.
- Problem gamblers tend to have a less stable or close relationship with their partner.
- The findings of this study demonstrate that the behaviours and actions of problem gamblers affect the lives of their loved ones, and to a limited degree, the reverse is also true.

Implications & Future Research

- Study findings may have an influence on prevention and treatment programs; for example, in developing programs for gamblers that involve their partners, new couples counselling techniques, and public education on how to talk to your partner about gambling.
- The researchers identified the following implications and potential research initiatives:
 - **Research**
 1. Examine problem gambling and its effects on the friends and families of problem gamblers in a **longitudinal study**.
 2. Explore the inclusion and effectiveness of couples therapy, paying special attention to communication, the nature of the relationship, and trust building.
 3. Determine whether a person who gambles becomes a problem gambler *because* they do not have a close relationship with their partner, or whether the relationship becomes more distant and troubled as a result of the gambling problems.
 - **Policy**
 1. From an educational/academic policy perspective, schools of social work and programs in couples and family therapy may consider including modules addressing problem gambling, paying particular attention to the inclusion of the financial complexities that surround this issue.
 - **Practice**
 1. There appears to be a need for a broad-based communication strategy messaging accessible treatment options and the fact that treatment can work.
 2. Clinicians, doctors, and health service professionals may need to be educated about the potential effects of problem gambling on spouses, siblings, children, and parents, and be made aware of the full range of family support interventions (specifically, couples and family therapy) when gambling-related relationship difficulties arise.