

# This Audience is Weird: Reflections on What We Know Now in Gambling Research

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“What’s the matter with the crowd I’m seeing?”

-- Billy Joel, *It’s Still Rock N’ Roll to Me*

On occasion, at prestigious research gatherings like this one, it is useful to ask ourselves a simple question:

What do we know?

More specifically, we might think critically about what we *believe* we know, in the same manner we think critically about the gambler and the global gaming industry as subjects of academic scrutiny. Epistemologically speaking, the path to *knowing* the gambler has shifted dramatically over the years, as the behavior has transformed -- from a sinful one indulged by a deviant few to a normal one enjoyed by the masses. Looking back with the benefit of years of hindsight, our early “expert” interpretations of gamblers seem pretty implausible, and even ludicrous. Revealingly, however, our fore-thinkers were no less certain than we are today that they were right -- that they possessed the path to Truth on Gambling, and that they knew exactly what made the gambler tick.

Were this conference taking place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its plenary speaker might well have been a published expert named P.E. Holp, who was certain that he could tell us who these gamblers truly were:

“Who are the men now given so fiercely to this mania in our city? Listen and I will tell you” (1887, p. 105).

Holp’s “mania” was gambling, and he identified gamblers as sinners of the highest order. In fact, in America, gambling was among the worst of sins, as it threatened the social order in ways that alcohol did not. After all, gambling threatened to undermine the Protestant work ethic that was so dominant in early American history. This ethic encouraged Americans to toil, toil, and toil some more, with hopes of slowly accumulating an honest savings over a long lifetime (Lears, 2003). Along comes gambling, with its promise of earning a lot in just a few moments (and with just a little bit of toil) and it is no wonder that preachers often attacked gamblers.

In another 19<sup>th</sup>-century work entitled *Traps for the Young*, Anthony Comstock used his pulpit to describe it thusly:

“The promise of getting something for nothing, of making a fortune without the slow plodding of daily toil, is one of Satan’s most fascinating snares” (1883, p. 56).

Most important for our purposes at this conference today, this is hardly a sparse early literature on gambling. In dozens upon dozens of publications in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we hear from dozens upon dozens of “experts” who were absolutely certain that they had gambling figured out, that they had the answers, and that they *knew* all of the nuances of this population of gamblers. What was more, these moral experts had tremendous influence – in fact, one could easily argue that academic experts today lack the reach and respect that these earlier experts enjoyed in their day (Bernhard, 2007).

*On Certitude, Science, and Globalization: A New World Research Order?*

My point is that before we allow that dreaded characteristic of certitude to invade our research consciousness, we might be well advised to realize that we are hardly the first to claim that we have the answers. We might even wonder how the expertise of today will look to the next generations of experts. Epistemological modesty is of course a hallmark of the scientific method, which insists that truth is always partial, and always subject to refutation through future research (Sagan, 1996). However, as we all are aware, in real research life, science does not always proceed this way.

A group of researchers at the University of British Columbia are now showing us just how flawed our confidence might be. In academic spheres, this was the (admittedly wonky) *Intelligentsia Debate* of the Summer of ’10, launched when Joseph Henrich and his colleagues Steven Heine and Ara Norenzayan “went viral” with an opening essay in the influential journal *Nature* (2010). Henrich’s subversive team has been questioning the very foundations of psychology and economics, and the *Nature* essay delighted in pointing out these fields’ foibles.

For a long while, critics have contended that the field of psychology might be re-labeled “the psychology of the 101 student,” so prominent is that group in the field’s research samples. Amazingly, a striking *two-thirds* of the subjects in United States psychology studies are students (Begley, 2010) – a group that hardly constitutes a representative slice of humanity (nor are the college years a representative time). I vaguely recall my sophomore year, and it was, in a word, sophomoric – and a time when I engaged in any number of non-rational behaviors for the first time (and in some cases, never again).

It gets worse: stunningly, 96% of the subjects in published articles in the top psychology journals come from Western industrialized countries, even though this group represents only 12% of the planet’s population (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Would anyone

argue that we are doing research that reveals universal human truths by neglecting generalizability this way? In Henrich, et al's memorable words, these research subjects are "WEIRD," which means that they hail from "Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic societies" (2010, p. 29). Worse, their research suggests that "people from WEIRD societies – and particularly American undergraduates – are some of the most psychologically unusual people on earth" (2010, p. 29).

These limited samples wouldn't be a problem if they turned out to be generalizable, and if these articles were uncovering universal human truths – but this does not seem to be the case. For instance, remember the Fundamental Attribution Error (or FAE for short) from your psychology 101 class? FAE's "universal" finding is that humans tend to attribute behaviors to temperamental factors (he's an angry person) rather than situational ones (he's just suffered a bad beat at a Texas Hold'em table). As a general rule, humans tend not to take note of context, but instead choose to simply interpret behaviors as indicative of a deep-rooted personality characteristic (often a flaw) – or so the thinking goes.

Here's the problem: the Fundamental Attribution Error turns out not to be so... fundamental. East Asians don't do it -- nor do Russians (Begley, 2010). In fact, it could well be that FAE – a concept that we devote weeks to in undergraduate psychology classes – may well be applicable only to the specific individuals who are *attending* undergraduate psychology classes.

The grand field of economics does not emerge unscathed either; as Henrich (who has a joint appointment in the psychology and economics programs at the University of British Columbia) has found, the "ultimatum game," an important contribution to economic game theory, does not translate universally. While we used to believe that game theory research like this revealed that there are underlying, universal senses of justice and economic fairness, Henrich and his team have found that non-industrialized countries think through these games very differently (Henrich et al, 2010).

This appears to be an especially costly generalization: economic policy, largely dictated by some of the very same economists who publish in these areas, has drawn heavily upon these game theory assumptions when determining the best way to eradicate poverty in non-WEIRD parts of the world (Begley, 2010).

#### *Practical and Research Implications: Costly Generalizations*

The list of the WEIRD is growing at an alarming rate, but one might reasonably ask at this point: is this yet another meaningless academic exercise, or worse: another instance of politically correct (which is to say, politically *liberal*) college professors encouraging us to embrace diversity? Hardly: as Henrich et al. note, these can be very expensive real-world mistakes – and not just for individuals.

For instance, the global gaming industry has learned about costly generalizations several times: there was the MGM Grand's not-so-grand opening, which was attributable in part to an entryway that forced gamblers to come into the casino "through the (MGM) lion's mouth" – an act that happened to be associated with terrible misfortune in Chinese cultures. Unsurprisingly, Chinese gamblers were not eager to gamble at the MGM, and an expensive renovation of the front entrance commenced. Other gaming companies have made major mistakes with feng shui or number systems that also contributed to anthropological problems – that ultimately evolved into financial problems (Bernhard, Futrell, & Harper, 2009).

Furthermore, it turns out that one of the oft-repeated "truisms" about gambling – that it has been around since the dawn of time, in all areas, among all peoples, always – is also inaccurate. Per Binde's carefully constructed article "Gambling Across Cultures" (2005) depicts this on a revealing map showing that historically, vast swaths of the planet did *not* gamble (though in many areas, it was introduced later on via colonialism). For the most part, in indigenous Southern Africa, Australia, and virtually all of South America, gambling was not present until it was introduced by colonizing outsiders.

And yet another "universal truth" is struck down. It would seem that "universal human truths" are neither universal, nor human, nor true.

*Lessons from Global Laboratories: The Spirit and Content of Future Research*

The lesson here is not that we should revel in others' mistakes – after all, as we have noted, the scientific method, when it is humming along well, allows for these very sorts of self-correcting mechanisms. I myself have committed these very types of generalization mistakes – often at podiums much like this one, in front of large gatherings of intelligent people.

As researchers, though, these developments underscore the crucial challenge of generalizability, and of paying special attention to research sample representativeness -- *especially* in a rapidly globalizing 21<sup>st</sup> century. As journal editors, we should insist that authors devote more than a quick limitations comment to generalizability, and as granting agencies, we should reward applicants who seek out "inconvenient subject pools" beyond those at our fingertips (Henrich et al, 2010). To this, I would add that we need to remember that even the most sophisticated statistical techniques cannot rescue data that are gathered uncritically – and too often, we as editors and researchers are blinded by statistical mastery before we use our critical eyes to view the foundations of those analyses.

Most importantly, perhaps, we need to pursue cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary research (more phrases that, like diversity, have lost some of their meaning due to overuse in academic settings, unfortunately). And at the very least, we should seek to replicate studies that have led to

“truths” that might not apply in strategically important settings (like the little neighborhood of Asia, which turns out to be a fairly important neck of the woods for the global economy in general, and the gaming industry in particular).

Daunting? Yes. But we might choose to embrace the spirit of Henrich’s team, who claim that these new developments need not paralyze the research process:

Recognizing the full extent of human diversity does not mean giving up on the quest to understand human nature. To the contrary, this recognition illuminates a journey into human nature that is more exciting, more complex, and ultimately more consequential than has previously been suspected (2010, p. 29).

Indeed, this is our daunting *and* exhilarating charge as researchers confronting a rapidly globalizing gambling world in a dynamic 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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