

Evidence and Rhetoric

a reflection by Adrian Bailey

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There's isn't a debate about gambling harms. There are many debates. Some forums of debate witness very emotive rhetorical polarisation which at their worst see folk resorting to personal insults rather than cooler exchanges. One 'hot topic' is to do with claims about 'evidence' or the lack thereof.

As somebody who has some experience teaching scientific methodology and statistics, and a little research experience (only at PhD level) I am reasonably able to appreciate some of the hundreds of research papers about gambling over the last four decades.

In the nature of all academic research, intellectual humility is a taken for granted core value. Researchers only ever see themselves as contributing to very wide bodies of knowledge. Truly, some research is flawed in its methodology and other academics serve to point this out. However, a research report will always discuss its limitations.

Since researchers have their own special interests and accumulated years of specialised experience their work will tend towards expertise in quite narrow areas, in one of the many fields of gambling research for instance. And within each narrow area there will, as well as disagreements about research methodology for instance, be broader disagreements about conclusions.

Increasingly in gambling research as with all health research there has been a shift towards qualitative research, for instance concentrating on the very wide differences between individuals' experiences of gambling and any harms they suffer. This is referred to as investigation into gambling 'careers'. This does not, of course, present a 'better' way than quantitative research which is enormously important; it's best seen as a more appropriate way in certain contexts, and this obviously depends upon what the researcher is trying to discover. (Five years of such research, talking with gamblers for instance, may only be the start of a longer journey, for the researcher will never set out to evidence an already reached conclusion! Researchers in many fields are individuals with deeply held personal values, such as a wish to address inequality and injustice, and this will steer a general direction of interest, but never compromise academic standards of procedure. At least, I hope not!)

Other researchers may specialise in product design, for instance examining whether some products are 'addictive'. Here, a particular researcher may focus on the sounds and lights of devices for example. Anthropological research may draw on a cross-discipline body of knowledges. Neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists, all bring different understandings from within their own disciplines. Economists consider the financial costs to society as well as any financial gains. Public health research may include attention to how different population sectors are affected by gambling. Government, from national to local levels, also

conducts research working with experts. Important organisations such as the British Medical Association, think tanks such as Demos also conduct research. The Gambling Commission conducts research. There is research into educational programmes. And so on.

This incomplete overview does at least suggest the complexity of ‘gambling research’. It should be noted that some researchers and research individuals refuse any direct link with the gambling industry, as is the case too with much or most alcohol research.

It is generally recognised as mentioned above that the voices of people with lived experience are crucial. A parallel example is useful. For many years both pharmaceutical industries and psychiatrists denied the existence of serious withdrawal dangers from anti-depressants. It was only the growing pressure of people who have been so affected, who often formed grassroots pressure groups, which finally forced establishment recognition of a serious problem in society.

It is remarkable that the gambling industry and its supporters deny that there is any evidence about the scale or nature of gambling harms. Frequently they assert that there is no evidence relating to gambling at all, thus denying the very existence of the huge body of research evidence outlined above. A rhetorical mantra is ‘There is no evidence’. Another is ‘We must have rigorous, robust evidence’. While rigour and robustness are indeed essential to research, the appropriation of these terms by what amounts to little more than tabloid style headlining is regrettable. Truly, defenders of the status quo of gambling, perhaps modulated by glossy promises to make gambling even ‘safer’ are no doubt sincere in their determination if somewhat flaky in their arguments.

Another area of concern in relation to the industry’s harm reducing initiatives is their voluntary funding and much self-lauded financial backing of some education and what little treatment opportunities there are. It should be said that some industry initiatives are to be welcomed and we should be cautious in thinking of ‘the industry’ as a monolith: some companies flagrantly breach regulatory requirements seemingly accepting fines as an operating cost; other companies are genuinely concerned to protect customers. The main problem is that the dominant narrative puts all the emphasis upon the pathological individual. It is the individual who is pathological. The vast majority enjoy a harmless flutter (which is true, though each of them will be at variable risk of running into problems). The main way to minimise gambling harms is claimed to be to ‘educate’ individuals. There is, of course, a role in personal, social, health and economic education in reducing a young person’s risk in relation to potential harms. There are slogans such as ‘When the fun stops, stop’. There are, among the plethora of advertising, some companies’ advertising advice on safe gambling. Yet many decades of ‘drugs education’, for example, has not prevented Scotland’s having the most dreadful rates of death and severe individual and social damage. Evidence suggests that attention needs given to much more complex and multiple factors, although this will not be as simple and cheap as promoting educational inoculation as a vaccine against harms.

Much, such as regulatory initiatives such as banning the use of credit cards to gamble, is most welcome. However, it can also serve to divert attention from the supply end of the issue. Corporate responsibility and regulation are more effective areas than concentration on individuals. Product design, aggressive marketing, sports sponsorship, micro-marketing through social media, personalised targeting through algorithmic gathering of precise individual behaviours, the very fact that gambling is in the remit of the Department of

Culture, Media and Sport rather than the Department of Health: these require urgent attention. This in no way is contrary to the need for treatment, awareness and education targeted at the individual level, but the scales really do need adjusting.

There is one final defence from industry and its supporters. It rests on the claim that all adults are free to choose, should not be curtailed in their choices by the nanny state, or, as the Chief Executive of the Betting and Gambling Council delights in calling advocates of gambling harms reduction, Sunday School Prohibitionists. That last example may stand for the, ironically very childish, stance of those who, seem to believe that at the age of 18 some mysterious transubstantiation and psychic endowment occurs whereby every adult miraculously becomes the complete agent of their own destiny, an autonomous locus of pure rationality. Some may regard such a view as little more than superstition at best, an ideological apparatus of power at worst. It is hardly a new idea that 'there is no such thing as society'. There lies the basis for Margaret Thatcher's hatred of sociology! A further irony is that the proponents of this position, in what passes for debate, tend to be somewhat angry rather than rational, a little prone to tantrums, preferring discourtesy and insult over more mature discursive behaviour.

We are, of course, all irrational creatures, motivated by feelings. We err, we make bad choices, we often are pushed and pulled by the complex cross-cutting of circumstances into places we would much rather not be. All the data crunching in the world, every cold, hard fact is of little value if we don't begin to know who we are. We're all led into temptation. The best we can do is to reduce temptations where we can, and if we do go awry to forgive ourselves and support and forgive each other. That's just another way of asking for population harms mitigation, non-judgmental treatment options, and, perhaps the most important thing of all, family and community empathy and compassion.