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Exploring College Student Gambling Motivation

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The present research combined qualitative and quantitative approaches in examining gambling motives among college student gamblers. A comprehensive set of 16 gambling motives was identified by categorizing 762 open-ended reasons for gambling, provided by 184 college student gamblers. Results revealed that most college students gamble to win money, for fun, for social reasons, for excitement, or just to have something to do. Overall, the results suggest the need for an eclectic biopsychosocial approach with regard to etiology of college student gambling.

KEY WORDS: gambling; college students; motives; motivation; reasons.

Prevalence rates of problem and pathological gambling among college students are among the highest of any segment of the population (Shaffer et al., 1999; Lesieur et al., 1991). However, little research has addressed why college students gamble. The majority of research examining motivations for gambling has focused specifically on adolescents and clinical or subclinical populations. The present research was

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designed specifically to examine gambling motivation among college students with a long term goal of determining why gambling is so prevalent in this population.

Theories of gambling behavior have largely focused specifically on pathological, or problem, gamblers. Theories that do not also address non-problematic gambling are necessarily incomplete. Identification of motives for gambling among individuals who fall across the entire continuum is necessary to better understand what differentiates problem from non-problem gamblers. The etiology of gambling has been discussed and examined from a variety of perspectives, the majority of which are based on implicit or explicit assumptions about motivation. Cognitive approaches to gambling assume that individuals are motivated to gamble by the desire to win money or acquire wealth and that gambling disorders arise largely out of erroneous cognitions about one's chances of winning (Ladouceur & Walker, 1998). Jacob's general theory of addictions (1986) suggests that problem gambling arises from the combination of chronic hypotensive arousal, experienced as boredom and emptiness, and a negative self-concept and chronic low self-esteem. Similarly, McCormick (1987) described two sub-types of disordered gamblers, the chronically under stimulated gambler and the recurrently depressed gambler. Thus, gambling for some, is presumably motivated by the desire to experience stimulation or excitement, the desire to escape boredom, and/or the desire to escape or cope with depression, anxiety, and/or a negative self-concept. Others have suggested that gambling is a form of play done for fun and enjoyment (Klingemann, 1995). Psychodynamic theorists have argued that gambling, for some, may be unconsciously motivated by a masochistic desire to lose (Bergler, 1958), or as a means of addressing or recreating parental conflict (Rosenthal & Rugle, 1994). Because most theories have focused on motivations for gambling among pathologic individuals, it is unclear the extent to which these motives generalize to non-pathologic individuals. Problematic and nonproblematic gamblers may have different motivations for gambling. For example, perhaps only problematic gamblers are motivated to escape boredom or to cope. Alternatively, individuals who gamble non-problematically may have similar motivations but at lower levels. Thus, perhaps motivational differences are primarily in degree versus type.

A number of studies have previously examined or reported specific motives for gambling. The majority of these, however, have uti-

lized checklists or otherwise predefined lists of motives. Thus, participants were typically asked whether or to what extent they gambled for an apriori set of reasons. While checklists and Likert-type measures of gambling motivation are perfectly appropriate for examining specific motives, they carry no guarantee that the most relevant or important motives have been included. In addition, checklists may influence the accessibility of gambling motivations. For example, an individual when asked whether he/she gambles to support charitable causes may remember participating in raffles or playing bingo at church and endorse this item even if he/she does not typically gamble for this reason. The present research was designed to assess motivation for gambling among college students without imposing a predefined set of motives.

METHOD

Participants

Participants included 184 (123 men and 59 women, two students did not indicate sex) undergraduate college student gamblers, enrolled in introductory psychology classes at a large northwestern university in the U.S. The average age of participants was 19.4 years ($SD = 1.65$). Ethnicity was 69.6% Caucasian, 21.2% Asian/Asian American, and 9.2% other. Participants were freshman (58.6%), sophomores (21.9%), juniors (14.8%), and seniors (4.7%). This sample was ethnically representative of the campus, which was approximately 69% Caucasian, 22% Asian/Asian American in the year 2000. Seventy-nine (45.6%) participants were non-problem gamblers (i.e., SOGS = 0), 72 (41.6%) had minimal gambling problems (i.e., SOGS of 1 or 2), 16 (9.3%) were level II, subclinical gamblers (i.e., SOGS of 3 or 4), and 6 (3.5%) were probable pathological gamblers (i.e., SOGS of 5 or greater). Eleven participants did not complete the SOGS.

Procedure

Participants completed a survey in mass testing format. The questionnaire included demographic items, a measure of gambling motivation, and the South Oaks Gambling Screen, as well as additional items not relevant to the present research. All measures and procedures

were reviewed and approved by the departmental human subjects committee.

Measures

Gambling Motives. Participants were asked to "think about what motivates you to gamble and briefly list the top five reasons in rank order (e.g., #1 = the most important reason, #2 = the second most important reason)."

The South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS; Lesieur & Blume, 1987) is a widely used self-administered screening instrument for pathological gambling. Scores on the SOGS can range from 0 to 20. Level II or subclinical "problem" gamblers have previously been identified by scores of 3 or 4 on the SOGS and those scoring 5 or higher have been identified as probable pathological, or level III gamblers (Shaffer et al., 1999). The SOGS correlates highly with DSM-III-R and DSM-IV diagnosis of pathological gambling and has demonstrated validity and reliability among university students (Beaudoin & Cox, 1999; Lesieur et al., 1991; Ladouceur et al., 1994). Sample items include "Do you feel you have a problem with gambling?" and "Have you ever felt guilty about the way you gamble or what happens when you gamble?" The SOGS also includes an item, which asks how frequently respondents engage in several types of gambling (e.g., "played cards for money," "bet on sports," and went "to a casino").

RESULTS

Participants were asked to list in rank order their top five reasons for gambling. Participants varied in the number of reasons they actually listed ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.13$). Responses were qualitatively analyzed to categorize the 766 reasons given by participants. An initial qualitative analysis of responses yielded 16 distinct motives that captured the majority of reasons listed by respondents. The following motives were identified and are listed with representative examples from participants' responses:

Money. Gambling to make or obtain money (e.g., "make money," "win money," and "get rich").

Enjoyment/Fun. Gambling for enjoyment or just to have fun (e.g., "to have a good time," "it's enjoyable," and "it's fun").

Excitement. Gambling for arousal, thrill, or excitement (e.g., "for the rush," "excitement," and "it's exciting").

Social. Gambling as a means of interacting with friends or family, or to meet new people (e.g., "social interaction," "to be with friends," and "to socialize").

Occupy time/Boredom. Gambling to occupy time, to have something to do, or to alleviate boredom (e.g., "something to do," "pass time," and "bored").

Winning. Gambling to experience winning (e.g., "victory," "winning," and "just to win").

Competition. Gambling to compete with others (e.g., "to beat someone else," "competition," and "compete with friends").

Conformity. Gambling because others are doing it, just to go along with the crowd, or because of peer pressure (e.g., "peer pressure," "because friends are doing it," and "friends decide to go gamble, so I just go along").

Risk. Gambling in order to take risks or experience uncertainty (e.g., "feel like doing something risky," "risk taking," and "the risk of losing").

Skill. Gambling to develop or practice one's skills or to learn (e.g., "show skills," "learn games," and "practice strategies").

Interest. Gambling because it is interesting or adds interest (e.g., "it's interesting," "friendly bets make a game/event more interesting," and "makes playing cards interesting").

Coping. Gambling in order to escape or to cope with problems, depression, or anxiety (e.g., "release from stress," "avoid responsibility," and "to shut the world out").

Challenge. Gambling to experience a challenge (e.g., "it is challenging," "I enjoy a challenge," and "challenge").

Drinking. Gambling motivated by alcohol (e.g., "free drinks," "something to do when drinking," and "drink liquor").

Luck. Gambling to test one's luck or because one feels lucky (e.g., "luck," "test your luck," and "feel lucky").

Chasing. Gambling to win back previous losses (e.g., "to get my money back," "to pay back what I lost," and "chance of getting your money back").

Motive Classification Reliability

Five coders were provided descriptions for each of the 16 motives and were instructed to classify each of the 766 responses as a single motive where possible but could select more than one category if a clear determination for a single category could not be made. For example, gambling "to take someone's money" was perceived by coders as fitting both the money category and the competition category. In addition, coders were invited to propose additional categories to classify statements that fit none of the listed categories. Coders were also asked whether they thought any of the listed categories should be modified, combined, or removed. Inter-rater reliability across the five coders was .91. Final categorizations were made by assigning statements to motive categories endorsed by the majority of coders. Accordingly, 93% of all statements were categorized. Statements not fitting any of the categories, or statements in which coder agreement did not reach majority, were not categorized (7%). Statements not categorized included those that were not reasons for gambling ("only gamble if you can afford to lose"), were too general (e.g., "personal preference," "just want to do it") or motives which were relatively unique in this sample (e.g., sex, atmosphere, novelty, charity, proximity, etc.).

Motive Frequency

Table 1 presents the frequency of motives endorsed. In examining all reasons for gambling, money, enjoyment, social, excitement, and boredom motives constituted slightly more than 70% of respondents' reasons for gambling. In examining only the "most important" reasons for gambling, approximately 84% endorsed money, enjoyment, social, or excitement motives. After applying Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons, there were no significant relationships between motives and SOGS scores.

DISCUSSION

The present research examined motivation for gambling among college student gamblers. Results revealed that most college students gamble to win money, for fun, for social reasons, for excitement, or just to have something to do. These motives, which were based on

Table 1
Prevalence of Gambling Motives

Motive Category	*Proportion of All Motivations (N = 712)*	*Primary Motivation (N = 184)*
Money	22.1%	42.7%
Enjoyment/Fun	18.4%	23.0%
Social reasons	13.3%	11.2%
Excitement	9.8%	7.3%
Occupy time/Boredom	7.9%	2.8%
Winning	4.5%	3.9%
Conformity	3.8%	0.0%
Competition	3.7%	3.4%
Risk taking	3.2%	2.2%
Interest	3.0%	1.7%
Skill	2.7%	1.1%
Escape/Coping	2.1%	0.0%
Chasing	1.7%	0.0%
Luck	1.5%	0.6%
Drinking	1.5%	0.0%
Challenge	0.8%	0.0%

students' own accounts of why they gamble, map very closely to motives that have been previously assessed in other populations using predetermined motivation categories. This suggests that motives for gambling are not necessarily unique to specific segments of the population. Among the motives typically assessed in previous studies, only coping/escape was not commonly reported. The scope of motives reported in this study supports the notion that comprehensive etiological approaches to gambling must be integrative and accommodate multiple perspectives (Brown, 1987).

Results were differentially supportive of extant motivational perspectives on gambling. Cognitively oriented theorists generally assume that gambling is motivated by the desire to win money or increase wealth (Ladouceur & Walker, 1998). Consistently, over 40% of this sample reported monetary gain as their primary motivation for gambling. Theories assuming that gambling is linked to arousal deficits or

desire to experience stimulation (Jacobs, 1986; McCormick, 1987) were also supported with gambling for excitement and to escape boredom being among the most frequently cited motives for gambling. Consistent with hedonic explanations of gambling, a large proportion of the sample also reported gambling for fun or enjoyment (Klingemann, 1995). Less consistent with previous theoretical considerations of gambling was the large proportion of individuals listing social reasons for gambling. Social reasons for gambling have been acknowledged in previous theories (e.g., Sheeran, & Orbell, 1999), but are typically overshadowed by cognitive and arousal explanations. Gambling to escape or to chase losses was infrequently listed as reasons for gambling. In sum, our findings support the utility of a biopsychosocial approach to college student gambling (Griffiths & Delfabbro, 2001) that incorporates biological and arousal related motivations (e.g., excitement, boredom, and interest), cognitive and mood related psychological motivations (e.g., desire to win money, enjoyment, and coping) and social factors (e.g., gambling to socialize and conformity).

Reasons for gambling in this sample were relatively consistent with reasons that have been included in studies using checklists. While this is encouraging, additional research is necessary to evaluate the utility of motive checklists based on researchers interests versus motives generated by participants. We recommend that future researchers explicitly justify their choices for inclusion of specific reasons in checklist measures on the basis of theory and/or previous research assessing motivation by other means.

The present research corroborates and extends previous work examining gambling motivation, but it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. We employed a convenience sample of psychology students, and while we were specifically interested in college student gamblers, findings from this restricted sample may not generalize to other populations. Indeed, we expect that future research will reveal that gambling is part of "the college experience" for many students. Given the higher rates of problem gambling in college populations, understanding this phenomenon is an aim in itself. In addition, although participants were encouraged to answer honestly and reminded that their responses would be anonymous, they may not have accurately reported their behavior or motives for gambling. A limitation of all self-report examinations of gambling motivation is that they are unable to assess motives that respondents may not be aware

of. For example, psychodynamic theories and perspectives that focus on reinforcement assume that individuals may not know why they gamble. Gambling motives that are outside of an individual's conscious awareness are unlikely to be captured by self-report methodology. An additional limitation of this research is that low prevalence rates of pathological gambling precluded sufficient examination of motivational differences between non-problem and pathological gamblers. While we were primarily interested in gambling motives among college students generally, additional research utilizing large samples is necessary to more definitively examine this issue.

These results suggest numerous avenues for future research. The present findings serve as the basis for the construction of a gambling motives scale now in preparation. Each of the questions addressed in this research is worthy of additional attention. Potential motivational differences between problem and non-problem gamblers have important implications for prevention and treatment interventions aimed at college students, and other populations. Developing a solid understanding of the motivational factors involved in gambling is important for the development of prevention and treatment interventions for problem gambling among college students. This research represents an important step toward that objective.

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