



GAMBLING RESEARCH REVEALS

Against the odds

Dr. Bonnie Lee believes repairing marriage bonds can bolster recovery from gambling addiction

Problem gambling can shake every aspect of one's life—particularly a couple relationship, which can crumble under the weight of financial stress and betrayal. But Dr. Bonnie Lee says the relationship between gambling and couple stress isn't as straightforward as many assume.

"Most people think linearly, 'Look what problem gambling did,'" argues the assistant professor in the Addictions Counselling program in the Faculty of Health Sciences. "They're less aware that maybe those problems were there in the first place."

Lee, who uses couple therapy to treat gambling addiction and other mental health symptoms, is researching the complex relationship between clinical problems such as gambling, depression and couple intimacy. There are many contributing factors to addiction, but difficulties in one's relationships figure prominently. After the addictive behaviour develops, Lee explains that the addiction exacerbates relationship impasses, and relationship conflicts worsen the addiction, creating "a vicious and defeating circle of cause-and-effect."

Her recent research substantiates this. Analyzing transcripts from couple therapy sessions of serious problem gamblers and their spouses, Lee discovered that "these couples had problems in their relationships—I call them 'fault lines'—far before the gambling problems began." The limited depth and range of their conversations precluded intimacy and their problems from being resolved.

The emotional distance between spouses ultimately creates lives of secrecy, of which gambling was an instance.



"Couple work is better done sooner than later before a relationship reaches the point of no return."

The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Its primary purpose is to support and promote research into gaming and gambling in the province.*

OUR MISSION

To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society

By repairing the foundation of a couple's relationship, one makes available to both partners an invaluable life resource in support and understanding that bolsters recovery.



Jonathan Parke

Without spousal support, a pressure point—usually a life transition like retirement, initiation into parenthood, or job loss—could precipitate a gambling problem. Because the loss and deception only deepen the divide between spouses, the residual anger and lack of trust in the relationship can lead to relapse.

Lee thinks helping gamblers and depressed individuals in the context of couple therapy can pay huge dividends. By repairing the foundation of a couple's relationship, one makes available to both partners an invaluable life resource in support and understanding that bolsters recovery. However, success hinges on the willingness of both spouses to take part in counselling, and Lee is developing a way of recruiting the fearful spouse, a strategy that seems to be working well.

The Alberta site at the University of Lethbridge for a pilot randomized controlled trial of Congruence Couple Therapy for problem gamblers and their partners has just opened this summer. The project is funded by the Ontario Problem Gambling Research Centre.

"Couple work is better done sooner than later before a relationship reaches the point of no return."

A similar version of this article appeared in the Spring 2009 issue of *"Snapshot: University of Lethbridge School of Health Sciences."* Permission to republish the article was granted by University Advancement, University of Lethbridge.

Additional presentation summaries from the institute's Eighth Annual Conference

Included in this issue of the newsletter are several summaries of conference presentations from the Institute's Conference on Internet Gambling. This event took place in March, 2009 at the Banff Centre. PowerPoint presentation slides from these and other conference presenters are available from the 'Events' section of the Institute web site.

Jonathan Parke—The behavioural dynamics of online gamblers

In his address to conference participants, Dr. Jonathan Parke of the University of Salford detailed his involvement in a research investigation which examined attitudes and behaviours of online casino and poker players across three continents. The study itself was commissioned by eCOGRA¹ and included both an online survey of 11,000 self-selected participants and five face-to-face focus groups held in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and Sweden.

While discussing what motivated online gamblers, Parke noted, *"The promise of winning money was vital to the game. Profitability, while preferable, wasn't essential."* In other words, players were prepared to lose long-term provided they were playing for real money—so the excitement for playing with money and profitability are, in fact, two different things. Parke also found that the least common motivation for gambling online was to socialize.

A host of other interesting findings were also revealed in the data collected as part of the study. For example, 12% of Internet poker players reported that they "gender swap"². Participants were found to be "lukewarm" in their support for responsible gambling

¹ eCOGRA, a non-profit organization, is the independent standards authority of the online gaming industry, specifically overseeing fair gaming, player protection and responsible operator conduct.

² Players "gender swap" by representing themselves as a member of the opposite sex through the use of an avatar (i.e., a graphic identity selected from a group of choices) or by using a gender-specific name.



Sarah Nelson

From the Institute Library...

In May 2009, the Institute made available the report *Gambling and Risk Behaviour: A Literature Review* (2009, March) by Dr. Erin Gibbs van Brunschot. It examines the connections between gambling and other forms of risk activity. Funding for the project was provided by the Alberta Gaming Research Institute in collaboration with the University of Lethbridge Library.

The report is available from the following web address: <<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/47229>>.

features, though 71% of them thought that being sent financial statements that tracked their expenditures would be valuable. Also, a significant group of online gamblers reported that they could gamble online and perform other tasks at the same time.

Though the study had methodological limitations (e.g., self-report, self-select, predominance of U.S. respondents), the results did offer many interesting findings and poignant observations. For instance, Parke indicated that, "Overall, support was given to responsible gambling policies that permitted players to have more control and information to make better decisions—such as knowing odds of games or clear, detailed and regular financial statements—compared to more prohibitive measures such as limits and exclusion."

Sarah Nelson—Investigating "Real-Time" internet gambling behaviour

An enduring challenge of studying Internet gamblers has been the unavailability of data that accurately represents their actual online gambling behaviour (i.e., spending patterns, time played, etc.). According to conference presenter Dr. Sarah Nelson of the Division on Addictions at Harvard Medical School, previous studies have primarily relied on data provided through retrospective gambler "self-report." Though interesting on its own, self-report should be supplemented with data collected from *actual* gambling episodes in order to create a more complete picture of player gambling behaviour. In 2004, Nelson and her research group partnered with Austrian-based gambling site operator bwin.com to obtain access to actual player data which they have since incorporated into their research investigations.

Nelson's first analysis using bwin data involved following the betting behaviour of 40,499 Internet sports gamblers over the course of eight months. The majority of the sample was male, had a median age of 31 and came from 85 countries with Germany, Greece, Spain, and Turkey being the most highly represented. Various measures were devised to segment the data (e.g., bet duration, bet frequency, bets per day, total wagered, net loss, etc.). "Approximately 1% of this group was found to have a disproportional high betting behaviour," said Nelson and characterized these individuals as being "heavily involved" bettors. Since the disposable income of these bettors remained unknown, Nelson indicated that it wasn't possible to determine the potential for social harm these losses might have caused. It did seem, however, that problem gambling appeared uncommon among this sample of sports bettors.

A related analysis was undertaken on data from 4,222 Internet casino gamblers (93% male) who frequented the bwin site. Interestingly, the female gamblers among them were found to have placed proportionately more casino bets than their male counterparts. Online casino gamblers as a whole placed more bets per day (49 bets) in comparison to sports gamblers (4 bets) even though they played less frequently. Nelson also discovered that the typical daily losses for casino gamblers were considerably higher than losses by sports bettors in this cohort.

Nelson's final examination reviewed the effectiveness of two responsible gambling interventions being used at the Bwin site—deposit limits and self-betting limits. Gamblers' betting behaviour after setting self-imposed limits, generally moved in the direction of placing fewer bets but only 1.2% of the sample participated in either system. In her conclusion, Nelson stated that these and other empirical investigations like them will provide much-needed evidence for the development of safe and effective responsible gaming interventions.



John McMullan—Cheating and cybercrime @ GamblingSites.com

Professor John McMullan of Saint Mary’s University in Halifax, Nova Scotia gave conference attendees a glimpse into the murky world of criminal behaviour as it relates to Internet gambling. McMullan gained these insights through an exploratory investigation which involved a meticulous review of academic literature and other relevant materials (e.g., news articles, technical white papers, gaming commission reports, etc.). The review centred on the diversity of cheating types, techniques employed by criminals, and issues related to law enforcement and security on the Internet. Based on the review, he identified the following three distinct types of criminal organizations that have emerged to take advantage of opportunities in the digital realm:



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- 1. Techno-nomads** are characterized as individuals working alone who use their superior technological skills to take advantage of situations for economic gain. McMullan’s example of this type of criminal was a 16-year-old known as “JJProdigy.” JJProdigy was able to organize multiple accounts on the PartyPoker.com site for the purpose of reaching lucrative final tables and collecting large monetary prizes.
- 2. Digital associates** collude with criminal partners in small teams to take advantage or undermine the integrity of gambling sites themselves. Scandals at AbsolutePoker.com and UltimateBet.com were cited by McMullan as two recent examples of cases involving collusion among associates. In these instances, Internet poker software was compromised in such a way as to allow “hole cards” held by opponents to become visible to the associates during game play.
- 3. Criminal assemblages** are large professional networks of up to a dozen people who are involved in large-scale crimes that are global in scope. A classic example of assemblages discussed by McMullan involved the “cloning” of the Euromillions Espania lottery web site. The criminal perpetrators tricked site visitors into believing they were accessing the bonafide Euromillions site when in reality they were at the criminal’s fraudulent replica site. Personal and financial information was then stolen from these unsuspecting visitors. Criminal networks also target Internet gambling sites by threatening to deny access³ to visitors in order to extort money. In some cases, gambling sites are employed for the purposes of laundering money or to evade taxation.

In concluding, McMullan recommended that it would be prudent for worldwide jurisdictions offering Internet gambling to revise and harmonize laws related to the activity. In addition, he opined that trans-border enforcement of laws pertaining to crime on the Internet needed to be strengthened. Without such improvements, online gamblers will continue to have serious concerns about whether the online games they’re playing are fair, honest and free of criminal activity.

* The Institute is funded by the Alberta government through the Alberta Lottery Fund.

³ This is known as a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack. Coordinated “armies” of computer bots are directed to overwhelm a web site in order to prevent it from functioning optimally.