The world-renowned gambling researcher discusses living in the shadows of the bright lights, how evolutionary biology relates to Vegas, globalised gambling, the science of intelligence and why gender diversity is important.

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In Profile

In your 2014 TED Talk you say, “An intelligent brain is a social brain, that a social brain is a hospitality brain, that a hospitality brain is a Las Vegas brain. And Las Vegas is smart.” What do you mean by this and how can the Australian market learn from this?

Your PhD thesis was on the “Community impacts of the gambling industry in Nevada.” What were the outcomes of your research?

Well, this was a dissertation, so the findings were manifold, but my first love’s thesis and my doctoral dissertation discussed focused on the ways in which gambling was stigmatised. I am a sociologist, so these kinds of social and societal processes are what we tend to examine. We found, for instance, that the problem gambler’s sense of shame today rests upon hundreds of years of worth of community leaders (often in religious spaces) doing some very public shaming directed primarily at them as individuals. So of course a problem gambler feels shame today — he/she has hundreds of years of powerful social ashamed — and as the weight of this history can be extremely distressing, to say the least.

You have now extended your research worldwide. What insights/ learnings have you found that are relevant to that are relevant to the Pacific and/or Australian market?

I always say that there is no place in the world that loves and hates gambling quite like Australia. On the social sciences side, I’ve been fortunate enough to participate in a bit in the debates over many years now, and nowhere in the world is the tenor of those debates quite like it is Down Under. Another observation from the business sciences: Australians in gaming management have done very well around the world now — exporting their intellectual capital, if you will. I would find in places like Singapore, Macau, and even Europe and North America. I suspect the two phenomena are related, if you are a gambling industry person, and you can navigate an environment as complex (and often hostile) as Australia can be, you can often flourish when you move into environments where those hostilities and complexities are lesser.

Online gambling is now competing with traditional land-based gambling and in Australia it is largely unregulated. What are the key insights and differences you found from your research into online gambling?

I think most of us who have observed these unregulated markets find them extremely distressing, in that they tend to minimise the socio-economic benefits without any of the protections that occur in regulated markets. My mentor Bill Eadington used to say, “all gambling is not created equal,” and that noting compared large, regulated, multi-amenity casino resorts with unregulated gambling was almost nonsensical, as these are quite different animals, and they have very different consequences.

The science of intelligence is starting to find something that most of us intuitively anyway that there are multiple ways to be smart. In many cases, social intelligence is a better predictor of life, love, and work success than IQ or other conventional measures of intelligence. If this is true, it would seem that hospitality companies boast smarter employees than traditional metrics might suggest — after all, you don’t last long on a casino floor or at a restaurant property if you score terribly on social intelligence, as there are all sorts of very human challenges that emerge every single day. Also interesting as we look forward, it seems that these forms of social intelligence will be the last forms of “smarts” that are automated away — as computers and machinery take over more and more jobs, such as driving-based jobs, which could well be eliminated by the coming wave of self-driving cars and delivery trucks. It will take much longer, though, for computers to replicate the kind of social intelligence required to make a customer feel deeply connected and satisfied in social environments that are found in hospitality. Today, investing in social intelligence seems smart, at both the individual and macro level, for gaming and hospitality industries. It’s the new way to be smart.

What are you working on right now?

At the University of Nevada, Las Vegas International Gaming Institute, we are investing in smarts, as we try to build a global intellectual capital that happens to study the gambling industry. To this end, we are growing and building new centres of excellence under the institute’s umbrella. This includes new centres looking at innovation and change, as the pace of change in service industries today can be staggering. It also includes the world’s first academic centre dedicated to responsible, research-based regulation. The International Center for Gaming Regulation, led by Andre Wilsenach, who has had a storied regulatory career in both South Africa and the United Kingdom. By bringing Andre to Las Vegas, we are demonstrating that this is truly a global industry, and that best practices can and should be shared across borders, whether we are talking about problem gambling or money laundering. Finally, we are launching another new centre that will look at the challenges that women in the gaming industry face, building upon successful academic initiatives that have pressured industries across the board to think critically about gender in the workplace. In the US, women are graduating from universities at rates that significantly exceed those of their male counterparts, and yet upper levels of leadership remain strikingly male (in the gaming industry and elsewhere in business). We’ve been inspired by successful movements in the UK that have found that the diverse leadership teams in business outperform those that do not boast this kind of diversity, and we’ve been inspired by grass roots efforts in the US gaming industry such as the successful Global Gaming Women initiative.

So as I always tell my students on the final day of course: be social (and be social across the diversity spectrum), it’s good for you. And be global it’s good for you. And it’s good for you. And it’s good for you. And it’s good for you. And it’s good for you. And we know now, those are the innovations lessons.

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