



The associations between cognitive and emotional empathy and gambling disorder

What this research is about

Gambling disorder (GD) is marked by an excessive and maladaptive gambling pattern. People with GD show addictive symptoms such as preoccupation with gambling and withdrawal when not being able to gamble. They often report functional impairments in both intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. The goal of this study is to examine if people with empathic ability are at reduced risk of GD because of their risk aversion and responsible gambling attitudes.

Empathy is the ability to experience and understand what others feel. It has two components: cognitive empathy and emotional empathy. People with emotional empathy have the ability to detect emotional cues from others. This allows them to automatically sense or tune into others' feelings. Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand others' thoughts and emotions by taking on their perspectives. There is evidence that empathy is linked to a lower risk of addiction. Lower levels of emotional and cognitive empathy have been reported in people with substance-related addictions. However, the link between GD and cognitive and emotional empathy has been less studied.

Risk aversion refers to a generalized pattern of negative attitudes towards potential risk. People with high levels of risk aversion avoid taking risks in various domains of life. People with higher levels of cognitive and emotional empathy may try to avoid risky behaviours, including gambling. This is because they may be more sensitive to others' negative emotions associated with losses. Cognitive and emotional empathy may also be associated with responsible gambling attitudes. People who hold responsible

What you need to know

The goal of this study was to examine if and how social abilities, specifically cognitive and emotional empathy, might be associated with gambling disorder (GD). It also examined whether the link between empathy and GD could be explained by risk aversion and responsible gambling attitudes. The researchers surveyed 580 adults who gambled on lottery tickets in China.

The results showed that people with higher levels of cognitive empathy had a lower risk of GD. But emotional empathy was not linked with GD. Risk aversion and responsible gambling attitudes explained the link between empathy on GD. People with higher levels of cognitive and emotional empathy showed a higher level of risk aversion. They were also more likely to hold responsible gambling attitudes. In turn, responsible gambling attitudes were associated with a lower risk of GD.

gambling attitudes believe that they should take control of their gambling.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited adults aged 18 and older in mainland China. The sample consisted of 580 participants who had gambled on lottery tickets in the past year. The average age of participants was 34.07 years old. About 50.4% identified as women. Participants were approached at public places near lottery retail shops. They were invited to complete an anonymous paper-version questionnaire.

The researchers included the following measures in the questionnaire:

- The 9-item DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for GD. Participants indicated if they experienced any symptoms of GD in the past year with a “yes” or “no” response. A higher total score indicated a higher risk of GD.
- The 22-item Chinese version of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index. The researchers used this scale to assess cognitive empathy and emotional empathy.
- The 6-item General Risk Aversion Scale. The researchers used this scale to measure participants' risk aversion.
- The 7-item belief subscale of the Chinese version of the Positive Play Scale. The researchers used this subscale to assess participants' attitudes towards responsible gambling.
- Demographic information, including age, sex, and frequency of lottery gambling in the past year.

What the researchers found

Among the 580 participants, the percentage of participants who met the DSM-5 criteria for GD was 9.1%. The researchers found that people with a higher risk of GD showed a lower level of cognitive empathy. But GD was not linked to emotional empathy. Both cognitive empathy and emotional empathy were positively linked to risk aversion. In other words, participants with high levels of cognitive and emotional empathy displayed more negative attitudes towards risk in general. But risk aversion was not associated with GD.

Responsible gambling attitudes showed a negative link with GD and a positive link with the two types of empathy. In other words, participants with responsible gambling attitudes had higher levels of empathy and a lower risk of GD. Responsible gambling attitudes were also associated with a higher level of risk aversion.

The effect of empathy on GD was explained by risk aversion and responsible gambling attitudes. People with higher levels of cognitive and emotional empathy

showed a higher level of risk aversion. They were also more likely to hold responsible gambling attitudes. In turn, responsible gambling attitudes were associated with a lower risk of GD.

How you can use this research

This study can be used to better understand the links between cognitive and emotional empathy and GD. The findings can inform research and public health programmes to prevent GD.

About the researchers

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Citation

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