




Gambling Research and Industry Funding

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between investigative credibility and the sources of funding associated with gambling research. Some researchers argue against accepting funding from gambling industry sources; similarly, they decline to participate in activities directly or indirectly sponsored by gambling industry sources. In contrast, these anti-industry investigators evidence less resistance toward accepting funds from sources other than industry, for example, governments, because they believe that they have greater independence, reliability, and validity, and less undue influence and/or interference. We organize this article, around six primary issues: (1) researchers making a priori judgments that restrict positions towards industry associated research; (2) the potential negative impacts of holding such a position; (3) a description of the different sources of funding available to support gambling-related research; (4) an examination of the extant empirical support associated with the sources of funding and whether such support evidences bias; (5) a description of six cases illustrating how refusing to participate in any project funded by the industry can adversely influence the advancement of science and, at times, be itself unethical; and finally, (6) we suggest some remedies to advance solutions to this problem by stimulating the participation of reluctant researchers to work towards a greater harmony, keeping in mind that the pivotal goal of our work is to increase our knowledge in different area of science and to harness it to public goods.

Keywords Research · Funding · Ethics · Gambling

Background: Critical Claims

To maintain confidence about scientific research, authors must openly and transparently disclose funding sources as well as potential and actual conflicts of interest. Absent integrity and ethical conduct, neither the public nor academics should accept the conclusions of published data without question—in fact, stakeholders should investigate the conclusions of published research as a matter of course. This is how science works, and this is how science advances. We are not disputing the requirement for open and transparent disclosure of received funds and conflicts of interest. However, we are suggesting that criticism of

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gambling researchers solely on the grounds that they accept gambling industry funding is something that needs to be challenged. Our principal argument is that refusing to participate in gambling research or dismissing studies based simply because of a relation to gambling industry funding is detrimental to the advancement of scientific knowledge.

There are two primary critical claims related to the funding of scientific research, often raised by ethicists and public health advocates. We argue that the ethical stance adopted and advanced by these funding critics are based on misperceptions. In fact, paradoxically, we consider these positions morally indefensible because of the consequences they engender for the advancement of knowledge and the social utility of research findings.

The first of these two claims assumes that the funding of any gambling-related research project by industry operators necessarily renders the entire research enterprise fatally untrustworthy and ipso facto justifies dismissing the findings out of hand. The second claim is the converse. If governments fund research directly or through its agencies, the results and their dissemination will be trustworthy and free of distortions. The assumption is that, because governments are the custodians of the public interest, government agencies and their representatives act in good faith and base policies on the best interests of the community. Therefore, findings of any government sponsored research meets the highest standards of impartiality and honesty.

Commercial and Government Funding Interests

It is intuitive to assume that industry-funded research is likely to be exposed to undue influence and bias. Some investigators claim that such research is no more than an aid to lobbying or marketing the commercial interests of the commissioning companies. However, automatic dismissal of the research or a refusal to take part in any industry-funded research is not necessarily warranted. Industry-funded research does encourage a measure of scepticism about possible hidden agendas that might influence conclusions reached and suggest a need for careful scrutiny of the soundness of evidence and validity of arguments advanced. Similarly, we accept that governments generally seek to base policies on the best available research, or at least select research to support their policies. However, like commercial interests, public officials are not immune from developing hidden agendas and those who evaluate government-funded research should be aware of how these factors might distort the commissioning, editing and dissemination of particular research reports.

There is a class of research topics where judgments about research findings are especially prone to be considered wrongfully, solely or mainly based on who funded the research. These judgments are likely to occur when public policy and regulation concern activities traditionally considered as vices, immoral or highly controversial. For example, intemperate drinking, drug taking, and gambling. Although there is a broad distinction between government and gambling industry funding, there are subtle sub-divisions of bias and undue influence within these categories that is worthy of consideration.

General Context and Arguments

Governments are exposed to forms of self-interest that can influence taxpayer-funded gambling researchers to maintain public support for, or to deflect community criticism against, policy decisions. These circumstances have negative impacts on the impartial pursuit of

truth on which scientific progress depends. Similarly, this situation can mislead the public about the efficacy of governmental policies or regulatory measures and might lead to counterproductive policies where unintended consequences harm individuals or forego public benefits.

The fundamental source of these problems is the conviction that gambling is an inherently immoral activity. This belief holds that the gambling industry is predominantly interested in maximising revenue and is an inherently immoral and predatory business. Accordingly, the industry cannot be trusted; by implication, researchers funded by the industry also cannot be trusted. That gambling is held to be inherently immoral is sufficient justification for critics to condemn and dismiss industry-funded studies without reference to any evidence of methodological flaws or incorrect interpretations of data.

The case of government is more complex than that of industry. This is because, though claiming that their policies are evidence-based and will be socially benign, governments are motivated by popularity-based policies or reactions to public pressure. This means they must not unduly alienate community sectors or anti-gambling voters who disapprove of gambling on moral grounds. In response, governments are caught in a conflict between adopting highly restrictive policies and maintaining revenue through less unpopular “gambling privilege taxes” rather than more unpopular income, property and consumption taxes.

With all research, the test of scientific integrity rests on the following four investigative and ethical principles: (1) Do the conclusions rest upon a sound evidence base? (2) Do the conclusions follow validly from the proposed premises? (3) Are alternative interpretations of the evidence considered and treated fairly? Finally, (4) Are the prescriptive conclusions justified on the basis of sound ethical reasoning about the right and the good?

Sources of Research Funding for Gambling Studies

Researchers rely on external funding to carry out their studies. Generally, funding sources are available through open and competitive grants funded by government agencies (e.g., National Health and Medical Research Council, National Institutes of Health, Australian Research Council, European Research Council, etc.), industry partners, and other smaller sources (e.g., non-profit groups). Government-sponsored competitive schemes allocate a quantum of research funds either for identified themes or open topics. Successful applicants emerge based on the criteria of scientific excellence as judged through independent peer-review processes. Although merit forms the primary criteria, and there is some degree of arm’s length between the funding agent and the researcher, the government retains the position of final arbiter and it is not necessarily obligated to offer reasons for rejection as evidenced by recent actions taken by the Australian government. For example, during 2017–2018, the Minister for Education denied funding to 11 Australian Research Grant applications in the field of humanities totalling AUD\$4.2 million, arguing that taxpayers would prefer funding to be used for other research. Such decisions appear not to be unique; allegations of similar political decisions were made in 1956 and 2005. Nevertheless, stakeholders generally accept competitive government funds as allowing independence to researchers.

Ambiguities occur in jurisdictions where, in some cases, the government is the gambling operator (e.g., US state lotteries). In the Canadian Province of British Columbia, the Lottery Corporation has a board of directors appointed by the government and who report to the Attorney General. In Quebec, the Société des Lotteries du Québec (Loto-Québec)

is composed of a board of directors appointed by the government; this board must provide annual financial reports to the Minister of Finance. In Alberta, the board of directors responsible to the Minister of Finance and the President of the Treasury Board, oversees the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission. In each of these cases, the operation of the gambling licence requires reporting to the government's finance departments where a potential conflict of interest exists between the government's budget business plan generating revenue (i.e., finance and treasury) and the objectives of responsible gambling to reduce levels of excessive involvement, and by implication, revenue. In this situation, the question remains as to the extent to which (a) research funding falls under the rubric of independent government or industry-sourced capital or (b) represents an extension of policy development and revenue generation as forecast by treasury budgets.

Industry funding can include many segments and strategies (e.g., manufacturers, operators, software developers, and promoters). Industry funding also can entail a number of procedural options for funding (e.g., an industry body can fund academics directly through negotiated arrangements; academics can apply to industry segments for funding to conduct research; industry can allocate funds to a third party to distribute to academics on a competitive basis). For example, the American Gaming Association (AGA) supported the National Centre for Responsible Gambling and its Institute for Research on Pathological Gambling and Related Disorders (IRPGRD).

Notwithstanding the source of funding, either industry or government, universities require researchers employed by them to obtain ethics approval from Institutional Research Boards or Human Research Ethics Committees for studies that involve humans. This, however, is only mandatory for university-based research projects. Private research providers such as accountancy firms and commercial research companies do not require this type of ethical approval. University ethics committees act to oversee the integrity of research and its compliance with appropriate codes of conduct and expectation. This includes questions of data and intellectual property ownership and freedom to publish results. From a political perspective, and as the culmination of revelations regarding tobacco industry behaviours, gambling industry funders are sensitive to allegations of interference and therefore have been less likely to directly influence the conduct of research. However, both governments and industry are unlikely to fund researchers that are known to hold strong advocacy views that increase the likelihood of critical interpretations of data. As Ladouceur et al. (2016) noted, the essential elements of effective collaborative research relationships between academics and funding bodies involve integrity, competence, credible independence and absence of bias, and a level of respect and trust among all stakeholders.

Sources of Funding and Potential Biases: Empirical Evidence

Some academics hold a strict position that advocates a divorce from all industry (e.g., Cassidy 2014; Livingstone and Adams 2016; van Schalkwyk et al. 2019). Does the empirical and scientific evidence support such a claim? Although critics have stated concerns about gambling research, the study of gambling industry funding biases is practically non-existent. To date, only two studies have examined this issue empirically (Ladouceur et al. 2019). In the first study, Ladouceur et al. (2019) examined 26 published articles focusing on Responsible Gambling to determine if industry funded research, compared to non-industry funded research, differed with regard to methodological quality and study outcomes. The results showed that funding source is not associated with any statistically significant

differences across the target variables (e.g., type of responsible gambling initiative, use of a measurement scale, or year of publication).

The goal of the second study was to determine the extent to which funding sources might influence characteristics of gambling research design and outcomes in general. Ladouceur et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive review of all gambling studies published between January 2008 and August 2018. To be included in the study, publications had to be quantitative and include a clear gambling-related hypothesis. After retrieving 1731 gambling studies, the authors applied the inclusion criteria and retained 720 studies for our final analytic sample. Again, the results indicated that industry funded studies did not differ from the non-industry funded gambling studies. Interestingly, studies funded by the gambling industry were more likely than other types of funding sources to include a conflict of interest statement. In short, no empirical studies have yet shown that gambling industry-funded studies are biased or suffer from methodological flaws compared to studies without such industry funding.

The Importance of “Optics” Over Scientific Evidence: Case Illustrations

Next, we briefly describe five cases that reflect some of the authors’ personal experiences associated with the harmful effects of misconstruing the relationship between sources of research funding and the credibility of gambling research and researchers. Individually stakeholders might dismiss each account as anecdotal. Cumulatively, however, and given their diversity and consistency of character, these cases illustrate our central theses.

1. *Missed Opportunity to Advance Scientific Understanding* During the past several years, there has been an increasing focus on responsible gambling programs. Recently, a group of gambling researchers invited an outstanding academic investigator to contribute a chapter to a new responsible gambling themed book. This invitation elicited an excellent contribution. However, when this author came to realize that preliminary funding for this volume came from gambling industry stakeholders, this author withdrew the chapter. There was no circumstance where this industry funding could have influenced the development of this chapter as the initiative for the book came from the editors and not the funding sources. The book is forthcoming, and the absence of this chapter reduces its contribution to greater scientific understanding of responsible gambling issues.
2. *A Shift in Commitment* For the past 15 years or so, a clinician and researcher in the field of gambling was regularly invited to provide training about the treatment of problem gamblers to residents and interns in a European treatment centre. Last year, the National Lottery of this country requested this specialist to provide an expert report focusing on the modality of remuneration of bar owners who host electronic gambling machine. His report stated that since no empirical studies have been conducted on this issue, his conclusion was to undertake a sound scientific investigation to answer the question. The head to the treatment centre retracted all further invitations, based on the fact the specialist had done some work for the industry. This decision, solely based on the fact that an operator asked a scientist to provide empirically-based information, had the consequence of depriving the interns and residents of receiving high quality training that would enhance the treatment of problem gamblers.
3. *Matter of Influence* Some of us report that we have experienced no attempt by gambling companies to alter or modify the conduct or the conclusions of their research. We have,

however, frequently seen our own and others' research selectively quoted by public relations operatives in the media, to lobbyists and directly to Government in the hope of advancing their commercial interests. The most serious case was when one of the authors was asked to alter the advice he was giving to a key Government committee on pain of losing funding for the educational organization of which he was the director. Possibly, the absence of interference in other instances has been largely because he has not been asked or else has declined to undertake projects, which are likely to confirm opinions that are very unwelcome to the funder. An example would be that high prize, rapid action EGMs are much less safe in a large number of small venues than in a small number of large venues.

4. *Matter of Influence Again* Conversely, when research has been government-funded, one author has more often than not experienced attempts to steer the conduct of the research, its findings and its dissemination in directions, which will support or not undermine decisions that Governments have already decided to make. The most egregious—indeed shameless—instance of Government interference was directed by the Commission of the European Union. Briefly, they instructed him at the outset to say absolutely nothing about their policy; he was only to gather evidence, which supported it. When he asked them what policy they had in mind, they answered: “A liberal one which would increase the amount of gambling people engage in and lead to more jobs.” He pointed out that gambling, by itself is labour-un-intensive, and so tends to destroy rather than create jobs. Secondly, he said that if they adopted a policy designed to encourage more people to spend more money gambling, this would be regarded as a very bad idea by many Europeans. He was told to make no mention of this. The project collapsed.
5. *Biased Interpretation of Empirical Evidence* Recently, in a brief report, van Schalkwyk et al. (2019) concluded: “An evidence-based, joined-up response is needed to this addictive product for which there is no evidence of a safe level—an approach we might refer to as gambling control” (p. 1681). However, at least two important sets of data show the exact opposite of this conclusion! First, prevalence studies conducted throughout the world reveal that the vast majority of individuals who gamble do not have a gambling problem. Furthermore, the prevalence rate of gambling disorder has remained relatively stable since the 1970 s despite the dramatic expansion of gambling activities. (e.g., LaPlante and Shaffer 2007; Black 2012). Second, like studies of psychoactive substance misuse, empirical studies of gambling reveal that, even for those who suffer from disordered gambling, gamblers can recover from their problem (e.g., Blaszczynski et al. 1991; Zinberg et al. 1977). Furthermore, some recovering gamblers can resume gambling and maintain control over their gambling (e.g., Ladouceur et al. 2009).

Taken together, these five cases illustrate our principal argument that refusing to participate in gambling research or to dismiss investigative activities simply because of a relationship to gambling industry funding is detrimental to advancing scientific knowledge and to the social utility of research findings. Equally, we cannot assume that public policy is based on the best available evidence even if, or simply because, government has funded the relevant evidence-gathering research.

In the next section, we propose some remedies to address this issue and, more importantly, how different players in the field of gambling studies can contribute to find a solution.

Remedies

To limit the adverse effects associated with misleading assumptions about gambling research and funding sources, there is a variety of remedies to consider.

- We must stop assuming that industry funding, *eo ipso*, is responsible for misleading findings.
- We must stop assuming that government funding, *eo ipso*, is responsible for untainted findings.
- We must neither engage in nor tolerate ad hominem attacks. Critics need to focus on research with compromised methods, data or analyses. Often problems emerge from inadequate or inappropriate analyses.
- We must refrain from attributing corrupt and improper motives to researchers.
- Journal editors must not publish criticisms of industry-funded research without evidence of methodological flaws, interference or biased interpretations, and with claims that exceed the evidence.
- All parties must accept and behave consistent with the ethical guidelines of their professional organization and ethical requirements for the conduct of research.

Conclusions

The six illustrative cases suggest that, when stakeholders evaluate the validity and usefulness of gambling research, the criteria and requirements for judging scientific contributions should be the same regardless of funding source. In addition to declaring sources of funding, researchers should disclose their advocacy group membership(s) and their position about the morality of gambling: where they stand on a spectrum ranging from prohibitionist to libertarian (Collins et al. 2015). Such declarations are fundamental to transparency and to maintaining a balance between the principles of (1) “no dismissal without rebuttal” and (2) “no acceptance without Popperian attempts at falsification.” We also encourage stakeholders to accept as integral to the professional ethics of scientific researchers that they do not concern themselves with “optics” or whatever other people might think about their intellectual integrity and general virtuousness. Their obligation is to contribute ethically and with integrity to advancing the frontiers of knowledge, especially when such knowledge has the potential to make the world a slightly better place than it otherwise might be.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Peter Collins is retired and receives no funding for gambling-related research. As Director of the Centre for the Study of Gambling at the University of Salford, UK, (Retired 2010) his work was funded by the UK casino and betting industries. As Executive Director of the South African Responsible Gambling Foundation (Retired 2013) his work was funded by the South African gambling industries. Howard J. Shaffer received funding from a variety of sources, including the Foundation for Advancing Alcohol Responsibility, The Healing Lodge of the Seven Nations via the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and Indian Health Services (IHS), the Integrated Centre on Addiction Prevention and Treatment of the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals—which receives funding from The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, DraftKings, the Massachusetts Gaming Commission, and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. In addition, during ap-

proximately the past 5 years, Shaffer or the Division on Addiction received funding from National Center for Responsible Gambling, National Institutes of Health, the Alcohol Beverage Management Research Fund, the Danish Council for Independent Research, Heineken USA, Inc., bwin.party, St. Francis House, the State of Florida (i.e., as a subcontract to Spectrum Gaming Group), the Massachusetts Residential Substance Abuse Treatment for State Prisoners Grant Program (i.e., as a subcontracted evaluator for Worcester House of Corrections), and the Massachusetts Juvenile Accountability Block Grant Program—as a sub-contracted evaluator for Cambridge Police Department). Dr. Shaffer also has received speaker honoraria and compensation for consultation from the American Psychological Association, Las Vegas Sands Corp., Davies Ward Phillips and Vineberg, LLP, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, LLP, the New England School of Addiction, and from the Dunes of Easthampton, a residential addiction treatment program, for serving as a consultant. Regarding this project, he received reimbursement from Laval University for travel expenses, but no honorarium associated with the international group on responsible gambling. Robert Ladouceur: During the preparation of this manuscript, Robert Ladouceur has received funding over the last few years for consultancies, book royalties, honoraria for conference presentations, and to cover travel expenses including from La Loterie Romande (Switzerland), Club NSW (Australia), Comelot (UK), La Française des Jeux (France), Loto-Québec (Québec, Canada), National Lottery (Belgium). He is a member of the Independent Assessment Panel of the World Lottery Association. Alex Blaszczynski has received direct and indirect funding over the last few years for research projects, consultancies, book royalties, honoraria for conference presentations, and to cover travel expenses including from La Loterie Romande (Switzerland), Svenska Spel (Sweden), Club NSW (Australia), Comelot (UK), La Française des Jeux (France), Loto-Québec (Québec, Canada), Casino Austria, National Lottery (Belgium), Sportsbet, Aristocrat Leisure Industries, Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, Gambling Research Exchange Ontario, Responsible Gambling Trust (GambleAware), Manitoba Gambling Research Program, NSW Office of Liquor, Gaming, and Racing, Gambling Research Australia, National Association for Gambling Studies, National Council on Problem Gambling, and Le Comité d'organisation Congrès international sur les troubles addictifs. He receives funding from the Routledge Group in his role as Editor-in-Chief for International Gambling Studies. All professional dealings have been conducted with the aim of enhancing responsible gambling and harm minimisation policies and practices, training counsellors in the treatment interventions, and advancing our understanding of the psychology of gambling. Author 4 does not believe any of these funding sources constitute a conflict of interest for this project; however, we want to fully disclose our funding sources. Davis Fong received funding from the University of Macau and Macau SAR government (China).


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