

Blame It on Reno: a Commentary on Hancock and Smith

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Abstract In this article, we provide a commentary on Hancock and Smith’s critique of the Reno model of responsible gambling. In our view, Hancock and Smith raise many legitimate concerns about the progress of gambling policy reform. Most attempts at minimising the harm associated with higher risk gambling products such as EGMs have been based on responsible gambling principles rather than a true consumer protection framework. As a result, much of the emphasis has been on modifying individual behaviour rather than significant reforms relating to industry operations, practices and the nature of the products. On the whole, we endorse these views. However, we argue that the paper depicts developments in research and policy a bit too selectively and also imputes too many causal links between the Reno model and other activities in the gambling sector. Some reforms and research topics identified in the paper have been discussed, investigated or implemented in some jurisdictions. Other issues including the slow replacement cycle of gambling technology and the structure of the gaming industry may also need to be considered as barriers to reform.

Keywords Reno model · Gambling · Commentary · Problem gambling

In their paper, Hancock and Smith provide a detailed critique of what is known as the ‘Reno Model’, which is a statement of principles relating to ‘responsible gambling’ compiled by a group of leading gambling researchers in the early 2000s (Blaszczynski et al. 2004). According to Hancock and Smith, the Reno argument has been amplified and refined in a series of subsequent reports and papers. Although these publications vary in their specific context, they generally articulate similar views. Each argues that gambling is a legal and acceptable choice of leisure activity, but which can sometimes result in harm for a small minority of participants. Sensible regulation therefore involves the implementation of policies and practices that enable people to make more responsible and informed behavioural choices, to be aware of and recognise the risk inherent in their behaviour and to avoid the development of harm. Under the model, different ‘stakeholders’ are thought to work together to provide a

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responsible environment. The responsibility of industry is to provide products in a ‘responsible way’ that avoids the exploitation of vulnerable individuals and which addresses problem gambling. Government’s role in the model is to impose regulation and provide services that reduce the harms associated with problem gambling. Academic research performs the role of providing empirical evidence to support the efficacy (or lack thereof) of proposed responsible gambling measures. Decisions about which reforms to make should be informed by scientific evidence rather than value or moral-driven judgments. The model conveys a vision of being able to strike balance between the needs of the industry, recreational gamblers and community well-being.

Although the Reno model would appear to have an intuitive common-sense logic, Hancock and Smith highlight a number of important limitations. These criticisms are ones which we generally support. The most significant issue they highlight is the very strong focus on individual choice and behaviour. In their view, problem gambling is very much positioned by the Reno model as a problem of individual behaviour rather than gambling products. As a result, relatively less attention has been directed towards the problematic elements of gambling products, including the high stake sizes, rapid play speeds and what they term ‘deceptive’ practices of manufacturers. In other words, less attention is directed towards the products themselves and industry practices as sources of harm. Instead, because of the focus on ‘responsible gambling’ rather than harm minimisation and consumer protection, policies to reduce the risks associated with gambling have tended to take a ‘light touch’ approach. Players are provided with information about the products, where to seek help, how to recognise problems in their own behaviour and how to gamble in a responsible manner. In support of this view, they cite the work of Eadington (2003) who drew attention to the limited scale of responsible gambling provisions in the USA. At the time, much of the industry’s commitment to responsible gambling was described as ‘lip-service’ or ‘halfway house’.

Their second principal argument which we support relates to the extent to which governments have made meaningful contributions to reducing gambling-related harm. In Australia, for example, there have been multiple inquiries into the gambling industry (Productivity Commission 1999, 2010), but most of the major reforms that might have a strong impact on people’s ability to spend money rapidly (particularly on gaming machines) have not been implemented. The authors highlight the potential value of a number of reforms including reducing the maximum bet size, changing the nature of machines, reducing machine accessibility and imposing limitations on the availability of cash in venues. The principal barrier to reform they identify is the fact that many governments face a conflict of interest and often receive strong lobbying from the industry to avoid major changes. Many governments are highly reliant on taxation revenue for gambling and want to promote tourism and hospitality, so that serious reforms to gambling products that will reduce revenue will often be resisted or questioned (Livingstone and Woolley 2007; Markham and Young 2014). In the authors’ view, the Reno model is convenient because it allows the government and industry to ‘do things’ without really ‘doing very much’ and it directs the focus away from the products to individuals. As Reith (2007) points out: harm to the small number of individuals is considered the cost incurred in a free market, libertarian society to allow others (the majority) to engage in the leisure activities of their choosing.

Despite agreeing with many of the central tenets of this paper, we did, however, find some areas which were less convincing or which are potentially subject to question. Some of these concerns we have raised previously in a paper that examined in the political economy literature

(Delfabbro and King 2017), but there are also some additional points we can raise in relation to this paper.

Blaming It on Reno

The power and influence of the Reno model or Reno style thinking is probably not as strong as argued in this paper. Although some outcomes and policies might appear to be consistent with it, it is important not to fall into the logical trap of confirming the consequent (i.e., if A causes B, if B, then A is true). We were particularly surprised, for example, to read that the judiciary might have been influenced by the Reno model. In fact, an appraisal of the relevant case law relating to gambling (e.g. Taylor 2004) indicates that courts are often reluctant to accept the views of psychologists and psychiatrists when they try to claim diminished capacity or that problem gamblers were affected by a mental illness that affected their decision-making. In general, courts tend to rely on precedent, deterrence principles and broader ‘community standards’ which are unlikely to get influenced by a set of guidelines published in 2004. Similarly, the authors evoke almost a type of conspiracy reasoning when they propose that academics might have been influenced or constrained by the Reno model or by the industry. In fact, psychologists and other health science disciplines now generally adopt very eclectic models when they study social phenomena. Moreover, many of the approaches to studying gambling that are criticised (e.g. cognition) date back to the 1980s (e.g. Ladouceur and Mayrand 1984), and this work has its antecedents in decision-making research that dates from the 1950s. None of these behavioural or cognitive approaches to studying gambling have changed all that much over the last 30 years (apart from the use of more technology), so it is hard to infer a causal connection between the type of work being undertaken, the Reno model, and the more recent involvement of industry funding in gambling research programmes. Indeed, as the authors concede, evidence is not readily available to show how particular findings might have been tempered as a result of industry involvement.

Mischaracterisation of Psychology

The paper has a tendency to engage in a form of in-group and out-group categorisation in which all ‘psy’ sciences are grouped with medical sciences as disciplines which are largely preoccupied with essentially the same research problems. For example, there is reference to ‘impaired control’ as a medical concept, but this is largely a behavioural construct that does not predispose any underlying pathologising of the behaviour. Instead, as Mark Dickerson indicated in a number of studies (e.g. Dickerson et al. 1992), impaired control very likely occurs as a result of the interaction between the individual and external stimuli and schedules of reinforcement. In effect, the person’s behaviour comes to be dictated by factors beyond the person’s control (Delfabbro and Winefield 1999). It is also a bit misleading to argue that the ‘zone’ entirely controls people’s behaviour because this would usually only develop within the session and is unlikely to be a feature of all gambling. Indeed, Dickerson (1993) made it very clear that it is important to differentiate between the factors that lead to the commencement of a gambling session as opposed to factors which are likely to maintain it. Perhaps most problematic of the depiction of psychological approaches is that it ignores that fact that behaviourism is a core area of psychology, and this is fundamentally concerned with external factors and

how they influence behaviour. A substantial body of work undertaken by Mark Dixon (USA), Mike Dixon (Canada), Dickerson, Delfabbro, Rockloff (Australia) and Griffiths (UK) has been concerned with investigations of how product/machine features (e.g. play speeds, near misses, lights, free spins, jackpots) influence behaviour and the implications of this work for harm minimisation.

Another element of the paper that comes close to a form of conspiracy thinking is to propose that journals filter out papers that do not comply with the dominant narrative. While it is not possible to rule out some favouritism being given to some methodologies (e.g. quantitative over qualitative), a journal such as *International Gambling Studies* has demonstrated a willingness to publish a number of articles by Livingstone (Livingstone and Woolley 2007), Markham and Young (Young et al. 2012), all of whom have adopted a wider sociopolitical approach to gambling research, and whom have advanced similar arguments to those expressed in this paper.

Omission of Developments

The paper also tends to focus on examples which are consistent with the arguments about the dire state of responsible gambling provisions and the narrow focus of research. However, in discussions of stronger reforms, there was little mention of Norway and other European developments. No mention was made of the fact that nearly all Australian states have mandatory rather than voluntary codes of practice. In addition, the authors did not acknowledge the fact that a lot of research in Australia over the last decade has been funded through COAG and organisations such as Gambling Research Australia which do not have direct industry connections or representation. Since 2000, a number of studies have been funded in Australia to look specifically at the potential modification of gaming machines. These include the machine modification study by Blaszczynski et al. (2001), studies of gaming machine jackpots by Rockloff et al. (2014), Schottler Consulting's (2014) study of the effects of modifying EGM features. There have also been studies of the removal of ATMs in Victoria (Thomas et al. 2013); research into venue operating hours (Tuffin and Parr 2008), and note acceptors (Brodie et al. 2003). Studies by Walker (e.g. Williamson and Walker 2001) also looked extensively at free spin features. Thus, while we generally agree that very little research has actually been applied to yield meaningful changes, it is not quite true to say that the sole focus of psychological gambling research has been on individual causes of problematic behaviour. The machines have indeed been the focus of a lot of research.

The Complexities of Reform

The final area where we felt that the authors could have acknowledged is in relation to the general practical complexities associated with making large-scale reforms. As we have previously indicated (Delfabbro and King 2017), the gambling industry is complex and multilayered. Those who are often blamed for problem gambling (the venues and owners of venues) are often not the same people who distribute the machines, design the artwork, program them, or develop the patents. Thus, imputing blame for exploitative products potentially involves several parties or organisations, some of whom may have no contact with the final product. It is, therefore, perhaps more useful to examine to what extent governments

and regulatory bodies can do more to reduce the potential harms associated with activities by making stronger decisions about what types of products should be legalised. Unfortunately, in addition to the revenue concerns, one of the principal challenges for government-based reform in Australia is that none of the evidence definitively provides a lot of evidence that changing bet sizes, play speeds and some other individual factors will make a lot of difference to reducing gambling-related harm. Thus, it may be that meaningful change will only occur through much larger scale changes such as introducing newer lines of machines that are less risky for players. Such a change would, however, require significant time to occur because the replacement cycle of machines is generally slow (often 10 years), and this would have to occur across all the country. In addition, as was evidenced in the debate concerning the introduction of pre-commitment technology, there may need to be major network and other technology upgrades put in place before other interventions (e.g. player tracking) could be introduced.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that Hancock and Smith have advanced many valid arguments concerning the validity of intervention philosophies that remain overly focused on individual behaviour and which do not appreciate the wider political context. However, we believe that these arguments are strengthened by (a) a clearer conceptualisation of psychological research and in particular how it views problematic behaviour as arising from the interaction between individual and product-based factors working in combination and (b) more guarded inferences about the causal connection between the Reno model and developments in research and policy.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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