



EDITORIAL

Fiona Nicoll and Murat Akcayir

Gambling policy is not based on evidence but on the politics of what counts as evidence. It is whoever decides this question who holds the cards.

- Anonymous interview participant in *Fair Game*, Cassidy, Loussouarn, and Pisac (2013, p.38).

The State of Play in Gambling Research

We are delighted to launch the inaugural issue of *Critical Gambling Studies*. You may be asking: why do we need a journal dedicated to critical gambling studies? So, let us share the genesis of this project. A few years ago, a group of gambling researchers in law and the humanities and social sciences agreed that it was time that an international peer-reviewed journal was established to showcase and stimulate excellent, innovative and interdisciplinary research that was not beholden to powerful stakeholders in government, industry and the addiction treatment professions. The road to establishing this journal was paved by two years of preliminary research on the existing situation of academic gambling studies as represented in databases of peer-reviewed academic literature.

Our meta-analysis of gambling research over three decades (1996-2018) demonstrated a serious imbalance in gambling research in Anglophone countries, where the majority is produced. We found that around 60 percent of the peer-reviewed literature in Scopus and Web of Science, from researchers working within and across jurisdictions in the UK, Canada, US, Australia and NZ, was generated within a relatively small group of disciplines – psychology, psychiatry and neuroscience. While business and economics represented around 10%, humanities and social sciences accounted for less than 8% of research.¹ The focus of most of the research in psychology, neuroscience and psychiatry is on problem gambling. In particular, it is concerned with the development and application of effective screens for

¹ Alberta Gambling Research Institute study of all peer-reviewed literature within Scopus and Web of Science databases. Publications are submitted and forthcoming in 2021. Please contact the authors for more information on this study.

identifying problem gamblers, administering prevalence surveys for counting their concentration, as well as different suggestions for preventing and treating problem gambling. However, in the last five years lootboxes and other addictive game mechanics have become a standard feature of popular videogames. This has seen a significant migration of gambling researchers with disciplinary backgrounds in psychology into videogaming studies, previously an academic field with a strong concentration of researchers in humanities and social sciences.

A deficit of genuinely inter-disciplinary research on gambling is one casualty of a vicious cycle that has developed over the past three decades. The more that gambling research has focused on problem gambling, the more natural it has seemed to other scholars and funding bodies that such research constitutes the field itself. There is evidence that gambling research is dominated by those who are not so much curious about gambling as desperate to find an accessible and renewable source of money to support an academic career. *Fair Game* (2013) was a project led by anthropologist, Professor Rebecca Cassidy from Goldsmiths, University of London. It involved a content analysis of gambling research literature as well as semi-structured interviews with 109 gambling research stakeholders including researchers, regulators and industry representatives in the UK, Europe, Australia, North America and Hong Kong/Macau (Cassidy, Loussouarn, et al., 2013). The interviews were especially revealing and disturbing. As one researcher put it: 'I wish I could tell you, "Oh yes, I have always been interested in gambling". I went for it because basically there was an opportunity there for me. I was following the money.' (p. 54). This was not an isolated response. Another reflected on their career trajectory: 'I wasn't planning to keep doing gambling but that's where the money was. It just took off and I guess I was drawn into it.' (p. 54). One of the other participants explained how this narrowing of intellectual scope happens:

There is pressure from the university to bring money in. As an academic you are definitely penalised for not engaging. More and more universities judge you by the funding you bring in in terms of research, and gambling and alcohol funding is very easy to get, especially if you don't care where it comes from (p. 62).

Fair Game also revealed that scholars in humanities and social sciences, who in some cases had completed significant doctoral studies on gambling, were given a clear message that they did not belong in the field. Established gambling research appeared to operate with a very narrow understanding of 'science'. As another participant explained: '...they just don't care to accept the same kinds of evidence which other fields or disciplines would.' (Cassidy, Loussouarn, et al., 2013, p.39). Several participants noted how the field favors quantitative methods:

Some disciplines like psychology are actually very good at being able to do something fast and empirical and get the results out quickly. You can have a veneer of objectivity and scientific respectability with numbers. That goes a long way with the bureaucrats... (p. 30)

Psychological research is regarded as more credible and scientific and that's in spite of long-established disciplines of public health, of geography, public economics (p. 30).

These comments, among others in the *Fair Game* study, provide a window into the everyday experience of researchers in humanities and social scientists who are working to develop and deepen existing knowledge of gambling.

Why do we need more genuinely interdisciplinary research on gambling?

There are significant limitations of existing gambling research. These include an over-reliance on psychological screens, used in clinical settings and prevalence surveys, as well as the application of

laboratory methods to study participants who are often not demographically representative of those who gamble in everyday life. Prominent scholars in gambling research are not unaware of these limitations. Calls for 'further research' into social and cultural dimensions of gambling are ubiquitous in publications and conferences. However, these calls are rarely supported by commitments to funding, or by invitations to leading humanities and social science researchers to collaborate. Instead, gambling researchers have adopted a 'biopsychosocial'² framework of understanding (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002). Griffiths and Delfabbro (2001) claim that 'when one takes a biopsychosocial view, it becomes possible to perceive the individual gambling in terms of its broader social and cultural context' (p. 21). They argue that such an approach incorporates '...the best strands of contemporary psychology, biology and sociology' (p. 2). While this is a noble ambition, it raises the question of what qualifies these researchers to judge the 'best strands' of fields in which they lack disciplinary and interdisciplinary expertise. The promotion of biopsychosocial approaches might be viewed as an attempt to keep knowledge within restricted disciplinary territory rather than paving a concrete path to new and genuinely interdisciplinary understandings of gambling phenomena.

Notwithstanding the obstacles described by participants in the *Fair Game* report cited above, researchers in the humanities and social sciences continue to publish excellent work on gambling. Much of this work is contained in edited books or monographs that often take many years to produce. Important edited collections include Kingma's (2010) study of global gambling organizations, a collection of qualitative gambling research projects by Cassidy, Pisac, and Loussouarn (2013), a study of public policy and science related to gambling by Sulkuinen et al. (2019), and research on gambling in European welfare states by Egerer, Marionneau, and Nikkinen (2018) Co-authored books address other

important issues, including labour relations in gambling industries, from a critical feminist perspective (Chandler & Jones, 2011; Mutari & Figart, 2015). Monographs include Lears' (2003) magnificent study *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*, Gerda Reith's (1999) sociological milestone on gambling in western culture, *The Age of Chance* (1999) Jeffrey Sallaz's (2009) rewriting of Erving Goffman's sociology of gambling through the lens of comparative labour studies in *The Labour of Luck*, and Emma Casey's (2008) careful and original study of working-class women lottery players, *Women, Pleasure and the Gambling Experience*. Other key sources are Marieke de-Goede's (2005) genealogy of finance and gambling, *Virtue, Faith and Fortune*, Peter Adams' (2008) study of the political impact of commercial gambling, *Gambling, Freedom and Democracy*, as well as his (2016) study of research ethics involving knowledge of dangerous consumptions, *Moral Jeopardy*, and *Regulatory Failure* (2011), Linda Hancock's case study of social (ir)responsibility in a large Australian casino. Natasha Schüll's (2014) book, *Addiction by Design*, uses qualitative methods of participant-observation and interviews with slot machine addicts, together with those who design and market EGMs in Las Vegas. In addition to raising important questions about what constitutes gambling experience in late modernity, her study provoked new research on 'sticky' algorithms that generate our attachment to devices such as mobile phones. Other key titles include, *Poker: The parody of capitalism*, Ole Bjerg's (2011) penetrating psychoanalytic study of poker and capitalism, Cesar Albarrán-Torres' (2018) timely and creative book, *Digital gambling: Theorizing gamble-play media*, and Fiona Nicoll's (2019) critical cultural study, *Gambling in Everyday Life*. Most recent publications include Kate Bedford's *Bingo Capitalism* (2019), which provides a legal and political history of Bingo and charts important transformations in this everyday gendered cultural practice, and Rebecca Cassidy's anthropological

² For a brief description, history, and critical evaluation of this framework, see Ghaemi, 2009.

reflections on a career in gambling research, *Vicious Games* (2020).

Creating a public intellectual space for critical gambling studies

In spite of these important milestones in gambling research, scholars in humanities and social scientists lack the institutional support of journals and research centers that support so much of the psychological and medical research on gambling. One consequence of so few incentives for us to continue research in the field is that most of our primary teaching and research is on topics unrelated to gambling. *Critical Gambling Studies* was established to ameliorate this situation and to provide a forum for debates on the most urgent questions raised by gambling provision, consumption and regulation.

Establishing this journal has not been without challenges. There were robust and sometimes difficult debates and consultations among editorial board members about how to define and maintain academic integrity in 'critical' gambling research. In particular, we needed to work through the role of commercial gambling industries in setting the gambling research agenda, limiting access to research data and sponsoring key global conferences (Cassidy, 2014; Livingstone & Adams, 2016). Through a process of consultation among the editorial board members, we have produced clear and rigorous guidelines for authors and reviewers to address conflicts of interest and promote transparency about sponsorship and stakeholders in the peer-reviewed research that is published in *Critical Gambling Studies*.

In addition to establishing a presence as a new academic journal it was important to create a space to articulate our broader intellectual project and to showcase the diverse methods and theoretical frameworks used by gambling researchers in humanities and social sciences. The *Critical Gambling Studies* website and blog provide a forum for a timely public exchange of ideas and research findings. Existing topics of blog posts include:

money laundering, stigma, and urban gambling developments, as well as comparative reflections on 'influencers' in videogame and gambling product reviews and marketing. Our *Twitter* account shares the latest developments in commercial gambling and regulatory policies adopted in different jurisdictions around the world. In addition to peer-reviewed academic articles, our open themed and special issues include book reviews and interviews with senior gambling researchers who have been outspoken about different aspects of gambling. We also plan to provide a space for links to important grey literature in the field.

We believe that this first open issue demonstrates the value of the broader intellectual project of critical gambling studies. Each article takes a topic that is timely and relevant and exemplifies new methods, applies new theoretical frameworks, or shares a new discovery.

Before a detailed introduction to the contents, it seems important to acknowledge the environment into which we are launching *Critical Gambling Studies*. Impacts of COVID-19 have exacerbated uncertainty about the capacity of free markets to address the needs of citizens at a time of global pandemics and disruptive climate change. We are experiencing a radical shift in the kinds of risks that gambling has historically mediated as an everyday cultural practice, as a metaphor for capitalism, and as an indispensable source of taxation revenues. What does it mean to gamble now and how is this likely to change? What role will gambling play in the months ahead for individuals and communities, whose ordinary activities have been curtailed by various forms of social isolation? What will be the long term consequences of the rising popularity of online gambling – both for real and for play money? How will gambling exacerbate or help to ameliorate political, economic and cultural challenges in the long period of recovery ahead?

An important consideration, as we ponder these questions, is the way that legal gambling links individuals and communities to nation states and specific jurisdictions. For the past three decades,

gambling deregulation has been primarily justified by governments, industry and researchers as an expression of individual freedom and as a venue where individual responsibility should be exercised. Several of the essays in this issue raise important questions about the primacy of the individual in determining how gambling is made available and regulated by governments. Significant criticism of the individual focus that dominates research on problem gambling has come from scholars in the field of public health (See Reynolds et al., this issue). The COVID-19 crisis has prompted unprecedented government intervention within the spheres of finance, social welfare and medicine to protect the lives and livelihoods of citizens. Will these mechanisms be available to address individual and community harms from gambling after the crisis, or will an expansion of extractive gambling forms appear as a necessary evil required to help fund the process of economic recovery?

Action, Responsibility, Comparative Research Methods, Systems Theory, and Reflections from the field of Alcohol Studies

How has the socio-cultural work of gambling changed since Erving Goffman developed his sociological theory of 'action'? How well does his influential account of action within gambling, as well as gambling as a prototype for social action, hold up today? How has the gambling experience itself been transformed in late modernity and what are its prospects for shaping the 'characterology' that Goffman began to develop? In 'Where Isn't the Action?', James Cosgrave considers these questions, with reference to current social theories of action in late modernity, including 'the risk society', 'edgework' and 'reflexivity'. In particular, he reconsiders gambling's role in constructing a subject of action, proposing a new characterology which sees the reproduction of social order in continual tension with the navigation of a universe constituted of overlapping uncertainties.

It has almost become a truism to point to the limitations of gambling research frameworks that

center on the individual gambler. In spite of widespread awareness of this epistemological problem, it has proved extraordinarily difficult to move beyond the individual focus of gambling studies. Egerer, Marionneau and Virtanen (2018) suggest that this challenge must be tackled simultaneously on the fronts of theory and methodology. They ask us to consider what might change when we approach gambling less as a problem of self- or government- regulation and more as a problem of systems and communication. Their application of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory demonstrates a new way to break deadlocks in positivist and critical gambling research by considering the *gambling system* and its environment. Encompassing related spheres from intimacy and family to politics, science, technology, health, entertainment and economy, a systems approach enables researchers to analyze the stakes and non-stakes involved in each sphere.

Battles have been raging about the definition and value of 'responsible gambling' for over a decade. The past three years have seen polarising debates over 'the Reno model of responsible gambling', focused, in particular, on the ethical terms through which it reconciles the interests of industry, government and academic researchers (Hancock & Smith, 2017). Reynolds, Karouz and Ilacqua undertake a scoping review to explore how responsible gambling is defined in the academic research literature and to examine the kinds of evidence that have been generated to support its value and efficacy as a policy program, vehicle for corporate responsibility and academic research focus. Their study of existing research (including that which is critical of RG) identifies a lack of interdisciplinary scholarship and a need for further studies that promote consumer protections and improved public health outcomes.

Virve and Hellman explore the apparent paradox of gambling monopolies in jurisdictions that are otherwise governed by neoliberal economic logics and social values. How should we understand the persistence of national gambling monopolies such

as that in Finland? Why does gambling warrant an exceptional status as a state monopoly when global gambling companies operate through competitive licensing regimes in so many other parts of the world? To answer this question, the authors situate the Finnish monopoly, both in relation to its regional and administrative context in the European Union and in relation to other monopolies in Finland, which have been subjected to neoliberal reforms. A detailed comparison of the ways that mainstream media reports on political debates about the merits of alcohol, gambling and rail monopolies, reveals a strong consensus among stakeholders as an important factor in sustaining a gambling monopoly in Finland.

An interview between Fiona Nicoll and veteran alcohol researcher, Professor Robin Room, continues a focus on comparative understanding of gambling within and across jurisdictions. Room began his career as a sociologist in Canada and produced some of the earliest social impact studies on regional gambling developments. While his career was spent mostly on alcohol studies, he has continued to collaborate with gambling researchers and provides valuable insights into the similarities and differences between the ways that each are regulated and researched. He also reflects on current issues in gambling research from the perspective of an expert who has observed an academic field develop from its origins, considering important shifts in power between different stakeholders over this time.

Finally, our book review provides an opportunity for celebration and critical engagement with gambling research that moves beyond the politics of problem gambling to consider gambling's role in broader projects of national and regional economic development. Murat Akcayir's book review discusses Lee Kah-Wee's book (2019), "*Las Vegas in Singapore: Violence, Progress and the Crisis of Nationalist Modernity*," that focuses on history, architecture and juridical histories behind the Marina Bay Sands and explores the role of gambling in Singapore, from colonial times to the post-independence period.

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Funding Statement

The Alberta Gambling Research Institute is a consortium of three universities in the province of Alberta (University of Alberta, University of Lethbridge and University of Calgary). It receives provincial government funding to produce peer-reviewed studies relevant to gambling policy in the province as well as nationally and internationally. Funds are administered at arms-length from the government through an independent board.

Dr Nicoll has also received funds since 2016 from the following sources:

2018-2019 Faculty of Arts TRC Fund to produce video What Comes Next? Political Afterlives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission \$5,000.

2017-2018 Emil Skarin funds to produce video What Comes Next? Political Afterlives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission \$5,125.

2017 Intersections of Gaming and Gambling. Visiting fellowship with Dr Mark Johnson (KIAS, China Institute and AGRI) \$3343.00

2017 AGRI start-up funds. 'Meta-analysis of Gambling Research and Comparative Indigenous Gambling Policy Research' (AGRI Start Up funds) \$30,000

2016 \$86,436 from AGRI for Gambling responsibly: Measuring and validating responsible gambling behaviours amongst regular gamblers in Alberta. Co-investigator in international team led by Garry Smith.

2016-2021 – Alberta Gambling Research Institute Chair on Gambling Policy.

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