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Pathways to excessive gambling: A societal perspective on youth and adult gambling pursuits

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By Charlotte Fabiansson. (2010). Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company. ISBN 978-1-4094-0431-6; 239 pp. \$99.95 (hardcover edition).

Although Australia is, in population and economic terms, a relatively small country compared with many of the other G-20 countries, it is a major player in the area of gambling. It is well known that Australians have the highest per capita expenditure on gambling of any country in the world. Several Australian companies are leading innovators in gaming machine technology, and gambling-related taxation (particularly from gaming machines) provides a crucial source of revenue for state governments. Gambling is a major feature of everyday community life in Australia. With the exception of Western Australia, most community clubs and hotels in Australia have gaming machines and other gambling facilities. It is, therefore, very difficult for Australians to avoid being exposed to opportunities to gamble when they go out for drinks, to social functions, or on family outings at licensed venues. Over 70 percent of Australian adults gamble at least once per year, and this behaviour often starts early, because young people grow up in families where gambling is seen as an acceptable and enjoyable part-time and social activity ([Productivity Commission, 2010](#)).

In general, this is the central argument advanced by Charlotte Fabiansson in her new book, *Pathways to excessive gambling*. Spanning more than 200 pages, Fabiansson's book is a sociological account of the rapid global expansion of the gambling industry over the last two decades, but it is also a critique of more individualistic or psychological approaches that have tended to dominate the field of gambling research since its inception. In Fabiansson's view, gambling is a multi-faceted phenomenon that needs to be understood in a broader social, economic, and political context. The causes of problem gambling lie not just with individuals, but in these broader factors and influences. Similarly, when one considers the harms resulting from gambling, one must also consider how the community and

the social fabric is affected, rather than merely focussing on the consequences for the individual gambler.

In support of her argument, Fabiansson's book includes four chapters relating to the social and economic significance and history of gambling. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the topic of gambling (its definition and nature), while Chapter 2 examines the links between gambling and broader social and recreational pursuits. Chapter 3 provides a summary of developments at a global level, while Chapter 4 provides an overview the situation in Australia, with a particular focus on developments in her home state of New South Wales. Together, these chapters highlight the rapid growth in gaming machine revenue, the nature of regulatory processes, developments in responsible gambling, and how gambling contributes to state taxation.

In Chapter 5, she summarises the findings of a substantial research project involving a survey of 754 young people (mostly younger than 18 years) from two Queensland communities about their gambling habits. Chapter 6 includes findings from a qualitative study involving 19 problem gamblers derived from a multi-cultural help service in Sydney. The youth gambling survey is impressive, because it has a very high response rate and examines young people's participation in a wide range of different activities. Similarly, I found impressive the range of issues explored in the qualitative interviews and in the clarity of the analysis, although this would have been stronger if there had been greater integration between the two separate studies. For example, interviews with adults in the regional areas where the youth study was conducted would have strengthened the author's conclusions.

The final two chapters are devoted to summarising the findings and the implications for future gambling research in Australia.

In many ways, this is a timely book because relatively little sociological analysis of this kind has been undertaken in Australia. Both Australian and international readers will find the summaries of gambling statistics useful and be able to draw upon the literature review as a source of material illustrating the contrasts between gambling in Australia and elsewhere in the world. Another useful element of the book is the fact that the studies of youth gambling are based on regional and rural schools, such that it provides one of the few comprehensive sociological analyses of gambling outside the major metropolitan areas. In non-metropolitan communities, clubs and hotels often provide a focal point for a considerable amount of community life, so it is not surprising to find high levels of gambling involvement here, despite the absence of major casinos. The book also makes the important point that links exist between the behavior/activities of adults and young people's receptivity to gambling, while providing useful descriptive information concerning the social pathways into gambling and problem gambling.

I generally agreed with most of the arguments advanced in this book, but I was neither entirely convinced that a divide exists between psychological and sociological research, nor that social and community factors have been under-emphasised in previous studies. Several of the youth gambling studies undertaken in Australia have been ones with which I personally have been involved (e.g., [Delfabbro & Thrupp, 2003](#); [Delfabbro, Lahn, & Grabosky, 2005](#); [Moore & Ohtsuka, 1997](#)); these are clearly very social in their focus. All discuss the important role of social and familiar influences in youth gambling. Yet another study overlooked by Fabiansson includes qualitative focus groups with discussions of gambling pathways ([Lambos, Delfabbro, & Pulgies, 2007](#)). Even the often-quoted national definition of problem gambling (from [Neal, Delfabbro, & O'Neil, 2005](#), p. 21) specifically refers to the effects of problematic behaviour on other people and the community. Moreover, I was mystified not to find a single reference to the work of Jan McMillen, who has conducted extensive socio-political analysis of gambling in Australia for more than 20 years. Many of the arguments about the importance of broader contextual factors, not to mention the need for multi-disciplinary approaches, have been frequently articulated in her publications (e.g., [McMillen, Woolley, O'Hara, & Jackson, 1999](#)). Given this, it almost seems ironic that the major study described in this book utilises the same individual-level survey approach that is often criticised by sociological researchers.

To my mind, the principal limitation of this book is the quality of the exposition in a few places. While the broad structure and ordering of material is sensible and logical, the progression of ideas within individual chapters and across paragraphs was sometimes difficult to follow. Different countries, years, and topical areas are combined in the same paragraph, such that comparisons are not necessarily being made between facts or findings that are immediately comparable or logically ordered. In the descriptions of youth gambling research, for example, it would have been much better in my view to have described the overseas studies first and then summarise Australian findings. In the chapter describing the survey study, the methodology section could be much clearer. I had immediate difficulties in trying to locate the sample size, understand exactly what questions had been asked, and follow the overall findings. For example, a table describing overall gambling participation rates is not presented until later in the chapter, long after other more specific findings have been discussed. The book also includes a considerable amount of repetition, some odd statements (e.g., the DSM-IV is described as a gambling screen¹; peer influences are discussed as if they are not risk or protective factors; and individualistic approaches make surprise re-appearances, such as “The drive to compete and win is an intrinsic trait in humans” [p. 37]). In another place, problem gambling screens are described as measures of “gambling propensity” (p. 109). Furthermore, there is no mention of [Derevensky, Gupta, and Winters' \(2003\)](#) analysis of the Ladouceur critique of the SOGS-RA, and [Moore and Ohtsuka's \(1997\)](#) paper is described as being about “hidden gambling,”

although the study also included a sample of young adult gamblers aged 18 to 25 years.

Despite these concerns, the book provides a useful contribution to the existing literature on gambling in Australia, while underscoring the importance of utilising multi-disciplinary approaches and perspectives in the analysis of the causes and consequences of gambling.

Notes

¹Fabiansson writes, “and the screen more commonly used in the USA, the Diagnostic Criteria for Pathological Gambling (DSM-IV, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) (American Psychiatric Association 1994)” (p. 17).

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