

knowledge snapshot



A review of the role of empathy in gambling and gambling disorder

What this article is about

Empathy has been divided into two types. Emotional empathy is the ability to feel similar emotions as other people by picking up on cues from them. Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand someone else's perspective. Being empathic supports social functioning, including relationships. People with some mental disorders and substance use disorders have lower levels of empathy. However, there is not much research on the role of empathy in people with gambling disorder (GD). GD is a behavioural addiction characterised by difficulty controlling one's gambling.

One theory suggests that there are internalizing and externalizing pathways to developing an addiction. The internalizing pathway suggests that lower levels of empathy lead to distress in social relationships. Thus, people may adopt an addictive behaviour to deal with negative emotions. The externalizing pathway suggests that lower levels of empathy make it difficult for people to hold back their impulsive behaviours. Not being empathic could contribute to the development of GD through both pathways.

The aim of this review was to identify and summarize research articles that have been published on the role of empathy in gambling and GD. The researchers wanted to know if being more empathic can protect people from developing GD.

What was done?

The authors created a search strategy to capture articles related to their topic. The search strategy focused on the key words "gambling" and "empathy". They applied this search strategy to the databases MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, PubMed, China National Knowledge Infrastructure,

Why is this article important?

Empathy is the ability to feel and understand what other people are experiencing. Low levels of empathy are seen in some mental disorders. Little is known about the role of empathy in gambling disorder (GD). The authors of this review searched for empirical articles that examined the relationship between empathy and gambling. They identified 11 articles, 10 of which looked at gambling behaviours and one that looked at GD. Most studies asked participants to watch or participate in a gambling task while their brain activities were measured. Nine studies found that activities in certain areas of the brain were associated with levels of empathy. One study found that people with GD had higher levels of emotional empathy but lower levels of cognitive empathy than healthy people. More research is required to understand how empathy affects gambling.

and Wan Fang. They identified 96 unique articles in their searches. Two of the authors read the abstract and titles of all 96 articles to determine whether they were relevant for the review. Sixty articles were eliminated in this way.

The two authors read the full-texts of the remaining 36 articles and included 11 of these articles in the review. To be included in this review, the articles needed to: (1) measure empathy, (2) measure gambling disorder and/or gambling, and (3) analyse the relationship between empathy and gambling in some way. The articles must also have been peer reviewed and written in English or Chinese language.

What you need to know

Methods used by included studies

Ten of the articles examined gambling behaviours generally. One article compared people with GD and people without GD. The studies that examined gambling behaviours tested people in lab settings and asked them to complete different gambling tasks. Most of the studies looked at participants' brain activities while completing the gambling task. Nine studies measured participants' levels of empathy using psychometric tools. The most common tool was the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). Two studies used experimental conditions where low and high levels of empathy were invoked in participants.

Relationship between empathy and gambling behaviour

Six studies asked participants to observe other people's gambling. Of these, three studies did not find a relationship between empathy and participants' brain activities. The remaining three studies did find a relationship. Participants' empathy levels were associated with their brain activities while watching a gambling situation. Eight studies asked participants to engage in a gambling task. Six of these studies found a relationship between empathy and brain activities whilst playing a gambling task.

Relationship between empathy and gambling disorder

The one study to examine empathy in GD found that people with GD had lower levels of cognitive empathy than healthy people. People with GD also did worse on an empathy-related task. However, they had higher levels of a component of emotional empathy called personal distress.

Emotional empathy and cognitive empathy

Five studies distinguished between different kinds of empathy. Four of these studies focused on emotional empathy. They found that it was related to the brain activities of people who were watching or participating in gambling. Other studies found that cognitive empathy was stimulated when watching or participating in gambling.

Who is it intended for?

This article is intended for researchers and treatment providers interested in empathy and gambling. The results indicate that empathy is likely involved in gambling. It also appears to play a role in GD, although there is not enough research to indicate the precise role of empathy. More research is needed to better understand how empathy affects the development and maintenance of GD.

About the researchers

Anise M. S. Wu, Hui Zhou, Le Dang, and Juliet Honglei Chen are affiliated with the Department of Psychology and the Centre for Cognitive and Brain Sciences at the University of Macau in Macao, China. Le Dang is also affiliated with the Faculty of Teacher Education at Pingdingshan University in Pingdingshan, China. For more information about this study, please contact Hui Zhou at vc07325@um.edu.mo.

Citation

Wu, A. M. S., Zhou, H., Dang, L., & Chen, J. H. (2022). Is empathy associated with gambling and its addiction? A scoping review of empirical studies. *Journal of Gambling Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-022-10130-w>

Study funding

This study was funded by the Macao SAR Government Higher Education Fund.

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.

