

The WAGER Vol. 7(16) - Fore! An Investigation of Wagering and Disordered Gambling Among Golfers

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Tiger Woods won big at the Master's tournament last week. But not all winning on the golf course is done officially. Many professional and amateur golfers also try to win by gambling on their golf games. This week's WAGER reviews an ethnographic study that investigated gambling among golfers who wager on the outcome of their own games (Smith & Paley, 2001). The WAGER focuses on the authors' description of disordered gambling among golfers.

Smith and Paley collected data over one year at two private golf clubs in Canada. To limit the influence of scientific observation on natural playing patterns, the authors used a form of participant observation called auto-ethnography. Specifically, the researchers participated in playing and wagering on golf games to observe golf wagering in a natural setting. Subjects of these field studies did not know that they were being observed. Researchers targeted golfers who they knew from experience or referral to be subjects of their field observations¹. Both researchers recorded their observations about golf wagering in field journals after golf games and post-game interactions. The researchers also used structured interviews with a sample of these golfers (n=28)² to collect more information about wagering on golf. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Both researchers were familiar with golf and the golf clubs used as study sites, and many of the informants already knew the researchers and felt comfortable sharing information.

The researchers grouped informants into four general betting levels based on the stakes they were willing to risk (see Table 1) and estimated the percent of male golfers³ who generally wagered at each level. Smith and Paley reported that these levels did not seem to be related to income. The authors made several observations about disordered gambling including: (1) several golfers reported feeling a loss of control over their golf wagering, (2) most recalled playing stakes

over what they prefer, (3) some informants felt under-aroused when playing for less than their usual wager, a possible parallel to tolerance, (4) some golfers chased losses, and (5) some players claimed that their performance, satisfaction, and excitement diminished when a wager was not riding on their performance.

Table 1: Levels of Wagering on Golf in Two Canadian Golf Clubs

Non-Gamblers	Lower	Middle	Upper
Those who never gamble or who do so on an infrequent basis	Those who ordinarily risk between \$1 and \$20	Those who typically risk \$20 to \$100 on the golf course and on occasion go as high as \$200	Those who routinely risk \$200 or more in a round of golf
15%	60%	20%	5%

Smith and Paley concluded that none of the private golf club members were disordered gamblers because the golfers retained enough money to maintain their lifestyle. They authors asserted that players' wagering was secondary to the golf game.

There are a number of problems with these assertions, however. First, some aspects about the study methodology were not clear. For example, the safeguards against the influence of subjective opinions about gambling and golf on the conclusions that were drawn from their personal observations were not discussed in enough detail. The authors complicated this by not including a standardized problem gambling screening instrument to verify their claims about the problem gambling status of their participants. Noting that gamblers were able to maintain their lifestyle despite gambling does not mean that all of their participants were healthy gamblers. Second, the fact that Smith and Paley knew most of the study participants limits the ability to generalize these findings beyond these subjects and might limit the stability of certain findings. For example, the authors reported gender differences in gambling participation; however it is unclear whether this is due to sampling strategy or gender. Further, by using golfers that they knew as study participants, the authors may have unwittingly minimized the primary benefit of auto-ethnography; naturalistic observation. Finally, the ethics of wagering with people who might potentially be struggling with addiction is questionable. Although the authors did this to obtain natural observations, the study could have resulted in serious negative consequences to some informants.

There are very few auto-ethnographic research studies on gambling. This study reminds us that this approach is valuable because it can provide insight into phenomena without the influence of scientific observation. Further, the study

investigates a popular gambling venue often overlooked in gambling research, and draws attention to an area where new inquiries may further our understanding of sports wagering.

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Notes

1. The total number of individuals on which field observations were based was not reported.
2. The authors did not include examples of their interview questions in the article.
3. Researchers found no female golfers in the Middle and Upper range of betting so this analysis was restricted to male gamblers.

References

Smith, G., & Paley, R. (2001). Par for the course: A study of gambling on the links and a commentary on physical skill-based gambling formats. *International Gambling Studies*, 1, 103-132.