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## Why Behavior Analysts Should Study Gambling Behavior

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## *WHY BEHAVIOR ANALYSTS SHOULD STUDY GAMBLING BEHAVIOR*

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The field of behavior analysis has been applied to solve many problems facing our society. Differential allocation of behavioral research to certain applied problems has resulted in positive changes in those areas while other areas remain underserved. Problem and pathological gambling are areas of concern in our society which have been minimally addressed by behavior analysts. Reasons for the underrepresentation of research in gambling are discussed and possible solutions to foster a behavioral understanding of and treatment for problem gamblers are presented.

*Keywords:* pathological gambling, addiction, behavioral therapy, applied behavior analysis

In the opening pages of the first issue of the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, it was made clear that the science of behavior analysis could be used and should be used to solve problems that faced our culture (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968). During the past 40 years, advances have been made in a number of applied arenas such as developmental disabilities, autism, organizational behavior, and education. However, other critical problems exist in our society that appears relatively untapped by behavioral psychologists, behavioral therapists, and behavior analysts. One such problem is gambling. With prevalence rates of 1-3% of the population (National Gambling Impact Study Commission, 1999), pathological gambling is nearly 100 times more prevalent than of autism. Our society has cultural epidemic on our hands.

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Pathological gambling has not been ignored by the rest of social science. Theories abound as to what causes problem or pathological gambling. They include medical models of chemical imbalances (Kim, Grant, Adson, Shin, & Zaninelli, 2002), genetic mutations or predispositions (Lobo & Kennedy, 2006), sociological influences, cognitive processing errors (Toplak et al., 2007), or combinations of any of the above. During the past ten years the number of published articles archived in the PsychINFO database with the key word "Pathological Gambling" has grown substantially. In 1997 there were 29 papers published and in 2006 there were 142 papers published. This publication trend snapshot suggests that while behavioral researchers allocate their investigative activity to other domains, many others in science are exploring the behavior of gambling.

Allowing non-behavioral researchers to "solve" the gambling problem or explain the causes and cures of pathological gambling is unfortunate. Consequently behavior analysts will find themselves defending an unknown or unpopular position that may be at odds with growing accepted conceptualizations of

the disorder. Furthermore, as behavior analysts arrive late in the game, they will find themselves not being taken seriously and considered novices in an area of seasoned gambling “experts.” It is not necessarily the case that non-behavioral researchers will have nothing to offer, indeed they will. However, the types of research questions that are asked and how the data are explained by these non-behavioral scientists will surely differ from those schooled more principally in the behavior sciences.

The reasons for why behavior analysts have yet to make a meaningful and substantial contribution to the field of gambling are open to speculation. No true assessment has been conducted, and explaining causes for a behavior that did not occur is difficult if not impossible. Exploration into the “whys” and “why nots” of our field are warranted. At first glance it appears that researchers tend to allocate their responding to those options resulting in reinforcement. Such an analysis makes behavioral sense. Given the lack of funding for gambling research compared to research in developmental disabilities, education, or drug addiction, failed funding attempts would be considered failures to obtain sought after reinforcers. Without funding, the resulting research projects may be of minimal scope, fail to produce meaningful outcomes, and only found acceptable for publication in low impact journals. Again, the reinforcers seem lacking. Subsequent consequences result in poor merit reviews, risking tenure, and promotion. Compounded with the complications of using a clinical population for research purposes, attempting to generalize college student behavior to pathological gamblers, having people “gamble” in a laboratory, or capturing the gambling experience in analogue situations, it is reasonable to speculate that behavior analysts will find reinforcers elsewhere much more densely and immediately.

There are two types of solutions which can result in more behavior analysts contributing to an understanding of pathological gambling and gambling behavior more generally. The first type of solution is to provide a high profile, scientifically rigorous, peer reviewed journal that promotes behavioral research on gambling. This journal is such an outlet. In this first issue readers will see a wide range of authors, research methods, and data that suggest behavior analysts do in fact have something to contribute to the field of gambling. Add to this an editorial board of well respected scientists, a fast editorial turnaround process, and open access format to ensure high publicity of publications.

The second type of solution is a bit more delayed, probabilistic, and risky; much like gambling itself. The solution is to make behavior analysts realize that there are many individuals suffering from gambling disorders that could stand to benefit from the types of scientific outcomes that behavioral researchers could potentially produce. Our scientific rigor lends itself to discovering cause and effect relationships among events better than other sciences. The dismissal of constructs, internal mediators, and hunches, is what separates behavior analysts from many other disciplines and pseudo scientists studying gambling presently. We have the skills that can change lives, and as a result, should use them as best we can. Finally, we have a rich history in pure basic science. Embracing that laboratory foundation is critical to generating applied solutions to pathological gambling. As a result, the journal will span the field of behavioral science, from theory to practice, from basic to applied, and from individual to cultural. Only by acknowledging the breadth of our science and publishing the wide range of findings in one outlet can we have a unified voice in the gambling community.

There is considerable room for an additional outlet for gambling research, and specifically an outlet that is dedicated to the

scientific analysis of gambling. To date, a scientific-based journal dedicated to gambling that explores the phenomena in attempts to understand causes for the behavior has been lacking. Thus, I proudly present to you the first issue of the Analysis of Gambling Behavior.

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