research snapshot
summarize | mobilize

Experiences of family members of people with gambling problems in Japan

What this research is about

Most forms of gambling are banned in Japan. The types of gambling that are allowed include sports betting and lotteries. There are also electronic gambling machines (EGMs) called *pachinko* and *pachislot* that are allowed to operate in parlors due to a regulatory loophole. When people who gamble win on a *pachinko/pachislot* machine, they receive a prize with little monetary value. The prize can then be exchanged outside of the parlor for cash.

There are few policies dedicated to problems caused by gambling in Japan. It is the responsibility of the person who gambles to recognize signs of addiction and to gamble in a moderate, or *tekidoni*, way. The impact of a loved one's gambling on family members has not been well-researched in Japan. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of family members of people with gambling problems who are not seeking help for their gambling.

What the researchers did

Six family members were interviewed for approximately two hours. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. There were five parents (mother or father) and one spouse who were interviewed. The family members who gambled had refused to seek treatment for their gambling problems, with the exception of one person who was in treatment.

The interview consisted of open-ended questions to elicit detailed accounts from the participants. The transcripts were translated from Japanese to English. They were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the content. They were analyzed with a focus on how each participant understood their personal and social

What you need to know

In Japan, policies surrounding gambling addiction take the point of view that it is the individual's responsibility to gamble moderately. Similarly, it is the individual's fault if they develop a gambling addiction. The goal of this study was to examine the experience of family members of someone who gambles problematically, while considering the impact of these types of policies. Six family members, of whom five were parents and one was a spouse to someone with a gambling problem, were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed and three themes that captured the contents were identified. The three themes were (1) secrecy and social isolation; (2) expectations of providing for family members to avoid social exclusion; and (3) self-blame and sense of failure as parents.

world. Three themes were identified that captured the participants' experiences.

What the researchers found

The three themes that the researchers identified were (1) secrecy and social isolation; (2) expectations of providing for family members to avoid social exclusion; and (3) self-blame and sense of failure as parents.

Secrecy and social isolation

The stigma around gambling addiction is pervasive in most societies, but particularly so in Japan. Participants noted pressure to maintain appearances and hide their family member's problems with gambling. This often includes lying about their family member when asked by other people, including

extended family. The negative consequences for the family members include high distress, anxiety, and financial burden.

Expectations of providing for family members to avoid social exclusion

The participants, particularly the mothers, discussed how they blamed themselves for enabling their family member's gambling. Family members are often asked to pay their loved one's debts. This is not advised as it continues the cycle of addiction. But, the risk of not paying the debts means that the family members with gambling problems might lose jobs or relationships. There is social pressure in Japanese society to take care of family members, which becomes complicated when there is a family member struggling with gambling.

Self-blame and sense of failure as parents

The participants blamed themselves for their loved one's gambling problems. In Japanese culture, the responsibility is placed on the individual to account for their actions. When asked, the participants did not understand how the broader socioeconomic context, including the gambling industry, politics, and culture, can impact the individual and their actions. Instead, they blamed themselves for not being a good enough parent and failing their children in some way. One participant turned to the authorities to deal with her son's gambling many years ago, about which guilt still remained.

This study showed support for the notion that the framework of individual responsibility for health problems in Japan contributes to the public stigma and self-stigma that family members of people who gamble experience. The self-stigma of being a bad parent that the participants felt elicited shame and efforts to maintain secrecy. The participants' responses also revealed public stigma related to the risk of status loss and social exclusion.

How you can use this research

This research could be useful for gambling researchers and professionals who treat people who gamble and their family members. This research could be

particularly useful to people who are interested in the gambling context in Japan.

About the researchers

Naoko Takiguchi is affiliated with the Department of Sociology at Otani University in Kyoto, Japan. **Yuko Kawanishi** is affiliated with the College of Global Communication at J.F. Oberlin University in Tokyo, Japan. **Eva Samuelsson** is affiliated with the Department of Social Work and the Department of Public Health Sciences at Stockholm University in Stockholm, Sweden. For more information about this study, please contact Eva Samuelsson at eva.samuelsson@socarb.su.se

Citation

Takiguchi, N., Kawanishi, Y., & Samuelsson, E. (2022). Secrecy, self-blame and risks for social exclusion—Family members' experiences of gambling problems in Japan. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *13*, Article 940397. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.940397

Study funding

About Greo

Greo has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. Greo is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization with almost two decades of international experience in generating, synthesizing, and mobilizing research into action across the health and wellbeing sectors. Greo helps organizations improve their strategies, policies, and practices by harnessing the power of evidence and stakeholder insight.

Learn more about Greo by visiting greo.ca or emailing info@greo.ca.