

Op-Ed/Editorials: Toward a Balanced Discussion of Exposure to Gambling: The Importance of Social Context

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Discussions about gambling expansion, actual and virtual, are often emotion laden. Rarely do such conversations take place within a public health approach to the issue, which requires a consideration of both benefits and harms. Rather, advocates on both sides tend to gravitate toward evidence that supports only their position. For example, anti-gambling advocates might highlight instances of increased crime, and pro-gambling advocates might highlight instances of improved economics. Alternatively, considering both the pros and cons of such situations has the potential to expand the discussion to include existing theories and models of behavior related to gambling. When this happens, a full consideration of potential gambling outcomes prompts consideration of both exposure and adaptation effects.

Claims about the harmful effects of exposure to gambling have circulated over time, but Shaffer, LaBrie, & LaPlante (2004) were the first to conceptualize gambling as a possible social toxin. Advancing from earlier related work, Shaffer et al. argued that if gambling is indeed a social toxin, researchers should be able to accurately estimate its effects by extent of exposure. Shaffer et al. found support for this argument; but, they also found preliminary support for the idea that environmental factors modify exposure effects.[\[1\]](#)

Through this work they expanded common conceptualizations of exposure (i.e., that increased exposure leads to a proportionate increase in harms) to suggest the existence of adaptation (i.e., that some individuals and societies develop adaptations to gambling exposure, and therefore do not succumb to prototypical exposure effects).

Recently, like earlier work with intoxicant use (e.g., Shaffer &

Zinberg, 1985; Zinberg & Fraser, 1979; Zinberg & Shaffer, 1985), research has made it apparent that the social context is extremely important to any understanding of exposure effects. Exposure-related research is often inconsistent. Depending on the sample, the location of a study, and the historical time at which a study occurred, very different patterns emerge. For example, areas that have had more exposure with greater intensity and for longer periods of time can evidence fewer problems than anticipated (Shaffer & Hall, 2002; Shaffer, Vander Bilt, & Hall, 1999; Volberg, 2002). Over time, gambling-related behavior patterns in the community appear similar to the prototypical adaptation curves apparent for numerous biological toxins (e.g., viruses and bacterial infections, LaPlante & Shaffer, in press). This is important because anticipating such patterns of infection can facilitate the development of prevention and/or catalyst public health strategies or public policies.

As researchers, public policy makers, and advocates of both stripes continue to consider this issue, they should keep in mind that social contextual factors make any one-size-fits-all approach to gambling expansion likely to be insufficient. Until we identify the many social contextual factors that moderate gambling exposure, however, it is important to progress in a conservative manner. Taking a conservative approach might create some inconveniences, but ultimately will provide a measure of protection for those who remain at risk.

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[\[1\]](#) Related

work suggests that the social setting moderates alcohol effects. Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. However, in certain social situations, low dose alcohol use often results in stimulation rather than depression (e.g., the party effect). The same dose of beverage alcohol taken alone might encourage sleep.