

Why do we gamble?

By Geoffrey Hutson

I am a punter. Like most Australians I enjoy having a bet. My particular poison is punting on the ponies, but others like to gamble on Tattslotto, Keno, the soccer pools, the stockmarket, football, the pokies, and scratch tickets. Some even play bingo. Soon we will have a casino. Gambling is huge, more than huge; it is humungous. It pervades all aspects of our life. It is the largest organised industry in Australia, the southern hemisphere, the world, the universe. It is even bigger than religion. Which all suggests that the next biggest question after questions about God and the universe must be - why do we gamble?

Various scientific disciplines have had a go at explaining this phenomenon, including psychiatry, economics, sociology and psychology. Sigmund Freud was one of the first to stick his oar in. He reckoned that gambling was a form of self-punishment, arising from Oedipal conflict. He even went so far as to suggest that compulsive gambling was a substitute for masturbation. Edmund Bergler, another psychoanalyst, treated 60 compulsive gamblers and concluded that they were neurotics driven by an unconscious wish to lose. Repeated gambling was seen as a self-destructive desire for punishment which turned into chronic masochism, craved with an uncontrollable passion. However, the prevailing psychiatric model is less depressing and describes compulsive gambling as an addictive behaviour which is categorised along with other addictive behaviour patterns such as excessive alcohol intake, over-eating, smoking and drug dependence. The overall implication is that compulsive gamblers are different from other gamblers and are mentally ill.

But when scientists have actually compared regular heavy gamblers with compulsive gamblers they find few differences. Mark Dickerson at the ANU found that the demographics, personality, forms of gambling outlet, amount of time and money spent gambling and self-control were all much the same.

Dickerson's view, which is gaining increasing scientific acceptance, is that compulsive gamblers are a subset of the population of normal regular gamblers. They are different only in that they have sought help from a helping agency and in the process attracted the label "compulsive". A gambler in this situation accepts this label because the financial disaster can then be blamed on factors beyond the gambler's control and some self-respect can still be retained. This in no way is meant to undermine the seriousness or reality of the personal problems such gamblers may face. However, as science comes to recognise that compulsive gambling is not a mental illness, but an extension of normal behaviour, then so the treatment does not have to have the primary goal of abstinence. I was immensely heartened to read recently that Professor Alex Blaszczynski of Liverpool Hospital has found that controlled gambling as well as abstinence were successful outcomes of treatment programmes for pathological gamblers and that controlled gambling was not a temporary response which was followed by a return to continued uncontrollable gambling.

That dismal science, economics, has also had a go at explaining gambling behaviour. Economists argue that people gamble for monetary gain. However, here is a paradox, because as we all know, the only sure winner in the gambling stakes is the Government, and 99.9 per cent of all other gamblers lose. Why do we keep gambling if we lose? Two possible economic explanations are that punters are not aware of the true odds, or that the potential "utility of wealth" outweighs the poor odds on offer.

The lack of awareness argument is easily dismissed as several large scientific studies of thousands of race results have confirmed, that at least for horse racing, the market is a fairly accurate indicator of a horse's true chance of winning. There is only a slight tendency for punters to bet too much on longshots and not enough on favourites.

The utility of wealth idea was suggested in 1948 by Milton Friedman and L.J. Savage who argued that individuals will gamble if they place high value on the chance of achieving a major increase in wealth that

will allow them to improve their socio-economic position. Subsequent tests of this idea suggest it may have some credence for lottery and Tattsлото enthusiasts, pursuing a potentially life-changing outcome, but no significance for all other forms of gambling. Also, explaining gambling by saying it has “utility” doesn’t really explain much anyway.

That softest of sciences, sociology, has also had a go. Although hampered initially by views of gambling as deviant behaviour, recent sociological studies have made rapid progress. John Rosecrance (*Gambling Without Guilt*, 1988) has studied casino and racetrack gamblers in their natural setting - at the casino and racetrack. Rosecrance reported that gamblers in these settings were normal people carrying out conventional behaviour in a social setting. Gambling was associated with social rewards, including group membership, social interaction and the formation of satisfying and lasting social relationships.

Psychologists have studied gambling behaviour, risk taking and decision making in the laboratory. These studies have usually used college students, betting with play money in fake casinos. The outcome of these types of studies has been concepts such as “risky shift”, which suggest that individuals risk more in the company of others. However, these studies have been criticised on the grounds that the subjects, American college students, are notoriously more conservative than real gamblers and don’t risk their own money.

Recently, psychologists have ventured out into the field and studied gamblers in their natural setting - the racetrack, casino and pokie hall. Igor Kusyszyn, in his classic paper “*How gambling saved me from a misspent sabbatical*”, has probably got the closest of any academic. He spent his study leave gambling - horses, cards and blackjack - and in between times interviewed real gamblers. His conclusion? Gambling behaviour is an expression of the need to search for meaning in life - “a need that may be so powerful, pressing so hard for fulfilment, that the individual is willing to suffer financial loss, social isolation, and even personal tragedy in responding to it.” Gambling confirms our existence and our self worth. Gambling confirms that we are alive.

This view of gambling is best illustrated by the apocryphal story of the sociologist approaching the winning punter who has just had a huge collect. The sociologist asked the punter how he picked the winner. Replied the punter: “Who do you think I am, a nobody?”

Why do I gamble? Well, I’ve read all the literature, and I know all about Oedipal conflicts, masochism, addiction, sensation seeking, arousal, excitement, escape, partial reinforcement effects, subjective and objective probabilities, utility, risk taking and decision making. I probably gamble for all of these reasons. I also know that only 0.01% of gamblers finish ahead in their lifetimes. I gamble for this reason too. I want to be part of that 0.01%. I want to be a player in the hardest of games, the ultimate intellectual challenge. I want to be a winner. I want to be somebody!

As a rational scientist I also know that my gambling behaviour is unproductive, uneconomical and irrational. But when my horse bursts from the pack at the Flemington clocktower, and hits the front, full of running, what do I care? Go, go you beauty, go!

Therefore, I gamble to live. I live to gamble.

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