

Editorial

Considering the Ethics of Public Claims: An Appeal for Scientific Maturity

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Compared with the more mature scientific areas of inquiry, the study of gambling related phenomena is a relatively young field. Consequently, scientists and clinicians have countless opportunities to develop new areas of research and treatment approaches. Immature fields like gambling studies also provide the opportunities for quasi-scientists and even charlatans to influence the public, policy makers and perhaps themselves to thinking that their “evidence” supports a particular treatment, causal relationship or public policy. The Wild West had its snake oil salesmen and the field of gambling studies is no different. However, there are ethical guidelines to shape and direct the nature and form of public statements made by scientists and clinicians who are members of professional organizations. For example, within the United States, the American Psychological Association, American Sociological Association, the American Association of University Pro-

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fessors and the American Psychiatric Association have each published guidelines regarding public statements and the conduct of scientific inquiry. Members of other professional organizations are bound by their respective scientific and ethical guidelines and must behave in accordance with these principles. Other countries have similar organizations and guidelines as well.

Unfortunately, the public, the media and even some members of the previously mentioned professional organizations remain unaware of these guidelines. Eager to garner public attention or raise awareness for their cause, professionals too often make public statements without any supporting documentation that details the methodology employed to generate their findings. The media and the public too often simply accept claims for which there is little if any empirical support. If research exists, often it has not yet passed the test of peer review.

While all research deserves a measure of scientific skepticism, unpublished research is particularly suspect. While it might be comparable to its published counterpart, the burden of proof for such a claim resides with the documentation of the unpublished work. Absent such detailed evidence, unpublished research represents little more than opinion. George Higgins noted, "Data is what distinguishes the dilettante from the artist" (Guardian; London, 17 June 1988). To this we add that data, which can stand the test of internal and external validity (Campbell & Stanley, 1963), is what distinguishes the scientist from the charlatan. Unfortunately, some contemporary authorities fail to adequately understand the principles of scientific inquiry and sustain conventional myths and unfounded causal relationships (interested readers should review Edwards & Bagozzi, 2000).

We are not suggesting that there is no place for controversy or disagreement among those working in the field of gambling studies. Disagreement is common in science; it is the essential tension that energizes theoretical advances and discovery. In the mature sciences, disagreements tend to reflect differences of theoretical persuasion that are buttressed by evidence. The methods that generate this evidence must be available to public and scientific scrutiny. This is the machinery of science. We also are not encouraging people to avoid sharing their judgments about gambling policy or science. We are encouraging people to identify their opinions and distinguish these opinions from scientific evidence.

As the premier scholarly journal in this field, the *Journal of Gam-*

bling Studies has an obligation to promote responsible science and public policy. Consequently, with the publication of this editorial, we are asking clinicians and investigators of gambling related phenomena to subscribe to the following guidelines for public statements and scientific claims. This statement has been adapted from the American Psychological Association's *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Editorial board members and authors associated with the *Journal of Gambling Studies* who engage in expert testimony, clinical services, teaching, research, organizational consulting, or other professional activities maintain a reasonable level of awareness of current scientific information in their fields of activity, and undertake ongoing efforts to maintain competence in the skills they use. In addition, these parties rely on scientifically derived knowledge when making scientific or professional judgments or when engaging in scholarly or professional endeavors.

By adopting this principle, we collectively can advance the credibility of gambling related research—much of which has been challenged. In the United States, the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences in its review of the scientific gambling literature criticized the quality and credibility of this body of research (National Research Council, 1999). The NRC noted that its findings were greatly influenced by a relatively small body of newer, better research that meets or exceeds contemporary standards for social and behavioral research. The NRC recommended that future gambling related research should be held to these higher standards (National Research Council, 1999).

The response of the Editor and Associate Editors of the *Journal of Gambling Studies* to this clarion call is to reaffirm their commitment to the goal of publishing only those scholarly works that satisfy these higher standards.

In addition, we believe that the public statements and public behavior of gambling-related investigators and clinicians be held to a similarly high standard. On occasion, opinion has been passed on as scientific evidence. Unpublished evidence that has not been subject to peer review has been presented as definitive. Preliminary evidence has been summarized in public testimony or press releases without the necessary documentation, including methodological details that must be available for scrutiny. In each instance, this public behavior violates

professional standards of conduct and tarnishes the work of legitimate scientists.

It is time for gambling studies to be held to the standards of the more mature physical and social sciences. Only then can we restore some of the luster of science that is lost when even one questionable, incomplete and undocumented finding enters the public arena, making it difficult to distinguish legitimate science from quasi-science.

As more scientists, public policy makers and treatment providers enter the field of gambling studies, we believe that the *Journal of Gambling Studies* can serve as a unifying force and a center of excellence. Consequently, we are urging all of our associates to take increasing care in their public statements so that gambling studies and those who promulgate such work can move to the next stage of scientific maturity. The *Journal of Gambling Studies* encourages clinicians and scientists to make public statements and claims with care and to base such statements on the best available *scientific* evidence. When the extant scientific evidence reflects a mixed perspective, this circumstance deserves mention. When there is unanimity of view, this also deserves mention. We encourage the entire field of gambling studies to embrace this principle. If the field is to mature and gain respect, the scientific study of gambling will require legitimacy and authenticity and nothing less.

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