



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Journal of Business Research

Selling hope: Gambling entrepreneurs in Britain 1906–1960<sup>☆</sup>Carolyn Downs<sup>\*</sup>

Department of Management Learning and Leadership, Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, Lancaster LA1 4YX, United Kingdom

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 1 July 2014

Received in revised form 1 December 2014

Accepted 1 March 2015

Available online xxx

## Keywords:

Gambling  
Enterprise  
Entrepreneurship  
Social class  
Poverty  
Hope

## ABSTRACT

This research explores historical perspectives on gambling amongst poorer social groups in order to better understand why the poorest people in society gamble even though gambling seems economically illogical. A principal finding was that pleasure gained from hope of a small win and the agency of making a choice on use of scarce resources may be important in helping poorer people maintain optimism in the face of difficult life circumstances. The paper also explores patterns of illegal gambling entrepreneurship that arose as a response to the desire of the masses to “buy a few days hope” (Orwell, 1937). The paper concludes that where public opinion is out of step with the statute book then an illegal economy will develop to provide the goods or services the public is demanding and that apparently irrational behavior may in fact be a positive experience for many people.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

The history of commercial gambling stretches back centuries (Chinn, 1991; Clapson, 1991; Clark, 1983; Downs, 2008; Munting, 1996), but in many jurisdictions the commercialization of gambling took place in the illegal economy. In the United Kingdom (UK) lotteries were outlawed in 1823, and cash betting was banned in 1906. Despite some amendments allowing the football pools (1928) and charity lotteries (1934) most cash gambling remained illegal in the UK until January 1st 1961. Nevertheless, a substantial market for gambling games existed. Sociologists at Mass Observation (1947) found 68% of all respondents reported gambling on the football pools, betting or lotteries in the past year. Kemsley and Ginsburg (1951), reporting to the Home Office, found a combined (male and female) prevalence rate of 70% for these types of gambling. These prevalence rates are analogous to recent studies of gambling participation around the world (Binde, 2011). This suggests that even when most gambling is illegal participation rates in gambling are remarkably stable across time.

Participation rates in gambling are of interest in business and consumer research because while gambling is now legal in many jurisdictions it is not unproblematic; gambling is treated as a vice rather than legitimate leisure. Negative views of gambling are commonly held.

A study of gamblers found 51% believed gambling to be ‘generally addictive’ and 56% thought it ‘a waste of money’ (Griffiths & Bingham, 2002). Gambling has the potential to cause harm, not just the addiction of an individual, but to family and wider society through debt and crime associated with excessive consumption (Downs & Woolrych, 2009, 2010; Gazel, Rickman, & Thompson, 2001; Korn, 2000; Smith & Wynne, 1999). However, a significant commercial gambling sector developed between 1906–1960 leaving legislators to react to a de facto gambling industry rather than proactively regulating gambling.

This paper will consider the development of commercial gambling in the UK before January 1st 1961 when gambling was legalized. Entrepreneurs in the illegal economy succeeded through the exploitation of environmental and situational factors (poverty and the need for hope) that meant gambling supported the consumption preferences of working class consumers. The historical perspective helps in understanding the complexities of gambling consumption revealed in contemporary gambling prevalence studies which consistently show poorer social groups to have surprisingly high prevalence and addiction rates (Wardle et al., 2010), and illustrates how ‘taste [in consumption] is socially and historically constructed and reveals in individual's position in the social hierarchy’ (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013). The paper explores the role of hope in the development of patterns of gambling consumption and the ways in which legal and illegal entrepreneurs of gambling were able to exploit the need for hope amongst a substantial proportion of working class consumers. It will show that, for working class gamblers, commercially provided gambling was an unremarkable and persistent part of their leisure lives whether the gambling was provided in the illegal or legal economy. Evidence comes from archival sources

<sup>☆</sup> Many thanks to Dr. June Cotte and Dr. Catherine Prentice for editing this special issue, and to the two anonymous reviewers of this article, whose input was extremely helpful in developing the paper.

<sup>\*</sup> Tel.: +44 1524 510939.

E-mail address: c.downs@lancaster.ac.uk.

including Mass Observation Archive (MO), Parliamentary Papers (PP), autobiographies, collections of letters and the press.

## 2. Background

Rojek defined consumption as 'voluntary, monetary acquisition of goods and services in [a] market society' (Rojek, 2006: 475). The link between leisure and consumption is unremarkable nowadays, though it is a far cry from the calls for rational recreation that ran through the 19th and much of the 20th centuries (Bradley, 1976) and which impacted on the respectable working classes use of leisure (Hoggart, 1957; McKibbin, 1998). Rojek (2006) argues that different social groups have a relationship with the market, the media and the state directly linked to their positioning in society, and this relationship impacts on their consumption of leisure. Rojek states consumers are, 'positioned in relation to scarce economic, social, political and cultural resources' (Rojek, 2006:10) and therefore do not have the capacity to make truly free choices about their patterns of consumption. Similarly, Saatcioglu and Ozanne found 'taste is socially and historically constructed and reveals an individual's position in the social hierarchy' (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013:693). This is an important point regarding leisure choices. An individual's position in society may make adoption of the apparently irrational and potentially dangerous pursuit of gambling more understandable and perhaps even difficult to avoid for some poorer people. The process of the legitimization of consumption was shown by Ger and Belk (1999) to be linked to cultural variations in ethical thinking, similar to those found both within the British working classes, and between social classes (LeMahieu, 1988; McKibbin, 1998).

One of the unseen consequences of poverty is the impact it can have on an individual's will to act, 'severe poverty demoralizes people when it erodes their sense of control' (Myers, 2000: 329), but as Orwell noted, 'above all there is gambling, the cheapest of all luxuries. Even people on the verge of starvation can buy a few days hope ('Something to live for', as they call it) by having a penny on a sweepstake' (Orwell, 1937: 87). The lack of day-to-day control over many elements in the lives of poorer people may heighten the importance of optimism and hope in the lives of people living in difficult circumstances. Gambling as a source of hope for poor people is not a new phenomenon, it was observed by social reformer Bell (1907) and sociologists Rowntree (1901, 1941) and Zweig (1948, 1952, 1961). Contemporary studies come to similar conclusions; 'Most people on low incomes dream of winning the pools or the National Lottery' (Kempson, 1997: 8). Casey found that poor women in her study of lottery play 'were motivated by the prizes that they occasionally won', and that day-dreams about winning were important in their daily lives (Casey, 2003: 253).

The persistence of gambling amongst poorer people may point to an 'enduring subculture, more at ease with chance and contingency, less committed to a faith in human mastery over fate, than the dominant culture of enterprise, efficiency and control' (Lears, 1995: 8). Although social commentators may see gambling amongst poor people as reckless disregard for money what is not so readily recognized is that where the amount of disposable income is small then saving makes little difference. Gambling may offer hope for the future and a degree of happiness (adrenaline, thrill of a win or near win, company, and the status of daring to place a scarce resource on validating an opinion) during the experience. The economic logic of gambling, in terms of hope and happiness, may be weighed by the low-income non-problem gambler against moral disapproval of gambling by peers or wider society, and in many cases moral disapproval loses. If gambling is seen as a bridge to lifestyle desires and enough people are reported as having made it over that bridge, hope of winning will survive in the lives of poorer people who gamble, for 'desire [is] deeply linked to the social world, both through the mimetic process and through the pool of available values systems and lifestyles that constrain the freedom to desire' (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003: 328). Thus, non-problem gambling amongst the poor may offer hope for a better future. This hope is reinforced by

knowledge of life-transforming wins received by people like themselves while disappointment from not winning is mitigated by playing again.

Seligman and Schulman (1986) found that people with an optimistic explanatory style felt more in control of their lives and were protected from feelings of helplessness, even when facing obstacles or difficulties in life. Furthermore, they were less likely to suffer from depression than those with a pessimistic explanatory style. Abramson et al. (2000) used a gambling task to measure levels of optimism. The game was computer-based and uncontrollable. Optimistic participants showed an illusion of control, often talking to the computer as though words of encouragement might persuade the random event to occur. This behavior will resonate with those who have observed players muttering 'come on 20' under their breath as they wait for the last number on their bingo card to come up. The optimistic group believed their skill and ability helped them achieve success at the task (Abramson et al., 2000: 85). The finding that illusory control positively effects psychological health was replicated in a series of studies conducted as part of the long-term Temple-Wisconsin Cognitive Vulnerability to Depression (CVD) project. Concluding that 'even when optimism is illusory it provides protection from depression' (Abramson et al., 2000: 86) they noted optimism was a good predictor of resilience to depression.

For poorer gamblers it may be that leisure gambling, with a demarcated budget, offers an environment where a stressor can be experienced and controlled and this could be an important motivator to gamble. Psychologists find that a key ingredient for hope (optimism) is agency. Therefore it follows that hope is a thinking process, with outputs of thought being tools to finding paths to desired goals. As agency is not easily obtained by poor and powerless people it is perhaps not surprising to discover that poorer people are more likely to suffer from depression (Patel, 2008). Significant numbers of poor people participate in routine gambling and evidence from archives and in more recent work (Casey, 2003) shows routine gambling provides hope, encourages optimism, assists with goal achievement and gives pleasure, 'because, like, when you're skint you think, just put a pound in and get twenty quid' (Casey, 2003: 251). While lottery jackpots are elusive, and people realize they are unlikely to win a large prize, they do experience enough small wins to stoke up the hope of winning a larger prize one day. The belief in winning keeps them optimistic and purchasing tickets; for 'to make desire real people use consumption' (Belk et al., 2003: 329). The advantage of regular gambling with small amounts of money is that the dream of winning can be repeated over again with another stake, and the likelihood of regular small wins that make an appreciable difference to a tight budget is also well-understood by poorer gamblers (Hilton, 1936; Casey, 2003).

## 3. Gambling in working class society 1906–1961

The disreputable nature of gambling as a vice was buttressed by prohibitive legislation. Laws to control and contain off-course betting, lotteries and sweepstakes were passed in 1823, 1845, 1856, 1906, 1934 and 1956 leaving most commercial gambling in the black economy until the Betting and Gaming Act (1960). The legal situation with gambling in the UK was closely tied to moral objections to the pursuit. Of most concern regarding gambling was the impact on the 'poorer sort' (Metropolitan Police Files, 1939, Public Records Office [PRO] MEPO 3/765). The contention was that gambling led to secondary poverty, a trope widely understood and propagated. Other concerns were that gambling encouraged undesirable social characteristics such as a desire to get something for nothing, greed, laziness, crime and social disorder (Rowntree, 1905). Religious objectors to gambling, represented by the Churches Council on Gambling, an organization mainly comprising the non-Conformist Protestant churches plus evangelical Anglicans (Episcopalians), argued that gambling weakened trust in God to provide for all human needs; placed superstition over faith, undermined the Biblical command to work and encouraged greed which was a sin (Rowntree, 1905). However, other Christian groups

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10492931>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10492931>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)