COMMENTARY Getting There: Commentary on "Toward an Intergrative Behavioral Model of Gambling" By Weatherly and Dixon

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GETTING THERE: COMMENTARY ON "TOWARD AN INTEGRATIVE BEHAVIORAL MODEL OF GAMBLING" BY WEATHERLY AND DIXON

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Weatherly and Dixon have taken an important step by proposing a coherent behavior-analytic formulation of gambling to account for individual differences in the development of gambling problems. They rely on the cumulative and interactive effects of several well-established behavioral mechanisms to build their analysis. They also make a compelling case for avoiding overly simplistic accounts of the complex activity of gambling, and that alone is of service to the behavioral community.

I applaud many things about this formulation   It illustrates how gambling is in part rule-governed, affected by setting events and prevailing contingencies, and impacted by discounting of delayed rewards. Of course, more empirical work is needed in all of these areas. Fortunately, there is growing interest among behavior analysts in gambling, and I expect to see more examples of careful analyses of contributory factors such as this one. Weatherly and Dixon have met their goal of moving *toward* an integrative behavioral model of gambling, and although we're not quite there, the model is a step forward, and a leap ahead of the alternative conceptualization on which most current treatment is based: that compulsive gamblers are immature, diseased individuals with an unconscious need to lose.

But there is danger in dismissing some important considerations too quickly. The authors are correct in presenting lotteries as poor examples of control by intermittent schedules. In fact, lottery players are insensitive to changes in the odds of winning, and jackpot size alone accounts for more than 90% of betting variability (Lyons & Ghezzi, 1995). That does not mean that intermittent schedules of monetary reinforcement have little importance in most gambling. Video poker and slot machines (line games) employ much richer intermittent schedules, maintain much higher levels of participation, and are associated with much greater risk of pathological play than are lotteries (Lyons, 2006). Others have examined whether the "near miss" can serve a conditioned reinforcing function within intermittent schedules. We may yet find that intermittent schedules of reinforcement play a larger role than the current authors allow.

I pause at the easy dismissal of the "nebulous" history of reinforcement as well. Some players are coming off of a recent win, or a recent near miss, or a string of wins or losses, which leads me to consider whether all players sitting around a poker table (for example) "face the same response cost and immediacy contingencies when playing" (p. 7). That

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statement can only be true if one ignores the recent history, which seems a questionable way to proceed. In fact, the authors seem to acknowledge as much when they note that "the more one gambles, the more expensive gambling becomes" (p. 9). Perhaps Weatherly and Dixon would account for history-sensitive gambling patterns such as "chasing losses" by turning to the rules that players verbalize as they play, but in that case the "authenticity and accuracy of those factors may be questionable" (p.7) in the same sense that historical factors are said to be.

I can list a few other quibbles, such as whether establishing operations or setting events are accurate ways to characterize organismic or long-term risk factors such as ethnic background, age, gender, and SES of players, and whether that characterization is any less nebulous than reinforcement history. Compared to more obvious examples such as proximity to a casino, a payday, a debt coming due, a recent loss, a "bad beat," or a recent win, it is not clear to me how these main risk factors can be seen as either "operations" or "events", and more importantly, how their status as such can be tested. If effective treatment "will need to address the establishing conditions" (p.25), this will become a critical point. Some of the assertions of the model require stronger documentation as well. For example, it's disputable that "In general, winning money becomes less important as one grows older" (p.18-19); the 2000 U.S. census shows that households headed by those aged 65 and older have less income than those headed by ages 25 to 34. And if the same acid test is applied to the new model as that used to dismiss its simplistic precursors, how do we account for individual differences in young, male, poor, single, drug-using minority members who do not become pathological gamblers, and older, female, married, abstinent white women who do? The answer, I suspect, will have something to do with reinforcement history.

These issues notwithstanding, I find the effort an important and admirable step in the right direction. The Weatherly and Dixon model has much to commend it, and much for us to discuss.

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