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Comparing erroneous beliefs said during online poker among men with different levels of problem gambling severity

What this research is about

Most gambling activities are essentially based on chance. But poker involves some skill. This sets it apart from other gambling activities. Erroneous beliefs involve having an inaccurate understanding of chance. For example, an individual might believe they can influence or predict the outcome of a game more often than possible because of their knowledge, skills, or characteristics. In this study, the researchers compared erroneous beliefs of three groups of online poker players with different levels of gambling problem severity.

What the researchers did

The researchers invited participants to play in an online poker tournament. Participants had to be (1) 18 years of age or older; (2) a man; (3) someone who had played online poker for money at least once a month over the last six months; and (4) someone who had never been treated for a gambling problem.

The researchers recruited participants using a list of research volunteers and emails to the community of students and employees at the Université Laval in Québec, Canada. They also recruited participants through advertisements in local newspapers, on the radio, and on a poker forum; solicitations on the local sport network website; and word of mouth. The recruitment was from February to September 2010.

A total of 30 men participated in the study.

Participants completed the following:

- National Opinion Research Center's DSM Screen (NODS), translated into French.
- Questions about demographics, preferred poker websites and gaming establishments, types of poker

What you need to know

Poker involves some skill. This sets it apart from other gambling activities. This study compared erroneous beliefs of three groups of online poker players with different levels of gambling problem severity. The researchers invited 30 participants to play in an online poker tournament. Participants were placed into three groups of non-problem, at-risk, and problem gambling. The researchers examined the verbalizations of these groups while they played. Beliefs related to the illusion of control were found in all three groups. Participants with at-risk or problem gambling felt that they were more in control of the game's outcomes (i.e., they underestimated the role of chance) and that they could make up for their losses. Both groups also thought that the online game was rigged.

played, money spent, time spent playing, and number of years of experience at the game.

The researchers placed the participants into one of three groups based on their NODS scores: (1) non-problem gambling ; (2) at-risk gambling; (3) problem gambling. Each group had 10 participants. These people were invited to participate in online Texas Hold'em poker tournament at the Université Laval.

The researchers asked participants to say all the thoughts that came to mind aloud during the tournament. They also asked participants to speak as much as possible, as well as talk loudly enough to be heard. Finally, participants were asked to pretend as if they were a poker instructor.

The researchers analyzed hands 2 through 7 from the tournament. These hands involved unexpected loss

situations. Unexpected losses can create negative emotion in people playing poker, which may lead them to gamble in a risky manner.

What the researchers found

Most participants were from Quebec City (90%) and spoke French as a first language (97%). On average, participants were 26 years of age. Most were single (73%) and without children (77%). Over 70% of participants held a college or university degree. Over half of the participants (56%) had a personal annual income of \$20,000 or less. Participants had played online poker for an average of 3.6 years.

All three groups of participants had erroneous beliefs related to the illusion of control. People who were at-risk or had problem gambling were more likely to discredit the role of chance in the game than those with non-problem gambling. People with at-risk and problem gambling were more likely to believe that they could make up for their losses. This was related to “chasing losses.” Participants who believed they could make up for their losses held an illusion of control called probability control. Probability control is based on a poor understanding of odds.

Men in the at-risk group also sometimes minimized the consequences of their losses. This was known as attribution bias. All three groups mentioned their losses were caused by factors other than their personal skills. For example, they often thought that they lost because their opponent was not skilled. They felt that their opponents made bets that were too low or not proportional to the size of the pot. For participants in the problem gambling group, opponents’ lack of skill appeared to create frustration and anger. This was not seen in the non-problem and at-risk groups.

Both the at-risk and problem gambling groups thought that the online game was rigged (e.g., non-random distribution of cards). In the at-risk group, this was associated with the belief that stronger cards happened more often in the online game. In the problem gambling group, it was associated with the belief that one could influence chance through one’s action (e.g., higher bets would give stronger cards).

How you can use this research

These findings can support the development of a questionnaire to assess gambling beliefs in poker players. The findings also support the implementation of protection measures for people who play poker so that they can play on websites they trust.

About the researchers

Priscilla Brochu, Isabelle Giroux, Julie Dufour, Daniel Fortin-Guichard, Étienne Gagnon, David Paquet, and Isabelle Smith are affiliated with the École de psychologie at the Université Laval in Québec, QC, Canada. **Serge Sévigny** is affiliated with the Département des fondements en pratiques en éducation at the Université Laval. For more information about this study, please contact Isabelle Giroux at isabelle.giroux@psy.ulaval.ca.

Citation

Brochu, P., Giroux, I., Dufour, J., Fortin-Guichard, D., Gagnon, É., Paquet, D., Smith, I., & Sévigny, S. (2022). Erroneous beliefs verbalized while playing online poker. *Journal of Gambling Issues*, 49, 129-157. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4309/jgi.2022.49.6>

Study funding

This study was funded by Fonds de la prévention et du traitement du jeu de l’Université Laval, the Fonds de recherche québécois-Société et culture (FRQ-SC) and the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS) du Québec.

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