Problem Gambling and Policy Advice: The Mutability and Relative Effects of Structural, Associational and Attitudinal Variables

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Research on gambling has the double mandate of public service and the advancement of science. This paper is meant to carry forward that mandate. Latent in research on the causes of problem gambling is the policy insight that these causes represent different types of phenomena and are unequally mutable to practitioners' efforts to prevent and/or treat problem gambling. By making the issue of mutability manifest in research, findings from research would have more policy relevance and practical import. Data from a 1989 Iowa survey on lottery play and problem gambling are analyzed to illustrate this point. 1,226 respondents were contacted by phone and phone interviews were completed with 1,011 of these 1,226 eligible respondents. With multiple regression, we assessed the contributions of mutable and immutable variables to the explained variance in problem gambling. The results show mutable correlates explain enough variance in problem gambling to recommend their consideration in treatment/prevention. The results also suggest a social as well as a psychological etiology to problem gambling. Future research should, however, do a more complete comparison of social and psychological causes of problem gambling.

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INTRODUCTION

Gambling as a Policy Issue

The diffusion of gambling in recent years raises several policy issues, and this is particularly true for state-sponsored lotteries (Clotfelter, 1979; Clotfelter & Cook, 1989; Livernois, 1987; Spiro, 1974; Suits, 1977; Vaillancourt & Grignon, 1988). One issue is state lotteries might bring an increase in problem gambling and thus state expense to treat it (e.g., Abt, Smith & Christiansen, 1985; Sommers, 1988; Jacobs, 1989). Some interest groups put this into a larger context of the moral decay of the country and create an alarming picture. The nation has 97 million lottery players, who can be seen mobbing ticket outlets to have a chance at big winnings in multi-million dollar jackpots (Wells, 1989). Are these 97 million people at risk of becoming problem gamblers? One claim is that through sponsorship and media advertising of gambling, states are legitimizing gambling and motivating the public into it. Furthermore, the availability of all forms of gambling, not only lotteries, has been growing in most states during recent years. Gambling could become more acceptable, actual gambling could grow and spread to children, and for two to ten percent of the population this could lead to problem gambling with another ten to 15 percent betting more than they can afford (Wells, 1989).

Problem gambling is defined in the psychiatric literature as pathological or compulsive gambling, a disorder of impulse control. According to this medical model, problem gambling is thought to be a progression into more gambling and heavier wagering, resulting in a loss of control over gambling and the eventual disruption of one's life (Bergler, 1958; Hraba, Mok & Huff, 1990; Kallick, Suit, Dielman & Hybels, 1979; Lesieur, 1977; Moran, 1975; Orford, 1985; Winston & Harris, 1984). Compulsive gamblers chase old betting losses with new wagers, trying to get even, a possible dynamic behind the spiral into problem gambling (Lesieur, 1979).

Latent in theory and research on gambling is the practical insight that causes of problem gambling, including lottery play, are unequally mutable to practitioners' efforts. Practitioners can exercise some control over mutable but not immutable correlates of problem gambling (see below). If the issue of mutability were made manifest in research, practitioners would find it easier to translate research findings into