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The complex interactions of gambling disorder with illegal behavior

A study conducted with the collaboration of the Department of Psychobiology and Methodology of the UAB has analyzed the complex interactions of gambling disorder (GD) with criminal behavior. It reveals that between 23% and 89% of GD patients report illegal acts to finance their habit, and most of them show a personality characterized by high self-transcendence, trait that should be considered in intervention programs.

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Gambling disorder (GD) is a complex behavioral addiction (without substance use) characterized by a repeated gambling activity that leads to severe problems for the individuals, but also for families and society. It is known that from 23% to 89% of patients who met criteria for GD report at least one illegal activity related to their gambling activity, such as forgery, theft, or embezzlement to finance gambling activities (for example writing bad checks/paying bills from accounts that contain no funds). GD related illegal acts are commonly non-violent and motivated by the need to obtain gambling funds and/or recoup financial shortfalls, and the presence of these crime behaviors has been related with more difficulties in the global functionality (greater comorbidity with other mental disorders, substance/s abuse, more maladaptive personality traits and higher levels of impulsivity). Illegal acts to finance gambling or to pay outstanding debts due to gambling are also strong barriers for good treatment outcomes, since they impact adherence to the therapy guidelines and therefore increase the risk of dropout and relapses. Thus, one of the therapeutic targets for GD should be to identify the underlying mechanisms of patients who report the presence of these criminal behaviors, with the purpose to apply adequate precise intervention plans.

And although it is known that the processes explaining the concurrence of problematic gambling and crime are doubtlessly mediated by many interacting factors, the concrete pathways leading to the onset and progression of GD with illegal acts remain uncertain.

In a recently published study in which professors Roser Granero and Roser Nadal from the Department of Psychobiology and Methodology of the UAB participated, along with researchers from the UB and IDIBELL, a network analysis was used to visualize the relationships between a set of nodes containing information on the clinical profile (including the core symptoms of GD, psychopathology distress, substance use and personality dimensions) among a sample of n=401 patients seeking treatment for GD at the Behavioral Addictions Outpatient Unit of the Bellvitge University Hospital (Barcelona, Spain). Sample included men and women, within the18 to 80 age range, recruited between years 2021 and 2022. Two separate networks were adjusted, for patients with illegal acts (n=105) and for those without these behaviors (n=296).

In the patients with GD concurrent with illegal acts, the most relevant node was self-transcendence, a personality trait considered as a complex transpersonal and transdiagnostic construct and largely related to certain aspects of psychopathology, including substance and behavioral addictions. We conclude that patients with dysfunctional scores for self-transcendence could evidence certain characteristics related to dispositional traits like high anger, and hostility, but also to less social interactions. These patients could show low capacity to understand the possible consequences of their actions because of their restricted social perspective. And since the interaction provided by the gambling activity is clearly simplified (compared with the real social contexts), patients with dysfunctional self-transcendence may tend to only consider the short-term effects on themselves, and long-term consequences could be perceived as irrelevant. Illegal acts (such as forgery) might be perceived basically as an easy way to finance their gambling activity.

Our study provides new evidence regarding the underlying structure of GD profiles characterized by the presence of criminal behavior. Future studies should examine the outcomes of interventions targeting self-directedness outcomes to improve GD treatment and harm reduction interventions.

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References

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