

On the Moral Sentiments of Gambling Researchers

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As a young practicing economist, I was first drawn to the academic field of gambling studies due to the contradictions that exist in the gambling marketplace. Despite its widespread popularity and profitability, the industry's presence varied drastically across regions. For instance, while in Las Vegas, one could encounter slot machines virtually everywhere – from bars to grocery stores to the airport. However, just by crossing into Utah, the landscape changed completely, with not a single machine in sight. This stark contrast in policy and distribution was unlike anything I had encountered in other markets. I then learned of the harms caused by gambling and was equally startled at the diversity in related policies – some jurisdictions established extensive safety nets for gamblers, while others ignored the issue entirely.

It now seems clear to me that the differences in Nevada, Utah, and just about every other place in the world are not framed by the aggregate social welfare that regulated gambling offers local residents – surely the policies would look much more homogeneous (one way or another) in that case. Rather, policies largely reflect collective moral sentiments about gambling. And so, regardless of its merits or market specifics, it is because gambling is seen as something deplorable that it is not more widely available, while the reverse also holds true.

Culture matters no matter what.

Moral sentiments shape the way that gambling appears in all parts of society, and so too, they shape the way that gambling researchers view our role. This becomes self-evident with a casual reading of the literature. I have had many conversations with 'academic-outsiders' who find that Gambling Studies can often read like a heavy dose of personal preferences coated in a thin layer of empirics. In my own reading, I find that the issue is not the relevance of the empirical data, but rather that those within the field have developed a more refined (perhaps cynical) ability to notice and recalibrate for these biases. Consequently, research on contentious topics within Gambling Studies frequently reflects the divided stance of society at large – polarized and with less space for nuance than is deserved.

Unfortunately, many of these biases are rather unavoidable. They occur through self-selection into the field, self-selection into the topics we research, and self-selection into the tools we use. These biases are further perpetuated by academic media. Editors, reviewers, and journalists all want to publish work that is relevant to societal issues, so pointed research becomes a greater part of the public discourse. It would be naïve to assume we can root out all these biases from our work (though we should put effort to that direction), but I do believe there are easily achievable ways to improve.

Be relevant to science and policy.

In fields that intersect with government policy, like ours, we are continually tasked with the challenge of conducting research that is both scientifically robust and influential to policymakers. An effective policy framework distinguishes itself by the clarity of its foundational assumptions, the rigor of its empirical evidence, and the explicitness of its ethical rationale. These three elements should be distinct and unconfused in forming policy conclusions.

As an example, consider the labor economics field that persistently grapples with the effects of minimum wage policies. This debate encompasses theoretical, empirical, and ethical considerations, each playing a critical role in shaping policy.

- Theoretically, classical economic models generally predict that increasing the minimum wage will reduce employment, based on a set of initial assumptions regarding the behavior of workers and firms. These assumptions are a subject of open debate, inviting scrutiny regarding

their relevance and accuracy.

- Empirically, the evidence is often mixed. Studies yield divergent outcomes, which places the onus on the reader to assess whether the methodologies used are appropriate, reliable, and free from bias in the context of current policy discussions.
- Ethically, there is a dynamic and subjective discourse on what society owes its workers in terms of a livable wage.

Through separating the analysis into these requisite components, effective policy be developed that stands up to both scientific inquiry and ethical scrutiny.

Tell them about trade-offs.

When Vilfredo Pareto's name is evoked in gambling studies, it is often in the context of the 'Pareto Principle' – a framing that a disproportionate amount of gambling revenue is taken from a small proportion of customers¹. In economics, Pareto's name is more closely tied to the idea of Pareto Optimums – a concept defining outcomes where it is impossible to make any individual better off without making at least one individual worse off. It does not necessarily imply fairness or equity, but rather a state where resources are utilized in a way that no further net gain is possible without causing a loss to someone.

Achieving a morally unambiguous improvement – in which someone could be made better off without making anyone worse off – is a rare outcome in the real world of policy design. In almost all policy decisions, we are making some value judgments where at least one group is worse off from the change. As gambling scholars, our role is often not just to present data but also to help interpret it within a moral context that considers a just and fair approach to policymaking. This is generally not straightforward; therefore, we need to be explicit about the trade-offs involved in our policy recommendations, understanding that while some policies may lead to overall welfare improvements, they can also inadvertently exacerbate inequalities or impose burdens on certain groups.

In our work, clear articulation of ethically relevant choices will allow for a more nuanced understanding of the trade-offs inherent in policy design. It will encourage a more holistic consideration of outcomes, recognizing that no single framework should be a sole determinant of policy. For instance, stating explicitly that a policy recommendation is aimed at reducing gambling harm gives primacy to social welfare over industry profits. Understanding that a specific worldview

underpins the study conclusions can guide a more balanced evaluation of its merits. These ‘disclosures’ do not need to be complex to make the relevance of the findings much clearer. Consider the following examples of how small modifications can frame boundary conditions around the work:

- ***Holding economic output constant***, a ban on ads will improve health outcomes...
- We study this issue ***using a lens of gambling harm minimization*** and find...
- ***Assuming individuals will otherwise gamble at unregulated sites***, we propose the following policies for regulated sites...

These changes serve to anchor the research within specific ethical and practical parameters, making explicit the underlying assumptions that could affect policy outcomes.

Conclusion

An honest approach to policymaking in gambling studies involves not only a careful analysis of scholarship but also a thoughtful deliberation of the research’s broader context. Only by being forthright about the ideas that are imbued into our work can researchers contribute to a more honest and scientifically grounded policy debate. To that end, awareness of these hidden biases and simple statements about the assumptions that define the relevance of the research can help our interdisciplinary field contribute more effectively to policymaking.

— Kahlil Philander, PhD

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

1. Pareto himself was speaking of Italian land in his late-19th century writing, noting that 80% of land was owned by 20% of the population.
