

What differentiates professional poker players from recreational poker players?

Discovery 2010 Conference

Toronto, Canada

Abby McCormack & Mark Griffiths

International Gaming Research Unit

Nottingham Trent University, UK

April 14 2010



Poker popularity

- Popularity of poker has increased dramatically in recent years
 - World Series of Poker
 - Chris Moneymaker 2003
- Fastest growing form of online gambling
- Professional poker players have become media celebrities and 'superstars'.

Skill in games

Skill:

'the extent to which a player, properly motivated, can perform the mandated cognitive and/or physical behaviours for success in a specific game' (Larkey et al., 1997).

Larkey et al., 1997 suggest 3 types of

- 1) Pure chance – lotteries, keno, roulette, craps
- 2) Skill-chance – poker, backgammon, blackjack
- 3) Pure skill – Chess, checkers

Poker – is there skill involved?

- A question of much debate!
- Poker involves an element of skill – potential to win big if they make the right bets
- Many argue that poker should not be classed as gambling in the same sense as roulette or lotteries.
- Several cases have gone before court to determine whether poker is a game of skill, and if so, whether the law prohibits it.
- UK situation is different

Professional poker

- Players rely on skill, knowledge and experience to win consistently
- Professional players derive all or a significant part of their income from playing poker.
- Primarily a game of skill – years to master
- Successful poker players are always seeking to improve
 - Critical of their own play
 - Understanding the playing styles of their opponents

Howard Lederer –the ‘vast majority’ of high betting poker hands are decided after all players except the winner have folded

What kind of skill is involved?

- An ability to bluff?
- Mathematical skill?

Other skills required (Parke et al., 2005):

- Problem solving skills
- Self-control skills
- Critical evaluative skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Analytical and strategic skills

Previous research

- Very little research on professional poker
- Dedonno and Detterman (2008) – poker instruction
 - Participants who received poker instruction significantly outperformed those who only received information on the history of poker
 - Treatment group also played significantly fewer hands and resulted in improved performance
 - Treatment group reduced their number of hands played from 67% to 37%
 - (Optimal number of hands to play is 15% - 25% of hands dealt)

Previous research

- Griffiths et al (2009) – predicting factors of online poker success
 - Successful players =
 - More disciplined
 - Stick to a budget
 - Higher stake levels
 - Did not over-estimate their skill

Aims and objectives

An exploratory study to investigate the differences between professional poker players and recreational poker players

- 1) How are professional poker players able to make a living from playing poker?
- 2) What characteristics do professional poker players possess?
- 3) What strategies do professional poker players adopt?
- 4) How do these characteristics and strategies differ from recreational poker players?

Methodology

Design: Grounded Theory approach

Participants:

3 professional poker players (\$100,000 - \$250,000 USD a year)

1 semi-professional poker player (\$35,000 USD a year)

5 recreational poker players

Age range 23 – 47 years old (Mean = 31). Only 1 female

- Preferred gambling activity = Online poker
- Approximately half also participated in other gambling activities
 - Roulette, Sports betting, Horse racing and Blackjack

Methodology

1 current problem gambler, 1 ex problem gambler (still gambled)

- Self-report
- DSM-IV
- PGSI

Procedure

- A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on a schedule of key questions and themes, as identified in the literature.
- All Face-to-face interviews - Lasting up to 75 minutes
- Topic areas:
 - Account of their gambling behaviour
 - How, why they first started gambling
 - Why they chose online and/or offline gambling
 - Strategies

Results

All participants believed poker is a game of skill (rather than mostly chance based or a combination of skill and chance).

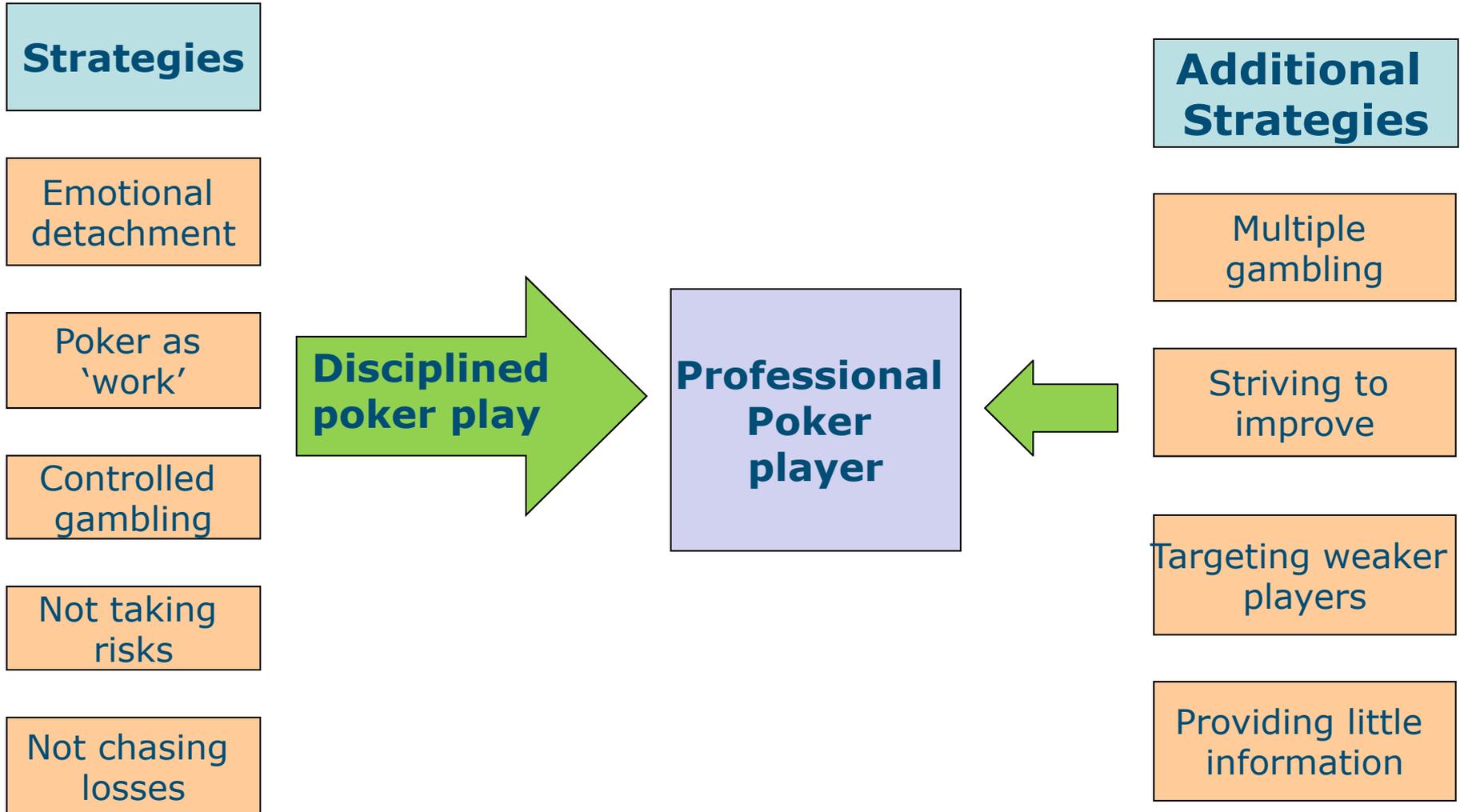
Professional poker players considered poker a sport:

'For me poker is completely different to any other form of gambling. It's like playing chess...it's a skilled game...I consider playing poker to be like a sport, not a gamble' (Martin, 26).

Or compared it to the stock market:

- *'Investment bankers invest money and they're basically taking a gamble every day whether shares go up or down and on a given day they don't know what's going to happen but long term their skill in predicting what's going to happen should make money so...I consider it like that' (Anthony, 29).*

Results



Disciplined poker play

Requires:

- Patience
- Extreme mental discipline
- Steady game plan
- Focus on long-term goals.

'I won't say I'm not affected by losing but I think I'm affected by losing in such a minor way and the same with winning because basically poker for me is just one big session over the course of the next however many years I play it for. So for example, if I get unlucky in a big pot it doesn't really matter because I will play so many of those big pots in a day or a month or a year that it doesn't matter' (Leon, 25).

- Recreational players more likely to focus on short-term goals – setting themselves up for failure

Strategies: Poker as work

'I try and treat it like a proper job, so I try and play at least five days a week for eight hours a day' (Martin, 26).

Need to put the hours in

Recreational players generally:

- Play less frequently
- Play shorter sessions
- Play for lower stakes

Strategies:

Emotionally detaching from the game

- Emotionally detaching from the game allows professional poker players to avoid recklessly chasing losses:
- *'It doesn't matter how good you are, you will go through periods where you lose money because that's the nature of the game...but you have to just keep the belief that you will make money because ...I might have one bad session but I know that if I play 10, 20 sessions in a week I will make money from it' (Martin, 26).*

Emotionally detaching from the game

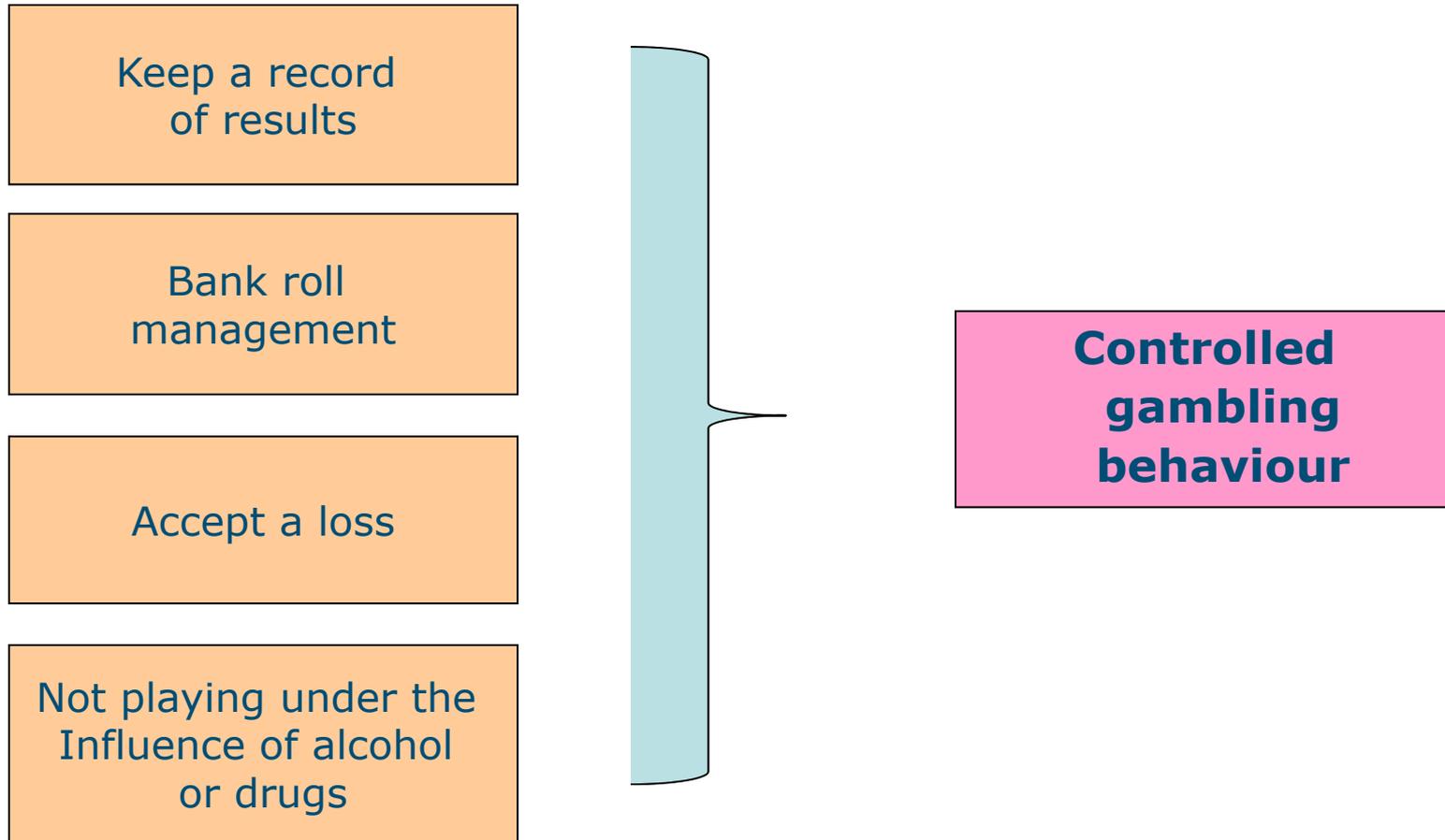
- Recreational poker players were much more emotional when playing poker online - can affect their ability to play logically:
- *'Poker...it's infuriating... I got a bad beat and I smashed my computer. It evokes that kind of emotion in me...I mean I'm 95% certain I'm going to win a hand and...then I don't because...someone gets lucky on the last card then it gets quite frustrating and emotions come out more and that's why I smashed the computer' (Nathan, 34).*
- *'I generally get quite annoyed when the other person gets what I think is lucky against me...I'm quite a bad loser!...When you're losing it can be extremely frustrating... It goes from one extreme to the other' (Ed, 23).*

Strategies:

Engaging in controlled gambling behaviour

- Playing a logical, rational game
- Playing with a clear head; not under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- Accept a loss
- Not acting hastily
- Make decisions based on accrued knowledge (knowledge of probability and of their opponents)
- Doyle Brunson (2 times world poker champion) – alertness and control over emotions
- Realise their boundaries
- Keep a record of hours, money won/lost

Strategies: Engaging in controlled gambling behaviour



Engaging in controlled gambling behaviour

Bank roll management

- *'I am a winning player at this level, the only way I could lose all my money would be to go vastly over my head into a game that I wasn't rolled for and...for a start I don't go into those games...I mean bank roll management is the only way you can be a winning player really...I mean you get some guys every year who take massive shots at games way above where they should be playing...I'm very good at not playing outside of my bank roll, I mean that's my first rule' (Leon, 25)*

Keeping a record of results

- *'I have meticulous data of all my results so when someone says to me are you sure you're a winner or did you really do that, and I have all the facts and figures to prove it' (Leon, 25).*

Engaging in controlled gambling behaviour

Accept a loss:

- Sit out a few games – regain composure
- Professional poker players reported only playing if they were in the right frame of mind:
 - *'Because its my profession, you have to...have the right state of mind and be relaxed...if you're agitated then you're probably going to lose money...Often, if I lose a big hand I'll just stop because if you're not in the right frame of mind to play you're going to lose a lot more money...so I clear my mind and then try again when I'm more calm' (Anthony, 29).*
- Knowing how to handle defeat becomes an integral part of the job.

Engaging in controlled gambling behaviour

Not playing under the influence of alcohol or drugs

- *'I keep somewhere between \$30,000 and \$100,000 online at any one time, and you could lose that in three or four clicks of a mouse if you went to the wrong table and it would be so easy to do, so I don't play drunk. I don't play on drugs, I don't play under any sort of circumstances that could make me likely to do that' (Leon, 25).*
- Some of the recreational gamblers reported they enjoyed a drink while gambling.
- *'I think [alcohol] takes the inhibitions away...in my case I'll gamble drunk, sober...It takes my judgment away which is why I never do well in big poker tournaments that last four, five, six hours because...I've had enough alcohol to then not use my sense I'll just go with my addictive side as opposed to my analytical side' (Nathan, 34).*

Strategies:

Not taking risks and not chasing losses

- Much less likely to take risks or chase losses:
- *'I would never chase my money back. I would never chase to try and make back what I'd lost. I'd continue to try and play what I thought was the right game' (Martin, 26)*
- *'Lots of poker players chase...I mean that's something I absolutely do not do, and you have to be very careful online because it's a few clicks of the mouse' (Leon, 25).*

Not taking risks and not chasing losses

- Recreational players take risks because it is 'exciting'. Some reported occasionally chasing losses:
- *'I really like to win. I hate to lose, but if you lose you think, okay, well I can get that back tomorrow' (Clive, 47).*
- Chasing may also be an attempt to meet emotional and spiritual needs. - can explain why professional gamblers more able to emotionally detach from the game.

Additional strategies

Multiple gambling

Targeting weaker players

Providing very little information about themselves

Constantly striving to improve

Additional strategies: Multiple gambling

- More profitable per gambling session if play more games
- Professional poker players play up to 8 games at a time:
- *'Online I play between six and eight tables, whereas when you play live you can only play one table...the way I play I have two monitors up so eight different tables at once. When you play live, you get dealt a hand the cards get taken in, the dealer shuffles them, you probably get about 20 hands an hour, if you play online and you're playing eight tables its much quicker so you could be playing 200 hands an hour' (Anthony, 29).*
- Recreational players only played one or two at the same time:

Additional strategies: Targeting weaker players

- Professional gambling thrives on the failure of others
- Make money from 'weaker players'
- *'You get a feel for the table when you're sat at the table. I try and identify weaker players...and then pick on them, it's kind of like bullying but you have to it's the nature of the game' (Tim, 37).*
- Need to find a table with 'fishes' on it to succeed at the game.
- *'I want [gambling advertising] to be allowed because I make a living off people who can't control their gambling problems...I want people to gamble because that's who I make a living off so from a personal point of view I'm glad they advertise and to be honest I'm glad there are people who lose money gambling because otherwise I wouldn't make a living doing this' (Martin 26).*

Targeting weaker players

- Make notes on your opponents
- *There is a facility where you can make notes on who you are playing against, so if I've played a person before or if I've seen them play particularly badly I'll write a note on them that they're a bad player...but also I've got some software which records who I play and then it gives me key stats on how they play...for example one of the key stats you can have is how many hands they play so if they're playing 50% of hands you know they're a pretty loose player and bluffing a lot ...there's hundreds and hundreds of stats which you can pick' (Anthony, 29).*
- *On the sites that I play, you can make a note on players as you're going along, so I tend to do that every time I play a card against somebody, I'll make a note on how they played (Martin, 26).*

Additional strategies: Providing little information

- Recreational players more likely to be honest about their identity
- *'I actually put my picture on, so there's no mistaking that...I'm an old bloke playing poker, if anybody wants to chat to me they can but no, I never pretend to be anything that I'm not' (Clive, 47).*
- Professional poker players give very little information away
- *'You can put a profile up...but I just don't like to give any information away...when I'm playing poker I don't want them to know I'm a professional poker player because straight away that would make them more cautious against me. I want them to think that I'm just somebody there for a gamble' (Martin, 26).*

Additional strategies: Striving to improve

- Overestimating your skill can lead to horrible consequences
- Recreational players attribute more skill to their playing style
- Professional poker players constantly want to improve
 - Reading about poker
 - Learning more about the game / opponents
- *'I love the fact that you're always improving, there's a massive amount of thought to the game and you can never be perfect at it, you're always learning (Martin, 26).*
- *I read a book called the psychology of poker before...and that listed all the downfalls that poker players have...it basically said if you want to do it professionally you have to play in a certain way so I started following this book. (Anthony, 29).*
- Poker evolves as a game and the key is to adapt to new environments and situations

Summary of differences

Professional poker players	Recreational poker players
Disciplined, logical	Take risks, act hastily
Emotionally detach from the game	Emotional play
Patient, controlled	Frustration, lack of control
Accept a loss	Chasing
Consider it 'work'	Consider it 'entertainment'
Focus on long-term goals	Focus on short-term goals
Realistic perception of skill	Overestimate own skill
Multi-table	1 or 2 table
Give little information away online	More information in profile
Target weaker players	Play at too high a level
Play frequently, longer sessions	Play less frequently, shorter sessions
Strive to improve	May think they know everything
Decisions based on knowledge	Less knowledgeable
Record play information	Less likely to record play information
Good bank roll management	Lose track of money in/out

Conclusions

- All participants viewed poker as a game of skill
- Professional poker players were much more disciplined, more logical and controlled, took fewer risks, less likely to chase
- Recreational players were more likely to chase, show signs of lack of control, take risks, gamble under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- Professional players all engaged in multi-table poker, recreational players did not.

Playing poker for a living

Advantages

- Choose own working hours
- Take days off whenever!
- You don't have to leave the house
- Great lifestyle for a winning player
- Large variety of games online to choose
- Quicker online – can play more hands
- Can't tip dealers online

Disadvantages

- No set income
- Exhaustion
- Reduced family time
- Solitary play - lonely
- Can be addictive

Future research...

- What is skill? How is it represented in different games?
- Which skills are at play in poker?
- Why do some players engage in multiple gambling? Are different skills required for this?
- Are different strategies adopted online and offline?
- How much information do people give away online? (Are professional players less likely to give out information about themselves?)
- What is the relationship between problem gambling and professional gambling?

Finally...

Playing poker for a living requires:

- Dedication
- Hard work
- Passion
- Desire to improve

Not easy! Most don't succeed

But it is doable – takes a combination of talent, dedication, patience and discipline to succeed!

References

- Croson, R., Fishman, P., & Pope, D.G. (2008). Poker superstars: Skill or Luck? Similarities between golf – thought to be a game of skill – and poker. *Chance*, 21(4), 25-28.
- Dedonno, M.A. & Detterman, D.K. (2008). Poker is a skill. *Gaming Law Review*, 12, 31-36.
- Griffiths, M., Parke, J., Wood, R., Rigbye, J. (2009). Online poker gambling in University students: Further findings from an online survey. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 8(1), 82.
- Larkey, P., Kadane, J., Austin, R. & Zamir, S. (1997). Skill in games. *Management Science*, 43, 596-609.
- Parke, A., Griffiths, M., & Parke, J. (2005). Can playing poker be good for you? Poker as a transferable skill. *Journal of Gambling Issues*, 14. Located at: http://www.camh.net/egambling/issue14/jgi_14_parke.html (Last accessed 10 February 2010).

Thank you

Abby.mccormack@ntu.ac.uk