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## Commentary - Further Directions For Gambling Research

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## COMMENTARY

### *FURTHER DIRECTIONS FOR GAMBLING RESEARCH*

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It is encouraging to see someone of Fantino's stature call attention to the opportunity that gambling presents for basic and applied behavior analytic research. Indeed, in his 2008 paper on the future of behavior analysis, Fantino predicted that "gambling is an area that will see important and well-publicized advances in the next few years and that behavior analysis may be in the forefront of these advances" (p. 127). Not content to merely make this prediction, Fantino and Stolarz-Fantino take aim at the future by offering a number of concrete suggestions on how gambling research might proceed in the coming years.

Reminiscent of Rachlin's (1990) earlier insights on why people gamble, Fantino and Stolarz-Fantino emphasize the relevance of self-control, temporal discounting, and the sunk-cost effect. A gambler with a problem controlling his or her level of play is described as someone for whom occasionally winning a small amount of money over the short term trumps the benefits of conserving money over the longer term, for instance, by simply walking away from the game before losing more or perhaps all of their money. Self-control is the culprit, then, which is weakened if not defined by the problem gambler's tendency to steeply discount the long term advantages of saving or conserving money.

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Rachlin (1990) speculated that the tendency to discount the upside of saving money is related to how the problem gambler responds to the distribution of wins and losses over repeated gambles. On this view, a winning bet has two main effects: (1) it sets the occasion for the gambler to take stock of the monetary cost of the win, which in turn (2) sets the occasion for subjectively discounting that cost in relation to that win. In other words, the effect of a win is to minimize the downside of the losses that preceded it. To make matters worse, Rachlin predicts that the longer the string of losses prior to a win, the greater the degree of discounting the cost of the win.

"Chasing losses" aptly describes these effects and seems also to relate to the conditions under which the sunk cost effect is observed. To combat that effect, Fantino and Stolarz-Fantino suggest that it may be beneficial either to increase the magnitude of the monetary difference between losing and winning or to provide cues that inform the problem gambler that continued play amounts to losing play.

If Rachlin's (1990) analysis is near the mark, then anything less than a dramatic and sustained difference between losing and winning will not inhibit the level or persistence of the problem gambler's play. How large and how sustained this difference would have to be is a worthy topic that might take as its starting point the uppermost limit of the difference. Who would risk their home, life savings, and job on a single gamble? By the same token, who would take a single puff

from a cigarette if the immediate consequence was terminal lung cancer?

Informative cues might discourage losing play, and yet the reality is that no such cues are available where it matters the most: the natural gaming environment. Casino gaming is by far the most common form of gambling in this country and abroad; it is also a wildly profitable, multi-billion dollar industry that is clearly invested in protecting not only its own revenue stream but also the enormous capital that it adds to the nation's tax base (cf. Ghezzi, Lyons, & Dixon, 2000). Discouraging losing play, then, is obviously not in the industry's best interest.

What is instead in the gaming industry's best interest is to encourage play, and it often does this by capitalizing on so-called "gamblers fallacies." Fantino and Stolarz-Fantino mention this in connection with the role that verbal behavior can play, for instance, in the development of the false or illusory belief that one can control the outcome of purely chance events. Dixon and Delaney (2006) are at the forefront of work of this sort, and Fantino and Stolarz-Fantino add to it with the intriguing suggestion that gambling-related thoughts may acquire discriminative control over play.

A fallacy of a different sort is the "near-miss effect." The effect is seen in slot machine play, for example, where two of three winning symbols appear on the pay line in manner that fosters the false belief that a winning spin is close at hand. With that belief in mind, the gambler will presumably play beyond the point at which they would otherwise stop playing.

A functional analysis of the near miss effect in slot machine play centers on the conditioned reinforcing properties of the symbols and the rate and pattern of responses that produce them (Ghezzi, Wilson, & Porter, 2006). Research to date suggests that the near miss effect may be overstated as a means of prolonging slot machine play, however. In any case, the effect represents yet another oppor-

tunity for gambling research; indeed, given Fantino's long-standing interest in conditioned reinforcement (e.g., Fantino & Romanowich, 2007), one would hope that he and Stolarz-Fantino will soon bring their talents to bear on understanding the effects of almost winning.

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