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Can playing poker be good for you? Poker as a transferable skill

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Introduction

In late 2004, we were approached by an on-line gaming company to examine the skills involved in playing poker (both on- and off-line) and to assess to what extent the skills involved had any transferability to real-life situations. This provided an

interesting challenge and we would like to share our speculations (as there was little in the way of empirical research to utilise).

Poker savoir-faire

Much of poker's appeal is due to the fact that, unlike many other forms of gambling, the scope to influence the outcome is vast. Put simply, it is primarily a game of skill. Although some of the necessary skills can be inherent (such as emotional intelligence, i.e., the ability to process emotional information, particularly as it involves the perception, assimilation, understanding, and management of emotion), many of the more idiosyncratic skills are only acquired through experience. As a result, successful poker players will always seek to improve by being critical of their own play and assimilating a behavioural repertoire of opponents' playing styles. Some sense of humility is required.

Successful poker players must show consistent voracity (i.e., greed). Profitable players need to view the game as a financial exchange rather than a social entertainment activity. This includes micromanagement of their “stack.” In other words, they should not play loosely simply because they have the chip lead. They shouldn't differentiate pots based on the level of action or entertainment value. A “pot won is a pot won” and each one is important. Poker is a zero sum game—the pot won must not be graded only by how much it increases the player's stack, but by how it affects the chip position with the opponents. A stack is primarily built by consistently grinding out small wins rather than by making erratic, high-risk plays.

Another skill that experienced poker players acquire is to realise their boundaries. This is applicable to several areas. Firstly, they must choose a game which suits their bankroll. Put simply, they should not play at a table where they are forced to play their blinds based on pot odds. Secondly, they should play at a level where they can keep their head above water (i.e., players should walk before they can run). A cheaper way to gain experience from the experienced players rather than “sitting” with them is to simply observe the profitable players at the high-stakes table. The final parameter is for players to know when they are beaten. Conceding defeat in a battle does not equate to losing a war. The war in poker consists of hundreds of battles. For players to use all of their “ammunition” in a battle they are unlikely to win is bad strategy.

Control

At a fundamental level, what separates good (professional) gamblers and novice or problem gamblers is the factor of self-control. The general rule of thumb for players is to avoid becoming emotionally involved in the game. Inducing emotional (rather than logical) reactions from gamblers is what makes the gambling industry so

profitable. By remaining unemotional, players can protect themselves from recklessly chasing losses and avoid going on “tilt.” On-line gamblers are particularly at risk from engaging in chasing losses for the simple reason that they have 24-hour access and are constantly subjected to temptation. Furthermore, they often lack a “social safety net” to give objective appraisals.

There are ways to avoid becoming emotionally engaged. These include reflective “time-outs” and having an objective attribution of outcomes. Reflective time-outs equate to playing slowly and making gambling decisions with accrued knowledge (i.e., knowledge of probability and of opponents). It is advisable after a “bad beat” for players to be disciplined enough to sit out one or two hands to regain composure before playing again. Extending the concept further, it is probably wise after a particularly ineffectual session to suspend play for an elongated time-out. Reckless and unintelligent play by knowledgeable players emerges from not being able to deal with frustration appropriately.

Determining objective attributions of outcomes involves players having an external locus of control when assessing the cards they have, and an internal locus of control regarding what they do with the cards available to them. The mantra of poker players is, “You can only play the hand you were dealt.” All players will experience streaks of desirable and poor hands, and it is how players respond to these streaks which will determine their success. It is very easy for players to become frustrated while in a negative streak. It is also easy in a positive streak to become narcissistic and complacent. It is the knowledgeable player who understands probability and who realises that over a continuous playing period streaks (both positive and negative) are inevitable and transient.

On-line poker playing

On-line poker and off-line poker are not synonymous. A very useful tool in poker is to “read” players through their body language and their verbalisations. In on-line poker, gamblers are denied this advantage, so they must seek to manipulate opponents by the tools at their disposal. The key is to take a weakness (i.e., not being able to physically see other players) and turn it into an advantage (i.e., using this nontransparency). On-line poker permits gamblers to create a false identity. Gamblers could portray themselves as young attractive novice female players when in fact they are actually very experienced recognised professionals. The key to a “hustle” or manipulating other players in poker is for gamblers to project a character and hide their identity. Essentially, it is about *representing* a façade, whether for one hand or the whole game. Gamblers can adopt any “character” they wish to suit any game in which they engage. Perhaps in the case of playing with novices it may be profitable for gamblers to portray themselves as experienced professionals in order to intimidate players into submission.

Using the Internet relay chat band provided, gamblers may find it easier to develop their personas. The tone and pitch of what gamblers say is not revealed in text, so fundamentally they are acting with their most unemotional “poker face.” Put simply, they can exude confidence as they go all in on a bluff, when in reality their hands might be shaking and they may be sweating. The key to winning is inducing emotional reactions from other players. With knowledge of their opponents, it is possible for gamblers to “tailor” interactions to induce the desired response.

On-line social interaction at the poker table is not confined to adversarial chastising. It is possible to develop amiable relationships between players. On-line poker—particularly at low-stakes tables—is often more about entertainment than profit. In poker, it is not necessary to reveal your hand if nobody calls (i.e., pays to see it). Without seeing cards it is more difficult to understand player behaviour. However, at more sociable tables, people will reveal what they had to opposing players, if for nothing else than to indulge the observers. Creating false “alliances” is a way for gamblers to ascertain more information about their opponents and improve their ability to “read” them.

Poker and transferable skills

Poker—both on- and off-line—requires many skills and abilities. Below are some of the traits and skills we speculate are needed to be a successful poker player and the characteristics needed to be a good poker player. We argue that all of these can be utilised in other contexts to bring about success in other areas of peoples' lives, particularly in the areas of employability and future success within that job.

- **Critical evaluative skills:** The ability to appraise information and situations realistically, and to anticipate problems and difficulties, is vital in poker. To critically evaluate your playing decisions (“did I play that right?”) and those of others is common. These are also essential skills in the workplace—particularly in management.
- **Numerical skills:** The ability to handle and interpret numerical and statistical information is an important skill in many areas of employability. In poker, there are many levels of numerical skill, such as the micromanagement of funds—every penny is important—or the cards themselves. Not many jobs require mathematical wiz-kids but many decision-making judgements can be based on the balance of probability or the ability to interpret data summaries.
- **Pragmatism skills:** The ability to make the best of a nonideal situation and to work within preset constraints is a valuable skill in poker. For example, players need to accept what they cannot change (their cards) and play with what they have. Pragmatism is an undervalued skill within the workplace—most probably because it is more of an inherent skill than something that is learned. Success in almost any job will require good use of pragmatism.

- **Interpersonal skills:** Knowledge of the mechanisms of social communication and the potential sources of interpersonal conflict can be the difference between a good and a great poker player. Being able to identify an opponent's "tell" can pay huge (financial) dividends. Having good interpersonal awareness is not the same as being socially skilled (although it contributes). Interpersonal skills contribute to emotional intelligence, i.e., how to respond to different people in different situations. Interpersonal awareness skills in the workplace can make a difference in understanding and dealing with interpersonal problems. They may also help in telling whether colleagues are lying or trying to be economical with the truth.
- **Problem-solving skills:** The ability to identify different strategies and approaches is of great benefit when playing poker. Problem-solving skills in the workplace are extremely important to anyone wanting to be successful in their career, especially when they are tied in with pragmatism skills.
- **Goal orientation skills:** The ability to set goals and to formulate strategies to achieve those goals can be of benefit while playing poker. Being hungry and insatiable in the desire to achieve (i.e., winning) is a common characteristic of good poker players. Having goals gives people a purpose, which is very valuable in the workplace. It allows people to measure their success in some way, just as the poker player does when winning or losing.
- **Learning skills:** The ability to continuously learn and not rest on your laurels is a valuable skill in poker (as it is obviously in almost all areas of life). In poker, being humble enough to learn from those more experienced and to take others' expertise into future games is akin to other learning experiences in other environments—including the workplace. In poker, such learning can bring about objectivity. For instance, poker players should not act in haste but ponder and deliberate responses objectively. In essence, this is continuing professional development. It doesn't matter what walk of life you find yourself in—learning from others is paramount.
- **Higher-order analytic and strategic skills:** The ability to extract general principles from immediate or concrete situations and to formulate appropriate strategies can be very important while playing poker. For example, good poker players know not to let the cards get them frustrated or not to fight battles they can't win. There are clear parallels in the workplace, including office politics.
- **Flexibility skills:** The ability to adapt to any situation or to be opportunistic when a situation presents itself underlies skills in flexibility. In poker, adapting to your environment (e.g., who are you playing against, how big is your stack) comes with playing experience. The ability to look from several points of view is not something that can necessarily be taught but is certainly a valuable skill to an employer.
- **Face management/deception skills:** The ability to knowingly deceive

someone is not normally seen as desirable, but in poker it is all part of the game. Good acting ability is needed to demonstrate poker face, bluffs, etc. The telling of nonverbal white lies is important here. In some situations in the workplace, such skill will be of great importance. Telling white lies to keep face or to be diplomatic is a good example. There are also many situations that employers have to bluff in order to succeed (e.g., in giving a presentation to the board or being interviewed for a dream job). While such skills are not encouraged, they can certainly be of great benefit to the employee.

- **Self-awareness skills:** The ability to play to strengths and acknowledge weaknesses is a common trait in many walks of life. In poker, such skills can be very important. For example, skilful poker players remember that bad luck doesn't always last and good luck definitely doesn't last. Poker players also know that there is no room for apathy or complacency (in winning or losing streaks). In the workplace, self-awareness skills will help employees succeed in areas of strength and delegate in areas of weakness.
- **Self-control skills:** The ability to act with a cool head under pressure and to show the nerve and the mettle to cope under adversity is critical in good poker playing. Quite clearly, in the workplace, many team leaders and managers need such skills in order to get the most out of themselves and their teams. Such skills are also important in terms of stress management.

Many of these skills are transferable to other arenas and are the kinds of abilities and traits that will help people achieve in the workplace and aid promotion.

Diplomatic use of white lies can aid employees in a variety of situations and can help smooth over (or disguise) mistakes and errors.

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