

Critical Gambling Studies



Editors' Introduction to the Issue

Emma Casey, Fiona Nicoll and Kate Bedford 

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Welcome to our brand-new issue of Critical Gambling Studies! The papers gathered in this most recent edition of the journal galvanise some core themes in the broad area of critical gambling studies. They remind us that the importance of thinking critically about gambling, particularly within today's global social and economic crises, is more acute than ever.

Running through the papers is a shared insistence on the importance of fresh and innovative approaches to the critical study of gambling. Each paper, in distinct ways, notes some clearly intractable issues. In particular, they highlight the stubborn continuation of gambling related harms, and the persistence of socio-economic inequalities that are inextricably linked to gambling in capitalist societies. There is an increasingly urgent need to stem the flow of gambling particularly from high to low income countries and to address the proliferation of commercial gambling and the harms it causes. In the United States, record numbers of young people are seeking treatment for gambling related harms, amidst increasingly vocal calls for regulatory crackdowns (Jones, 2023). Meanwhile, in the UK, revenues at gambling firms continue to be buoyant with the British gambling industry currently witnessing record profits, controversially in large part a consequence of the increased usage of online slot machines (Gambling Commission, 2023).

This issue of CGS also follows from the publication of the UK government's White Paper on gambling, which has highlighted the need for stronger regulations to address gambling harms, especially for young people (van Schalkwyk et al, 2023).

As the papers in this issue remind us, a central limitation of much gambling scholarship involves the framing of gambling harm as about individual pathology, dislocated from wider structural and socio-economic forces. Over the years, this limitation has helped absolve gambling companies of meaningful responsibility for the harms caused by their products. If solutions to gambling 'problems' can be addressed by individuals adapting their behaviour, then responsibility for 'harm', it is assumed, lies at the personal level, rather than at the

structural or social level, or at the door of gambling companies themselves. The papers in this issue call for a shift in focus away from the individual, and towards exploring different types of responsibility including from the gambling industry itself. The papers also emphasise the importance of addressing the complexities of gambling practices, and new proposed solutions to gambling harm, head on.

Charles Livingstone's paper "The End of Responsible Gambling" opens the journal issue. The article reflects on the neoliberal period - most commonly recognised as involving dramatic social, economic, and cultural upheavals in the late 20th century - within which commercial gambling liberalisation has been developed and remains firmly situated. Livingstone points to the "responsible gambling" discourse as a key response to gambling harm embedded within neoliberalism. This discourse became increasingly entrenched as neoliberal structures weaved their way into multiple facets of everyday life. Today, this extends to and includes social and public health policy. The resulting "responsible gambling" focus parallels the onslaught of neoliberalism. The entrenchment of the "individual pathologies" approach is not only commonly used by gambling scholars to make sense of the gambling experience; it is also increasingly, as Livingstone notes, a way of informing policy.

In short, a variety of standardised neoliberal discourses have heavily informed the field of gambling research to form an orthodoxy. One particularly concerning consequence of this, as Livingstone notes, is the resulting restriction of diversity in gambling policy and research priorities, which ultimately means that meaningful protection from harm is limited. In response, Livingstone advocates a "critical public health" discourse that would challenge the responsible gambling orthodoxy, and simultaneously expand and diversify the field of gambling studies. It is an ambitious, potentially high impact proposal that could offer a transformed approach to gambling regulation. Moreover, a critical public health approach would move regulators and researchers away from the influence of the gambling



industry. Livingstone's piece highlights the continuity of established public health discourses with responsible gambling, demonstrating the challenge of pushing for change even within the field of public health.

The second paper in this issue (Klara Goedecke, Jessika Spångberg and Johan Svensson entitled "Licence to Gamble: Discursive Perspectives on the 2019, Re-regulation of the Swedish Gambling Market") also develops a critical public health perspective. Goedecke et al offer a joint critique of the dominant free-market approach to leisure consumption, and the framing of gambling harm as a medical problem. They propose fresh perspectives, which would offer a more "discursive" account of the "production and legitimization of meanings around gambling". By focusing specifically on the Swedish model of the (re)regulation of the gambling industry that had previously been dominated by a small number of companies, the paper offers new understandings of how gambling harm is articulated – including through medical, public health and neoliberal discourses.

In particular, Goedecke et al offer a novel examination of the intersection and overlaps between medical, public health and neoliberal discourses on gambling, and they show how these discourses feed into policy. The authors also note the contradictions within these discourses, namely, that individuals are expected to on the one hand submit to the market and consume, but on the other, simultaneously demonstrate personal restraint and resilience, and develop personal solutions to what are ostensibly, social problems.

The discursive overlap described by the authors has the effect of reproducing and entrenching dominant meanings of gambling, which in turn feed into and shape gambling regulation in Sweden and beyond. This gives the paper an excellent potential global reach. Through a detailed analysis of a Swedish government inquiry, Goedecke et al show how the language produced within the written documents enables a discursive analysis that demonstrates how discourses reinforce powerful narratives around gambling.

A particularly useful concept emerging from the paper is the notion of a joint "market-medical" discourse, whereby harm tends to be aligned by policymakers with consumption rather than with production. This is particularly pertinent when considering the production and consumption of gambling products and the ways in which the gambling industry has often avoided being held to account as it continues to produce an ever-expanding range of products. The challenge of ensuring accountability is

compounded by the surrounding discourses that continue to centre individual responsibility.

The third paper in the issue is by Kate Bedford and is entitled "An Affordable Wager: the Wider Implications of Regulatory Innovations to Address Vulnerability in Online Gambling". Bedford's paper, in tandem with the first two papers of the issue, offers a critical analysis of recent attempts to protect vulnerable people from gambling related harm. Specifically, the paper responds to the UK Gambling Commission's proposal to use affordability data to identify potential vulnerability among online players, including collecting data around disposable income, postcode location, and other data that might mark potential financial vulnerability.

Bedford argues that these attempts to monitor the affordability of online play, while well intended, must be subject to rigorous critical evaluation, including for their unintended consequences on different groups of people. Identifying the risks of intensifying surveillance and affordability checks, Bedford notes the ways in which player tracking originated in casinos, for profit, and she argues that many online gambling companies, and 'safer gambling' software companies, have enthusiastically embraced affordability checks. The White paper's proposals to enhance affordability hereby risk making commercial providers - of gambling and of 'safer gambling' software - the ultimate winners. She offers a critical reflection on this new move towards state projects making use of new technologies to sort, monitor and identify gambling harms. The associated risks of commercial gambling operators mixing consumer data, and public data, and third-party provided data (from, for example, credit card companies and loan companies) are palpable.

Bedford's paper also warns against the risk of intensified affordability surveillance, especially for already stigmatised consumers, in a context where unfair gambling products are enabled to thrive unchecked. In this way affordability checks may potentially re-route resources from interventions that may be more effective. Furthermore, in tandem with earlier research, which has noted the ways in which powerful ideologies of neoliberalism are entrenched via everyday narratives of personal responsibility and consumer citizenship, Bedford powerfully argues that data collection targeted on assessing whether the play of "vulnerable" groups is affordable compounds existing rhetoric around the "responsible" versus "irresponsible" consumer - a dangerous narrative that already permeates much public policy discourse, especially in the UK.

Additional critical reflection is offered by Tunde Adebisi, whose short commentary piece "Knowledge of

Play: A Precursor for Rethinking Sports Gambling Among Young Africans” offers further insights. Helping to critique the idea of the homogeneity of gambling that has long permeated gambling scholarship, Adebisi explores communities of gambling within the youth gambling population. He unpicks the social construction of online gambling communities in Nigeria, which include informal hierarchies of gamblers. In particular, he focuses on the factors that shape “autonomy of play” in sports betting. Adebisi argues that the complex weave of drivers and motivations to gamble occur alongside varying and constantly shifting forms of access. Making use of the social media platform X (previously Twitter) to identify communities of gamblers, we see a new type of gambling “celebrity” emerging; one who passes on their “gambling knowledge” in what are highly hierarchical, sports betting communities.

In her book review of *Upholding Indigenous Economic Relationships: nehiyawak Narratives* by Shalene Wuttunee Jobin, Fiona Nicoll returns to the politics of Indigenous gambling investigated by a special issue on Critical Indigenous Gambling Studies and blog posts by Laurel Wheeler (2022, 2021). Nicoll brings key arguments by Jobin together with Darrel Maniwabi’s theoretical framework of the windigo to illuminate gambling as an extractive industry that requires a lens of situated Indigenous knowledges to understand and address related harms.

All of the papers in this issue argue for the increasingly urgent requirement of fresh theories and concepts within gambling scholarship. As Bedford notes in her paper, the role of scholars must be to offer critical accounts of gambling. By interrogating the wider, social and economic contexts within which gambling occurs, the papers in this issue explore in diverse ways the experiences of people who turn to gambling within the context of highly unequal societies, which have often repeatedly failed them.

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