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opinion

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Beliefs and Value Systems: Understanding All Australians

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Most explanations of problem gambling depend on British or American models, yet there are other ways of viewing the world

Governments at state and federal level are beginning to take seriously the growing evidence of problem gambling in many communities throughout Australia. This concern often takes the form of funding for strategies such as specialised counselling and the development of self-help manuals on how to handle problem gambling, that are addressed to the general public in lay terms.

These are undoubtedly very worthy measures designed in different ways to tackle the problem, the magnitude of which threatens the lives, livelihoods and

family relationships of increasing numbers of people.

Problem gambling is now being seen not only as a social and economic problem but as a serious mental health issue that has implications for mental health services and practitioner expertise in a multicultural community. A quarter of the population has origins in more than 100 countries, and the rest represent a rich heterogeneous heritage of indigenous and non-indigenous Australian born.

Counselling services for problem gambling are proliferating. Although most counsellors have mainstream backgrounds and North American theoretical perspectives, an increasing number are being recruited from ethnic minority groups and indigenous communities. Counselling agencies are starting to understand that mainstream counselling is itself a cultural artifact that is based on psychological theories developed in Europe and the United States for largely WASP populations with middle-class status and college education. Therefore we are beginning to see some efforts to modify established counselling methods to take in different cultural value systems, client expectations and help-seeking behavior.

The newest self-help books are readable, affordable and readily accessible that is, for Australians who read English and live within, or at least understand, the cultural boundaries of the mainstream Anglo-Australian culture in which there are certain shared and recognisable underlying values.

However, if you are outside the mainstream culture, if you are indigenous or from an ethnic background culturally distant from the mainstream, such books may be of little or no help. This is because the cultural values that underpin your life's path and your community may have little to do with prominent Anglo-Australian notions of individualism and the cult of self as reflected in the ever-shrinking nuclear family. In problem-gambling terms, there may be very different traditions and belief systems influencing your behavior and your thinking about games of chance and the unseen forces that control life's outcomes.

The meaning of gambling

It seems that most societies engage in some form of gambling, which is an extension of play. However, gambling takes on a new meaning because stakes are introduced, leading to risk-taking. In some cultures there are sanctions against gambling because of a prevailing view that gaining something purely through luck or chance is morally unsound.

Islam and early Protestantism adopted this view, and discouraged participation in games of chance, as it somehow represented interfering in divine law. Indeed, Islamic teaching suggests that by indulging in games of chance, human beings are attempting to meddle with "blind" fate and therefore inadvertently mock the divine plan in which nothing is left to chance.

A Persian verse suggests that gambling is a metaphor for life. Death is the croupier:

> This world is the dicing den of the devil. In it,
>
> We are the players. Fate supervises the numbers thrown.
>
> (Quoted by Hyde, in Rosenthal, 1975, p.161)

Another poet compared life's vagaries to the roll of the dice:

> Fate is the player. We the counters are.
>
> Heaven the dice, our earth the gaming board.
>
> (From Ibn Sina, quoted in Rosenthal, 1975, p.161)

Indeed institutionalised centres of gambling, like casinos, reflect the society surrounding them: elegant upper-class meeting places in parts of Europe; the great leveling experience of Las Vegas; or the stage for the machismo performance of masculinity, pride, loss and chance found in Latin America (Thompson, 1991). Indeed important values of the prevailing society are embedded in each gaming setting, allowing patrons to play a role attached to notions of leisure, daring and risk-taking all underpinned with the heady excitement of access to money.

One point seems certain: "People of the Book", whose traditions have come to them through the Judaic-Christian-Islamic heritage of monotheism, have religious and moral sanctions in place against gambling. In many instances throughout history this has been translated into formal government policy, leaving those who gamble to incur the consequences of flouting the rules and laws of church and state. Despite this, people continue to gamble, for many reasons.

One reason might be interpreted as an assertion of individuality against authority. The drive to individualism in Western cultural norms might explain why people who feel anxious or ambivalent about their gambling

transgressions tend to explain them away in terms of making a personal choice, about the need to feel a sense of excitement, the desire to take risks despite traditions that hold gambling as an undesirable activity.

A different philosophy exists in many neo-Confucian cultures, those ancient cultures in which a combination of Buddhist teachings and the writings of Confucius have given people another blueprint for understanding the world. Here we see a mixture of fatalism and activism. Strong beliefs are held simultaneously about the inevitable effect of external forces that are beyond human control, like the Buddhist precepts of fate or a former life. At the same time people must strive to achieve honorable earthly goals that are within their reach for the glory of family and ancestors (Yu, 1996).

An ancient proverb puts it this way: One's life is determined first by destiny, second by luck, third by feng shui, fourth by moral conduct, and fifth by education. So one very important goal is the achievement of personal success, both monetary and educational, which will reflect favorably on one's ancestors and family. A common New Year's greeting is: "I wish you increased wealth." In fact, the accumulation of wealth through educational success may be the main path to family honor. The concept of yuan explains a person's success or failure, as it represents the external invisible force that is beyond control. A person with du yuan exhibits an affinity with gambling, a special quality that will make winning very likely, as it harnesses those invisible outside forces. Yuan also works against feelings of guilt or hostility as it takes away the need for blame and promotes a passive acceptance of life's vicissitudes. But yuan is not fixed forever; Confucian teaching encourages people to take action to change and manipulate fate, and to work hard for a better future (Yu, 1996).

In the same vein is feng shui, the ancient science of geomancy that encourages humankind to plan buildings and surroundings to enhance opportunities for gaining luck and prosperity. This has the effect of driving out the malevolent and bringing in all that is good and life-enhancing. Part of this time-honored system is the ancient application of numerology to life's decisions and events.

Indeed people who come from neo-Confucian cultures may approach gambling and concepts of luck and chance from a different mindset which holds that those who play for money are not transgressing a moral law. Instead they are testing karma or fate. This is not to suggest that there are no sanctions against the personal and societal risks involved. We know that gambling activities often form part of New Year celebrations associated with attracting luck at an auspicious time. These are controlled within the collectivist norms of the community, thus working against the rise of the

isolated problem gambler (Nguyen, P., 1998).

Gambling in the neo-Confucian context may be contrasted to gambling in the Judaic-Christian-Islamic tradition which through received religious teachings maintains sanctions against indulging in games of chance for personal gain. In this context, people have to go outside those precepts to engage in gambling.

What is interesting is that the personal motivation for traveling the potential path to good fortune through a game of chance requires very different explanations from different cultural-value perspectives.

Beyond recreation

There are other ways of understanding gambling from a social and economic perspective. For the Tiwi people of North Australia, playing cards for money has become part of an adaptation to an imposed socio-economic system that implies a distinct division between work and leisure that did not exist in earlier times.

Tiwi women are the main "small time" gamblers, as winning small amounts of money is seen as equivalent to providing food for family members either by gathering from natural sources or by buying items at the local store. For Tiwi men it is less frequent, and the stakes are higher: once again it is seen as the equivalent of providing food, but in the same order as the occasional and successful hunt, the windfall being used for purchasing symbols of success in the white world like cars or travel to the mainland.

The inevitable consequence of the gambling paradigm is the opportunity for the family or community to share in the losses and the gains, which is a central cultural tradition of the Tiwi (Goodale, 1986). This pattern may be prevalent among other Aboriginal communities of similar size and geographical isolation.

How we explain gambling

Central to mainstream explanations of why people gamble is the notion of individualism and personal self-interest. Self-help manuals describe problem gambling as any gambling behavior that is beyond the control of the individual and causes personal, economic and social hardship for the person, the family and friends (Coman & Burrows, 1998).

As a statement of fact, this may apply in all cultures in describing a personal and social problem at a relatively superficial level. However, it says nothing about underlying value systems unfamiliar to mainstream thinking, and therefore poses several significant questions. What messages do minority cultures receive through the media about gambling as a state-sanctioned pastime? When people come from a culture that respects benevolent authority to a new country where prominent politicians openly support casino activities, what conclusions do they draw?

In addition to these, what is the result of a convincing advertising campaign aimed at particular ethnic communities showing fellow countrymen enjoying casino wins and receiving casino vouchers in lucky red New Year envelopes? The answer can be seen in the demographics: a community that represents 1% of Victorians is over-represented at Melbourne's casino making up 60% of the clientele.

Gambling and mental health

There is ample evidence of the depression-addiction cycle surrounding problem gambling in all cultures in Australia. Mental-health professionals are increasingly turning their attention to this issue among ethnic and indigenous communities, however they may be unaware of their own ethnocentric views on what constitutes rational and irrational thinking in terms of belief systems other than their own. In addition to the barrier of language in the therapeutic encounter, techniques that challenge beliefs relating to luck and chance may be used without effect when the underlying value systems of the parties are culturally distant.

Comfortable middle-class professionals may also be largely unaware of the effects that result from the migration or refugee experience. It is possible that post-traumatic stress disorder following a history of torture and trauma is a real factor in the origins of problem gambling in some communities.

Life events and stress

It is now apparent that the lowered status of unemployed Vietnamese men and the rise in independence and earning power of their employed wives has changed family roles irrevocably. This has led to severe depression, increased marriage breakdown and domestic violence. The vision of a win at the casino to redeem a man's place of honor and power in the family in an alien land may be a powerful trigger in the gambling cycle.

Latin American communities relate similar scenes of despair. Problem gambling may be associated with the frustration of machismo and its attendant values of masculinity, risk-taking, challenging fate, honor, hesitancy to delay gratification, and demonstration of bravery. These have their cultural origins in the destruction of mestizo communities over centuries of colonial oppression, but they find few outlets in the migration-settlement-unemployment cycle in contemporary Australia.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the current literature that the understanding of problem gambling and strategies for countering it are embedded in mainstream Anglo-Australian concepts of individualism, autonomy and personal responsibility. This includes approaches to counselling models, self-help manuals, advertising of opportunities for seeking help and the promotion of good mental health. There is little or no mention of understanding collectivist value systems in which the family or community is the core unit, not the individual.

This would mean a change in approach to expectations of client help-seeking, client understanding of what counselling is, and the model of counselling itself. It may require counsellors to extend their repertoire to include unfamiliar elements like subtlety and indirectness in communications, avoidance of confrontation and direct interpretation of motives and actions, and respecting different meanings in family relationships.

We also need to encourage and support members of ethnic communities to join the helping professions in much larger numbers than at present. They will provide the key to parallel beliefs and value systems, which are vital in helping us understand the gambling habits and attitudes of Australians from non-Anglo traditions. This will enable us to offer more culturally appropriate strategies to combat the same potentially destructive effects that may be visited upon all cultures. In this way there will be greater opportunity for equity in helping all Australian problem gamblers, whatever their birthright traditions.

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