

research snapshot

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Rationalizing continued gambling despite losses among players of electronic gaming machines

What this research is about

Gambling beliefs are of interest to researchers and clinicians because of their association with problem gambling. Gambling beliefs can take on many forms. Some beliefs are due to errors in thinking processes, which some researchers refer to as 'natural'. These include misunderstandings about the random nature of gambling outcomes. Other beliefs have roots in broader cultural systems. These include beliefs about luck, god, or other supernatural forces, which can be characterized as 'supernatural'. Some 'supernatural' gambling beliefs have religious undertones.

The psychological theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that when people's actions are not aligned with their beliefs, they experience mental discomfort. As a result, they will attempt to resolve the issue by either changing their beliefs or behaviours. People with problem gambling have invested their money and time in gambling. Instead of changing their gambling behaviour, they may justify their behaviour through a process called rationalization.

In this study, the researchers used a framework proposed by Lorne Dawson (1999) to understand why people continue to gamble despite their losses. This framework explains why religious group members continue to hold onto their faith even after a prophecy fails to happen. It suggests there are four main types of rationalization. *Spiritualization* involves reinterpreting the prophecy as having happened in a spiritual way that is not visible to humans. When using *Test of faith*, religious group members think that being able to hold onto their faith is a proof of their worthiness. *Human error* involves rationalizing the failed prophecy as a result of not reading the signs correctly or the group not meriting the prophecy

What you need to know

Rationalization is the process by which people justify their actions. The researchers explored how people rationalize why they continue to gamble despite their losses. They used a framework used to explain why religious group members continued to have faith in failed prophecies. They interviewed 43 Canadian adults who identified electronic gaming machines (EGMs) as their preferred game type. All participants were experiencing or at risk of problem gambling. Spiritualization, test of faith, human error, and blaming others were all used to justify continued gambling. This study shows that rationalization in gambling reflects broader cultural beliefs around moral worth, supernatural forces, and persistence despite setbacks.

coming true yet. *Blaming others* involves holding outside members or forces as being responsible.

What the researchers did

Researchers interviewed 43 Canadian adults who identified electronic gaming machines (EGMs) as their preferred game type. There were 20 women and 23 men. Based on the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), 65% of participants experienced problem gambling and 35% were at risk. Participants were asked open-ended questions during the interview. They were encouraged to express their ideas and experiences throughout the interview. The researchers analyzed the interview responses using content analysis. This involved looking for meaningful patterns and themes in the responses. The analysis was informed by Dawson's (1999) framework.

What the researchers found

Spiritualization

Many participants struggled to explain why they continued to gamble. Gambling appeared to fulfill a spiritual need. Some participants mentioned gambling was valuable for them and could not imagine their life without it. Several participants said the euphoria experienced from gambling was similar to that described by those who use drugs. Others tied the euphoria to EGM's audiovisual features. Participants projected human-like qualities onto the EGM, including emotions and intellects. Some participants thought the machine had divine abilities to determine their fate or were connected to larger spiritual forces that could influence their gambling outcomes.

Test of faith

Participants believed that they were due for a big win, which was similar to the gambler's fallacy. Gambler's fallacy is a belief that a gambling outcome is more or less likely to occur based on the outcomes of previous events (e.g., a win will come after a series of losses). However, being worthy of a win here held deeper meaning involving moral worth. To be worthy of a big win, participants believed they needed to show self-control in gambling and good character. They commented that one should not be moved by greed, nor should they expect a win. To this point, many claimed that they would make sound decisions with their new wealth should they win a lot of money when gambling.

Human error

Participants explained their gambling losses were due to erratic play and losing control. Participants thought greed drove erratic play and if one played in this way, they would be unworthy of a win. Participants believed that being in control and indifferent to a win were how to show the moral worth of a winner.

Blaming others

Blaming others could happen in two ways. First, participants blamed other casino customers for channelling negative energy, which led to bad luck or unfavourable outcomes. Blame could also be placed on family and friends who accompanied them to the casino. Second, participants blamed the casino for its underhanded way of controlling who wins or loses.

How you can use this research

This study could help inform problem gambling treatments. The researchers suggested that more spiritual or non-confrontational approaches may benefit some clients. Those working with people experiencing problem gambling could better understand the behaviour by understanding the meaning gambling has for some clients. Future research could explore how social processes may work in the management of dissonance in gambling.

About the researchers

Tara Hahmann was affiliated with the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto in Ontario, Canada when completing this research and is currently affiliated with the MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions. **Eva Monson** is affiliated with the Department of Community Health Sciences at the Université de Sherbrooke in Québec, Canada. For more information about this study, please contact Tara Hahmann at Tara.Hahmann@unityhealth.to.

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About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

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