Op-Ed/Editorials – On Science and the Unintended Consequences of Problem Gambling Policy

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The theme of the 2006 Institute for Research on Pathological Gambling and Related Disorders annual conference on gambling addiction was Lost in Translation? The Challenge of Turning Good Research into Best Practice. During the next few weeks, The BASIS is pleased to present a series of editorials from some of the faculty members of that conference. In this week's editorial, Dr. Bo Bernhard discusses unintended consequences of problem gambling policy.

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Having written in the past on the unintended consequences of problem gambling policy (Bernhard, 2004), I was humbled to be asked to deliver a presentation that covers similar intellectual terrain and in the company of so many intellectual giants from my bibliography pages. The topic of unintended consequences seems a natural one whenever contemplating policy decisions today, but it is useful to take a step back to think about these concepts' historical foundations and manifestations. It is interesting to note, for instance, that when the state of Nevada legalized gambling in 1931, problem gambling itself might have been fairly characterized as an unintended consequence of this policy decision. Contrary to many popular portrayals of this decision, legalizing gambling was not a rash decision made in response to desperate economic times brought on by the Depression. In fact, legalization was a decision that was pushed strongly by local business elites who wished to promote a broader economic agenda of economic growth via tourism promotion (Moehring & Green, 2005). In this sense, this historical tale is a familiar one – one not unlike current-day Singapore, which recently decided to legalize gambling for strikingly similar reasons. In those early days in Nevada, problem gambling was seen as sin rather than sickness (Bernhard, forthcoming), and our current understandings of the disorder were

generations away. Responsible gaming policies, to the extent we might call them that, were similarly underdeveloped. As a fifth-generation Las Vegan, I can recall conversations with my great-grandfather – himself a proud Las Vegan who was one of the oldest dealers on the Strip when he passed away – telling stories of how management would hand bus tickets home to gamblers who were "down on their luck" and lacked the financial means to leave Las Vegas. To be sure, this was hardly a scientific approach to responsible gaming, but it does demonstrate at least an early commitment to the idea that some intervention was necessary with some patrons who gambled to excess. Further exploration reveals that the state that has been at it the longest with legal gaming policy has had its own interesting brushes with these policies' unintended consequences. Famously, for years a Mafia sensibility ruled the state of Nevada. While for many this was hardly a troubling development (as my grandmother – echoing Debbie Reynolds – once said, "in those days, nobody got killed that didn't deserve killin'"), for government leaders at the federal and even the state level, the Bugsy Siegels and Meyer Lanskys constituted an unwelcome presence. Interestingly, when the feds got serious about cracking down on the Mafia influence, their RICO statutes did little to rid Las Vegas of its mob influence. It was in fact the state's Corporate Gaming Act that led to the first major victories over organized crime. This Act focused on allowing corporate investment in casino gaming – specifically by relaxing the requirements for background investigations into investors' business and personal dealings. In the end, the deep pockets of Wall Street won out over the shallower pockets of the Midwestern Mafia leaders, and corporate money squeezed out mob money (Moehring and Green). Hence, the policy designed to rid society of a presumed wrong did little to right things, while a policy that ostensibly targeted other activities did the trick.

This brings us to Robert King Merton. Merton was one of those rare social scientists whose work truly endures. His contributions are so profound that many have entered into common usage without proper attribution. From the "self-fulfilling prophecy" (which he coined) to the "focused group interview" (which he invented, and which evolved into the now-ubiquitous focus group – though in common usage it is a methodology that is far inferior to Merton's original creation), to "unintended consequences" (another everyday analytical phrase that he gave to us), Merton's ideas continue to influence our professional and lay analyses in a vast array of important settings.

The latter contribution proves especially useful for those of us interested in

analyzing problem gambling policy. Merton felt that any study of policy and human behavior must strive to distinguish between the reasons behind a policy and the empirically demonstrated consequences of that policy (1967). The field of sociology ran with this conceptualization, and today is often characterized as a field that is methodologically inclined to embrace a "debunking motif" (Berger, 1963) that seeks to explore real effects hidden behind stated ones.

Merton has since inspired generations of sociologists to do just that (including this sociologist, who was inspired to explore these kinds of processes with problem gambling policy.) In the problem gambling field, a variety of unintended consequences might emerge from noble-intentioned policies. For instance, Australian policies that slow the reel speed of machine games were thought to slow the rapid-fire gambling pace of problem gamblers – but when implemented, evidence showed that problem gamblers actually gambled for longer periods of time on these devices (Blasczyzynski, Sharpe, & Walker, 2001). In the U.S., placing gambling on riverboats was ostensibly intended to "remove" social costs – at least in the physical sense – from local communities. However, one surely unintended consequence of this policy was that problem gamblers sometimes found themselves trapped and unable to disembark these "cruises to nowhere." Mandated win-loss displays that reveal the amount won or lost on a machine (rather than credits accumulated) were designed to make potentially problematic gamblers aware of financial consequences. To problem gamblers, however, seeing that they were $200 down could well trigger "chasing" thinking. Finally, ergonomic requirements that insist upon well-lit, comfortable surroundings to create a more healthy environment might well allow problem gamblers to gamble for longer periods of time before carpal pains interfere with their play (Bernhard, 2004).

As articulated in the Reno Model (Blasczynzski, Ladoceur, and Shaffer, 2004), these examples illustrate the need to use systematic and scientific research to evaluate the real effects often hidden behind the stated ones. Hence, noble intentions are not enough – we must use our research to develop best practices that effect the changes that we seek.

At this stage, however, I must insert a caveat – and one that I have increasingly grown aware of during my travels. I have had the fantastically good fortune to get to study gambling behaviors on six inhabited continents, and having watched a variety of humans gamble in a variety of global settings, I am in the end struck

not by similarity – but by difference. To cite but one striking example, gambling settings in Asia look and feel profoundly different than those outside of the doors of this conference. Casinos have none of the cacophony typically present in Las Vegas. In many Asian locales, gambling is a quiet, serious, and even job-like endeavor – in stark contrast to the more festive environs often observed in Sin City.

Hence, in my mind it would be naïve to suggest that anthropology is an insignificant factor, and that gambling behaviors should unfold in the same ways regardless of whether the gambler sits in Des Moines or Damascus. Hence, we cannot uncritically export even scientific findings from one locale without spending rigorous research time with that vital but oft-neglected construct: generalizability.

I learned this lesson the hard way. Asked early on to help the nation of South Korea develop problem gambling policies prior to the lifting of gambling prohibitions in the Kang-Won province, I suggested that the provision of help lines was a sound strategy supported by what little we knew from research. In practice, however, exporting this best practice from the environment with which I was most familiar (North America) proved problematic in a different anthropological locale. As it turns out, whereas the catchphrase in Las Vegas has become "What Happens Here, Stays Here" – in South Korea, the dominant ethos might well have been "What Happens in the Family, Stays in the Family." In South Korea, one most decidedly did not air the family's dirty laundry to some stranger over the phone. Nor did one reach out to conventional (conventional to me, at least) mental health structures to solve what was often deemed an "in-house" family problem. In this case, we failed because we simply did not pay enough attention to anthropology, or to generalizability.

In the spirit of learning from past mistakes and effecting intended change in the future, I would like to make a single policy recommendation that might address the ever-present challenges of unintended consequences in gaming industry policymaking. Once again, we might learn valuable lessons from history – and specifically, gaming regulatory history.

In this field, changing times have necessitated changing strategies for addressing the pressing problems that gaming regulators face. As we have discussed, early on gaming regulators found themselves charged with ridding the gaming industry

of undesirables – a task that was understandably assigned to a team of law enforcement experts, who now commonly work in gaming regulatory environments everywhere. Later, gaming regulators were confronted by problems associated with monitoring the complex challenges of technology in gambling devices, which led to a team of 'techies' being hired (and to this day maintained) in regulatory settings worldwide.

Today, very often one of the key challenges faced by regulators are those that are associated with the social costs of gambling – and once again, it seems that we might benefit from bringing on board a team of experts who are best suited to sift through the research evidence on this topics. I would argue, then, that gaming regulatory bodies need to have on staff a cadre of social scientists (and what an odd cadre we would constitute!) to assist with what must be daunting challenges pertaining to problem gambling.

This cadre – and those of us who might inform this cadre – might stand on the shoulders of Merton and others of his ilk. We might be inspired by practitioners like Carl Sagan, who memorably articulated a scientific method founded on twin pillars of inquiry: wonder and skepticism (1997). The former might best be captured by imagining the wide-eyed five year-old in all of us, taking in oceans and galaxies with an inextinguishable desire to wonder at the reasons behind their workings. The latter might actually be illustrated by thinking of a curmudgeonly grandmother that we might have known, constantly questioning with a vigilant skepticism the world as we "know" it. Both of these sensibilities, Sagan argues, are necessary for good research.

Importantly, Sagan also reminds us to recall the modest, tentative, humble (and humbling!) foundations of science – a science that is always open to counter-evidence, and that accepts the "truth" as always partial. Those of us who believe that today's insights into problem gambling are infallible might simply be reminded that yesterday's (moral) "experts" on people who gambled too much delivered their "definitive" truth accounts of this "sin" with a stunning degree of certitude and authority – one that is similar to much of the discourse that often emerges from our research today. Tellingly, they were no less certain of the truthfulness of their tales in their day than we are of ours in our day (Bernhard, forthcoming).

In the end, Sagan says that science is like democracy – in that science might be

said to be the worst, most flawed system ever devised to understand human beings (and their consequences) – with the notable exception of every other system ever devised to do so. In the problem gambling field, we have indeed come a long way – and as always, we indeed have much that remains to be done. Certainly, we have evolved in remarkable ways: conferences such as the NCRG's annual gathering would have been unimaginable in my great-grandfather's day. One wonders what marvels await us a generation from now, should we continue to adhere skeptically to these principles and this spirit.

What do you think? Comments on this article can be addressed to Bo Bernhard.

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