

# The WAGER, Vol. 21(6) - What did you expect? Ethnic differences in gambling expectancies

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“Gambling expectancies” is a catch-all term to describe the different things people expect to happen as a result of gambling – both positive and negative. These expectations help explain why some people [gamble more](#) than others, or why people gamble at all, so it is important to understand where they come from. [Some research](#) suggests that gambling expectancies are at least partially rooted in ethnicity or cultural background. This week, to end our [Special Series on Disparities in the Experience and Treatment of Addiction](#), The WAGER reviews a [study](#) by Alan Ka Ki Chan and others that compared the gambling expectancies of Asian American and White American college students.

## **What is the research question?**

Do Asian American and White American college students hold different gambling expectancies, and are these expectancies related to gambling problems?

## **What did the researchers do?**

Chan and his colleagues recruited 819 students, 456 Asian Americans and 357 non-Hispanic White Americans, from a large university on the U.S.’s west coast. The participants completed an online survey to report (1) whether they had ever gambled, (2) whether they had experienced a set of problem gambling symptoms, and (3) how likely they thought they would be to experience different positive and negative outcomes if they gambled. The researchers reduced the positive and negative outcomes to six classes of expectancies – three positive, three negative (see Table 1). They then looked at the differences in the averages of the responses of the Asian American participants and the White American participants for each of the six classes. They also looked at the relationships between the six classes of expectancies and problem gambling symptoms.

## **What did they find?**

Asian American students were less likely to expect mood enhancement (e.g., pleasure, thrill) and social affiliation (e.g., sociability, bonding with friends) than the White American students, but they were also less likely to expect feelings of

personal distress (e.g., anger, anxiety). Among the Asian American students, expecting that gambling will provide stress release and social affiliation was positively associated with problem gambling symptoms. Among the White American students, expecting that gambling would create over-involvement and negative functioning were positively associated with problem gambling symptoms.

Higher in Asian American students	Not significantly different	Lower in Asian American students
		Mood enhancement (pleasure, thrills)
	Stress release (tension reduction, temporary escape)	
		Social affiliation (being sociable, bonding with friends)
	Over-involvement (have trouble stopping, becoming addicted)	
		Personal distress (anger, anxiety)
	Negative functioning (legal troubles, poor academic performance)	

Figure. Comparison of gambling expectancies for Asian American and White American students. Click image to enlarge.

### Why do these findings matter?

Gambling expectancies can give insights into why people start or continue to gamble. It is interesting that the Asian American students were less likely to report expecting social or bonding experiences, given that many gambling games associated with Asians (e.g., Big Two, Chinese Poker, Mahjongg) are more social forms of gambling. These expectancies patterns could suggest differences in whether and how gambling and its consequences are discussed between parents and children or within peer groups. If there are systematic cultural gaps (e.g., if problem gambling is something that is “just not talked about”), then perhaps targeted awareness campaigns can fill in the voids.

### Every study has limitations. What about this one?

The list of expectancies was based on similar lists usually associated with alcohol and drugs, so it did not include expectancies of financial gain or loss. Expectations of winning and losing might provide important incentives or disincentives to gambling. Also, “Asian” and “White” are large umbrella terms each covering a diverse range of subcultures. Different subcultures have different

norms when it comes to gambling, and the data does not allow for differentiating between these subcultures.

**For more information:**

There are resources out there for Asian Americans who might need help controlling their gambling, but they tend to be regional or local. Examples of institutions with resources include the [NICOS Chinese Health Coalition](#) in San Francisco and the [Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling](#) in Boston.

— Matthew Tom

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