



The Value of Working Compared to Gambling: Are College Students Risk-Takers?

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Introduction

Pathological gambling, labeled a disorder by the American Psychological Association, is responsible for maladaptive consequences in over eighteen percent of the U.S. adult population. Although problem gambling has affected or will affect many individuals, very little is known about the specific environmental factors that cause gambling to become a problem for some and not others.

Given the limited understanding of the etiology of the disorder, there currently is a need for an experimental model of gambling (Madden, Ewan & Lagorio, 2007). Although several studies conducted by economists have evaluated situational factors that correlate with gambling behavior, there have been no models that allow for causal statements regarding the role of specific environmental or dispositional variables in contributing to the development and maintenance of gambling behavior.

The goal of the present study is to validate a new gambling paradigm and achieve a more thorough understanding of the relationship between environmental factors (e.g., between income and the odds of success at gambling) that may contribute to the development and maintenance of gambling behavior.

Evaluating how participants equate working (certain alternative) and gambling (probabilistic outcome) alternative across a range of gambling scenarios will give insight into the environmental factors that contribute to problem/pathological gambling behavior.

Method

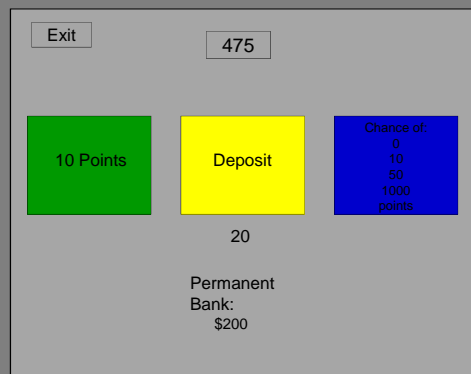


Figure 1: Picture of the screen presented to participants.

Four participants each completed 5 conditions, across which the gambling odds were manipulated. Stated as average points per click (i.e. unit price) each participant experienced the gambling payoff as .45, 5, 1, 2, and 4.5 average points per click (respectively).

Within each condition the participants were given a certain number of choices to distribute across the work and gamble alternatives. In each condition the unit price of the work alternative adjusted in order to determine the equivalent certain value of the uncertain gambling alternative.

Acknowledgements

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Results

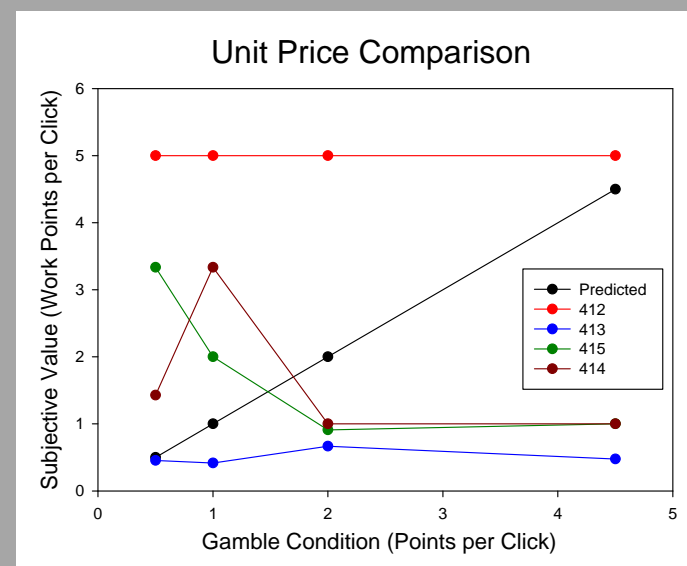


Figure 2: Average points per click on the work alternative plotted against the average points per click on the gambling alternative.

Discussion

In the real world, certain individuals tend to gamble when the odds against winning are very high in combination with the inability to make ends meet by work alone.

By adjusting the points per click on the work alternative the present study calculated the certain subjective value of the uncertain outcome. Regardless of what the odds of winning were on the gamble alternative, participants allocated responding similarly. That is, each participant responded differently, but similar across conditions. This would suggest that individuals have a given *certain* value of uncertain outcomes despite the actual odds. It seems then that we have created a way to evaluate individual differences in willingness to take risks.

Future manipulations will include more extreme probabilities of gambling and evaluating choice allocation between two uncertain outcomes. Future research could also correlate scores on the present measure to various personality measures (e.g., the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire).