

Journal Information
Journal ID (publisher-id): jgi
ISSN: 1910-7595
Publisher: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Article Information
© 1999-2003 The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
Received Day: 29 Month: April Year: 2002
Accepted Day: 21 Month: May Year: 2003
Publication date: October 2003
Publisher Id: jgi.2003.9.10
DOI: 10.4309/jgi.2003.9.10

Why do gamblers over-report wins? An examination of social factors

John Jamieson, PhD¹

Affiliation: E-mail: john.jamieson@lakeheadu.ca

Chris Mushquash, MA
Candidate¹

Dwight Mazmanian, PhD¹

¹Department of Psychology, Lakehead University Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada

For correspondence: John Jamieson Department of Psychology, Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada P7B 5E1, Ph: (807) 343-8738, Fax: (807) 346-7734, E-mail:john.jamieson@lakeheadu.ca

John Jamieson is a professor in the psychology department at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario. His main interests lie in experimental design and statistics. As an educator, he is intrigued by the factors that sustain gambling behaviours in view of the long-term expectation of loss. Chris Mushquash is a graduate student in experimental psychology at Lakehead University. This study was part of his HBSc thesis and he currently holds a fellowship from the Ontario Problem Gambling Research Centre, which will support his continuing research in gambling. Dwight Mazmanian is an associate professor at Lakehead University and a registered clinical psychologist. He is particularly interested in assessment and treatment of cognitive distortions that underlie problem gambling.

Abstract

The role of social factors in gamblers' over-reporting of wins was explored using a survey administered via the Internet. One hundred and fifteen gamblers (average age 36.9) completed the survey. The majority of gamblers reported that they do not over-report wins, and would not do so for social reasons. However, they believe that other gamblers do mislead people about their losses for a variety of social

reasons, such as a desire to appear skilled or to be popular. As well, the majority of gamblers report not feeling urges to gamble when hearing about wins, although younger people, males, and those with gambling problems were significantly more likely to report feeling and/or acting on urges to gamble when hearing about others' wins. The discrepancy between their views of themselves and of other gamblers may be due to cognitive distortions specific to gamblers, or may reflect a general self-presentation bias.

It is perhaps paradoxical that at the same time casinos and lotteries are making millions of dollars, the majority of gambling stories in the media are about wins, not losses ([Hill & Williamson, 1998](#); [McMullan & Mullen, 2001](#)). Similarly, when conversations turn to stories about gambling, it is generally initiated by someone who wants to tell about a recent gambling win. In spite of the fact that losses are much more common than wins, we hear primarily about the wins. This asymmetry of information about gambling wins and losses raises several issues. First, why don't we hear about the losses? Second, does this biased information have any effects on gambling behaviour, or on people's expectations of winning?

The phenomenon of gamblers reporting their wins, not their losses, has been widely documented. [Toneatto, Blitz-Miller, Calderwood, Dragonetti, and Tsanos \(1997\)](#) found that about one third of heavy gamblers showed a tendency to recall wins but forget their losses. Similarly, [Carroll and Huxley \(1994\)](#) found that addicted gamblers' reports of winnings exceeded what they had actually won. The usual explanation for this reporting bias has focused on a memory availability bias: large wins are rare and salient, while losses are common and not salient ([Tversky & Kahneman, 1982](#)). However, this explanation does not address why the media over-reports wins. Might the same processes affect the selective reporting of both the media and the individual gambler?

The media generally report stories because they are of interest to the public, and presumably the public likes to hear about wins. Gamblers may also tell about their wins because this is what their audience wants to hear. As well, gamblers might tell about their wins for other social reasons such as to appear more successful, or to evoke favourable impressions from others ([Schlenker & Wiegold, 1992](#)). [Holtgraves \(1988\)](#) has suggested that gamblers' over-reporting of wins may be an explicit attempt to create favourable impressions on others. Thus there appear to be two conflicting explanations for the over-reporting of wins: (1) it may reflect an implicit memory bias, of which the gambler is unaware, or (2) it may reflect intentional efforts at impression management. The first purpose of this study was to investigate whether gamblers intentionally tell people about their wins, not their losses, and whether they do so for various social-interpersonal reasons.

There is little information about the effects of reports of wins in the media or from other gamblers on gambling behaviour. It has been suggested that this biased information may strengthen the biased beliefs of gamblers ([Walker, 1992](#)). Expectations about winning (subjective probabilities) develop from both personal experience and observation. Since the public's observations are biased because of the over-reporting of wins, this could lead to unrealistically high expectations of winning, which might in turn lead to excessive gambling. As well, there are anecdotal reports from gambling counsellors that problem gamblers may experience strong urges to gamble when hearing about a gambling win. The second purpose of this study was to explore the effects of reports of wins. Are gamblers aware that the reports of wins by others are likely to be distorted, and, as a consequence, are they skeptical of others' reports of gambling wins? As well, do they report feeling the urge to gamble when they hear of wins, and do they act on these urges?

Method

Participants:

The sample consisted of 115 individuals recruited over the Internet. Seventy-eight (67.8%) were males and 37 (32.2%) were females. The mean age was 36.9 years (standard deviation = 11.8). Everyone reported gambling at least some of the time; the majority (60.9%) reported gambling more than once a month; and 27.8% gambled several times per week. Most of the sample (85.2%) reported that their gambling was not out of control, but 12.2% reported that their gambling was “occasionally” out of control, and 2.6% reported that their gambling was out of control.

Materials:

A 33-item questionnaire was designed for this study. It contained questions about the background and gambling behaviour of each participant, the presence of distorted beliefs (gambler's fallacy), the perception of impact of reports of wins (by friends and media), reasons why they or others may over-report wins, their skepticism of others, the degree to which they believe others have an accurate description of their gambling situation and the possible activating effect of reports of wins. The exact wording of most questions is presented in the Results section. Responses were generally on a four-point scale.

The questionnaire was posted on the Internet and can be seen at:

flash.lakeheadu.ca/~cjmushqu/gambling_questionnaire.html

Procedure:

Participants were solicited over the Internet in several ways. People searches were

conducted using ICQ, which is a person-to-person discussion program that allows one to search for particular types of people. A note was also posted on several gambling-related discussion forums (e.g. activegambler.com; bj21.com, winneronline.com), asking if anyone wished to participate in a gambling study. A link directed them to a web page containing a consent form. Upon choosing to participate, potential participants were directed to the questionnaire, which was administered over the Internet.

Responses were sent directly to a database that could be accessed by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software. The data were analyzed using bivariate correlation analyses (continuous and ordinal data) and chi-square analyses (frequency data). In analyses that involved comparisons of the participants' responses on one item with their responses on another, McNemar's test for related samples was employed.

Results

Gambling history and beliefs

In response to the question, "When you gamble, how often do you go back another day to win back money that you lost?", 40.9% of the participants reported 'chasing losses' on at least some occasions. In response to the question, "If you tossed a normal coin and it came up 'heads' 5 times in a row, what would be the most likely result of the next toss?" Thirteen per cent of the participants exhibited the gambler's fallacy, by choosing either 'heads' or 'tails', not 'equally likely.'

When asked, "How many gamblers lose more than they win?", 98.3% answered, 'most' or 'all.' But when asked the question, "Overall, how does the money you have won compare to the amount you have lost (or spent) gambling?", only 46.6% of participants reported losing more than they won, 11.3% answered 'same' and 41.7% answered that they had won more. While they acknowledge that most gamblers lose, the majority of gamblers completing this questionnaire said they were not among these losers. Those who reported losing more also reported significantly more gambling problems, $r(112) = .249$, $p < .001$, and were more likely to chase losses, $r(111) = .341$, $p < .001$.

Awareness of over-reporting wins

Two items addressed whether they tell others about their gambling wins. In response to the question, "Do you talk to friends and/or relatives about your gambling wins?", most participants (87.9%) answered affirmatively. Also to the question, "If you had a good win at a casino would you be excited about telling friends and/or relatives?" — the majority (66.1%) responded they would be moderately or very excited.

Three items addressed whether they mislead others about their wins. In response to the question, “Have you ever claimed to be winning money when in fact you lost?” 89.5% answered ‘no’, or ‘maybe once.’ To the question “Have you ever told friends and/or relatives about a jackpot you won, without telling them that you lost money on that trip to the casino?” 93.9% answered ‘no’, or ‘maybe once.’ To the question, “Have you ever told friends and/or relatives about your wins, but not mentioned your losses?” 78.3% answered ‘no’, or ‘maybe once.’

While the majority report talking to friends or relatives about their wins, and being excited about talking about their wins, they also report being truthful when describing their gambling outcomes to friends and relatives, and do not show an awareness of over-reporting wins. However, this view of themselves contrasts with their views of other gamblers. When asked “Do people more often tell you about their wins than about their losses?”, only 22.6% answered that this never or rarely occurred — significantly lower than the 78.3% who said they never or maybe once did this to others, $\chi^2(1, N = 112) = 55.39, p < .001$.

Another question asked “Do you think others give you an accurate picture of their overall win/loss situation?” The majority (71.3%) answered ‘rarely’ or ‘no.’ Again, this skepticism of others contrasts with their responses to the mirror question, “Do your friends and/or relatives have an accurate picture of your overall win/loss situation?”, where only 35.6% answered ‘rarely or ‘no’, $\chi^2(1, N = 111) = 31.37, p < .001$.

Social-interpersonal reasons for over-reporting wins

The question was asked, “If you were to tell people about your wins but not your losses, why would you do this? How important are each of the following reasons?” The reasons were “Other people are more interested in hearing about wins than hearing about losses”; “People like to hear only good news”; “So I will appear a more skilled gambler”; “So people will not lose respect for me”; and “So people will like me better.” The majority of gamblers reported that none of these reasons were moderately or very important to them (see [Figure 1](#)).

A ‘mirror’ question asked the reasons why others might tell about their wins, but not their losses, and each of the same reasons (with slight wording changes reflecting the reversal of subject and object) were rated on the same scale. [Figure 1](#) also shows the percentage who felt these reasons were moderately or very important to other people. These percentages were significantly higher ($p < .01$) for all reasons except “People/I only like to hear good news.” The reason most attributed to others for over-reporting wins was to appear more skilled (71.4% said this was moderately or very important to others).

Additional comparisons between the importance of reasons to themselves and to

others were conducted separately for those who had reported winning more than they have lost, and those who had reported losing more than they had won. Both groups showed the same difference between the importance of these reasons for over-reporting wins to themselves and to others.

Urges to gamble

Several questions addressed whether they felt the urge to gamble after hearing about someone else winning a large prize. To the question “When you read about someone winning a huge lottery, do you feel the urge to buy lottery tickets?”, 67.0% reported not feeling any urge, and 20% reported only feeling a slight urge. To the question “If a friend told you that they had won a large jackpot playing slots at a casino, would you feel the urge to go to the casino yourself?”, 74.8% reported no urge and an additional 15.7% only a slight urge.

Three questions addressed whether participants had acted on these urges. To the question “In the past, have you bought more lottery tickets than you normally would have, because you read about someone winning a huge lottery prize?”, 80.9% answered ‘no’ and an additional 11.3% answered ‘maybe once.’ To the question “Have you ever gone to a casino because a friend told you about a large jackpot they had won?”, 90.4% answered ‘no.’ The third question was “Have you ever gambled more money than you intended, on either lottery tickets or at a casino, because a friend had recently won a large jackpot?”; again 87.8% answered ‘no.’

While the majority of gamblers reported they have not acted on urges to gamble after hearing about others wins, their view of the effect of their reports of wins on other gamblers was quite different. In response to the question “Do you think someone you know has gambled more because of your reports of your wins?”, only 55.8% answered “no.” This was significantly lower than the percentage answering that they had never acted on urges to gamble after hearing about a win at either lotteries (80.9%, $\chi^2[1, N = 113] = 14.58, p < .001$) or casinos (90.4%, $\chi^2[1, N = 113] = 29.47, p < .001$). Thus the gamblers reported that they were largely unaffected by others’ reports of wins, but that others were more likely to gamble because of their reports of wins.

Additional correlations

While the majority of participants report neither feeling nor acting on urges to gamble when hearing about wins, additional analyses were conducted to examine the characteristics of those who did report feeling and acting on these urges. These correlations are presented in [Table 1](#). Stronger urges were experienced by those who reported having lost more money than they had won, who chase losses, and who believe in the gambler's fallacy. Those who admit to having a gambling problem are more likely to act on these urges, especially at a casino. Feeling and

acting on urges are also more common in younger people and in males. Urges were not related to their frequency of gambling.

Discussion

The findings did not provide clear support for the ‘social’ explanation for why gamblers over-report wins. Most gamblers in the sample deny ever misleading people. Most also said they would not mislead people for any of the social reasons that were presented. However, their view of themselves contrasts with their view of other gamblers. They believe that other gamblers do mislead people about their losses for a variety of social reasons, such as a desire to appear skilled or to be popular. Thus, the picture emerged that ‘others might mislead me for these social reasons, but I tell the truth.’

The discrepancy between how gamblers view themselves and how they view others was apparent throughout the questionnaire. In response to the question “How many gamblers lose more than they win?”, 98.3% answered ‘most’ or ‘all.’ However, when asked if they have won or lost more, only 46.6% reported losing more than they have won. As well, they felt that others had an accurate view of their win-loss situation, but that they did not have an accurate view of others.

The possibility that this study obtained an atypical sample of gamblers who win and who do not over-report wins is not supported by the finding that those who reported winning more and those who reported losing more both showed the same discrepancies between their views of themselves and of other gamblers. Instead, these findings are consistent with a body of research describing the cognitive distortions common to gamblers ([Toneatto, 1999](#)). For example, gamblers attribute success to personal factors such as skill, but attribute losses to external factors such as bad luck ([Gabory & Ladouceur, 1989](#)). They also show distorted beliefs about the independence of events, such as the gambler's fallacy and belief in hot or cold numbers. Another distorted belief of gamblers is an optimistic bias, which includes the illusion of control over one's destiny ([Hoorens, 1994](#)) as well as unrealistic optimism and overconfident expectations of winning ([Weinstein, 1980](#)). Of particular relevance to the present findings are reports that gamblers minimize the skill of other gamblers and have exaggerated self efficacy in their ability to win ([Toneatto, 1999](#)). The present findings show that gamblers minimize the gambling success and honesty of other gamblers, relative to themselves.

However, this discrepancy may well reflect a general self-presentation bias, not specific to gamblers. People tend to see positive things about themselves, more than about others. As [Pronin, Lin and Ross \(2002\)](#) recently observed, “We find that our adversaries, and at times even our peers, see events and issues through the distorting prism of their political ideology, their particular individual group history

and interests, and their desire to see themselves in a positive light. When we reflect on our own views of the world, however, we generally see little evidence of such bias. We have the impression that we see issues and events ‘objectively’, as they are in ‘reality’... people recognize the existence, and the impact, of most of the biases that social and cognitive psychologists have described over the past few decades. What they lack recognition of, we would argue, is the role those same biases play in governing their own judgments and inferences” (p. 369). As well, there is evidence for an implicit process in self evaluation, of which the individual is unaware, and which distorts perceptions about the self. These self-related processes occur implicitly and outside of awareness and influence information processing “without deliberate activation or conscious control” ([Cross, Morris & Gore, 2002](#), p. 401).

The second purpose of this study was to assess whether gamblers are affected by media reports of wins or by others over-reporting their wins. Again, the findings do not directly support such an effect. Most gamblers reported not feeling urges to gamble when hearing about wins, and even fewer report acting on such urges. As well, most gamblers are skeptical of the reports of others about wins, suggesting that the over-reporting of wins may not have a major impact on gambling behaviour or on expectations of winning. However, balancing this conclusion is the finding that the gamblers felt others were more likely to gamble because of their reports of wins. The self perception bias may again be operating to suppress the recognition of this effect on themselves.

While the present findings generally did not support a major effect of the over-reporting of wins on gambling behaviours, several findings emerged to suggest that some subsets of the population may be particularly vulnerable to negative effects of this biased reporting. Younger people, males and problem gamblers were significantly more likely to report feeling and/or acting on urges to gamble when hearing about another's win. The finding of activating effects of reports of wins in these subgroups suggests that this issue could be of potential clinical significance. Replication of these findings and further research would be required to determine this, however.

Several potential limitations of this study should be addressed. First of all, our sample of gamblers had access to and some knowledge of the Internet. There is no information available as to what, if any, differences might exist between gamblers who have access to the Internet and those who do not, nor whether such differences would produce different results for the two groups. Another issue is the extent to which responses provided on Internet-based questionnaires correspond to those obtained using more conventional methodology (e.g. paper-and-pencil tests and questionnaires). The results of a number of recent studies that examined this issue have revealed no differences between responses obtained using the

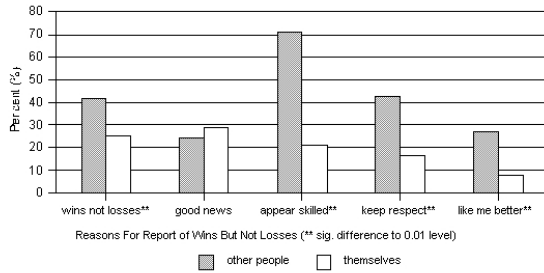
Internet and those obtained using paper-and-pencil methodology in such related areas as personality (e.g. [Buchanan & Smith, 1999](#); [Pettit, 2002](#)) and alcohol use ([Miller et al., 2002](#)).

References

- Buchanan, T., Smith, J.L. (1999). Using the Internet for psychological research: Personality testing on the World Wide Web. *British Journal of Psychology*, 90, 125-144.
- Carroll, D., Huxley, J.A.A. (1994). Cognitive, dispositional, and psychophysiological correlates of dependent slot machine gambling in young people. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 24 (12), 1070-1083.
- Cross, S.E., Morris, M. L., Gore, J. S. (2002). Thinking about oneself and others: The relational-interdependent self-construal and social cognition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62, 399-418.
- Gaboury, A., Ladouceur, R. (1989). Erroneous perceptions and gambling. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 4 (4), 411-420.
- Hill, E., Williamson, J. (1998). Choose six numbers, any numbers. *The Psychologist*, 11(1), 17-21.
- Holtgraves, T.M. (1988). Gambling as self-presentation. *Journal of Gambling Behavior*, 4 (2), 78-91.
- Hoorens, V. (1994). Unrealistic optimism in health and safety risks. In Rutter, D.R., & Quine, L. (Eds.), *Social Psychology and Health: European Perspectives* (pp 153-174). Aldershot, U.K.: Avebury/Ashgate
- McMullan, J.J., Mullen, J. (2001). What makes gambling news? *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 17, 321-352.
- Miller, E.T., Neal, D.J., Roberts, L.J., Cressler, S.O., Metrik, J., Marlett, G.A., et al. (2002). Test-retest reliability of alcohol measures: Is there a difference between Internet-based assessment and traditional methods? *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 16, 56-63.
- Pettit, F.A. (2002). A comparison of World-Wide Web and paper-and-pencil personality questionnaires. *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments & Computers*, 34, 50-54.
- Pronin, E., Lin, D. Y., Ross, L. (2002). The bias blind spot: Perceptions of bias in self versus others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 369-381.
- Schlenker, B.R., Weigold, M.F. (1992). Interpersonal processes involving impression regulation and management. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 43, 133-168.
- Toneatto, T. (1999). Cognitive psychopathology of problem gambling. *Substance Use and Misuse*, 34 (11), 1593-1604.
- Toneatto, T., Blitz-Miller, T., Calderwood, K., Dragonetti, R., Tsanos, A. (1997). Cognitive distortions in heavy gambling. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 13, 253-266.
- Tversky, A., Kahneman, D. (1982). Availability: A heuristic for judging frequency and probability. Kahneman, D., Slovic, P., & Tversky, A. (Eds.). *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (pp 163-178). Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Walker, M.B. (1992). *The Psychology of Gambling*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Weinstein, N.D. (1980). Unrealistic optimism about future life events. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 39 (5), 806-820.
-

Figures

Figure 1: Percent of respondents who considered these reasons for over-reporting wins as moderately or very important for themselves and others.



Tables

Table 1

Correlations between frequency of gambling, the amount of money lost, degree of problem gambling, degree of gambler's fallacy, the degree to which the respondent chases losses, gender and age with feeling and acting on urges to gamble on lottery tickets and at a casino.

	Feeling urges		Acting on urges		
	Lottery	Casino	Lottery	Casino	Spent
Gambling frequency	.145	.023	.118	-.008	.018
Amount lost	.318**	.226*	.283**	.209*	.231*
Problem gambling	.028	.068	.139	.278**	.296**
Gambler's fallacy	-.298**	-.227*	-.199*	-.144	-.198*
Chasing losses	.138	.341**	.181	.297**	.201*
Age	-.345**	-.213*	-.216*	-.080	-.006
Gender ¹	.353*	.337*	.229*	.207*	.276**

*p< 0.05 **p< 0.01

¹ Point biserial correlation (females coded 1, males coded 2)

Article Categories:

- Research: Jamieson

Keywords:

gambling

,

over-reports of wins

,

cognitive distortions

,

self-presentation bias

.