The illusion of control: structure, measurement and dependence on reinforcement frequency in the context of a laboratory gambling task

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Abstract

We present a new experimental method for studying the illusion of control in a gambling context, along with a new multi-item measure of the degree of perceived control. Responses to the measure were found to reflect a distinction between primary and secondary control – a distinction not recognised by traditional single-item measures. Furthermore, responses to the new measure were, in contrast to ratings on a concurrently administered traditional measure, found to be completely independent of the experienced reinforcement frequency. This finding highlights the purity of the newly-developed measure and calls into question the status of reinforcement frequency as a fundamental determinant of the degree of illusorily perceived control.

Keywords: illusion of control; primary control; secondary control; reinforcement frequency; gambling

Introduction

In a seminal exposition of the cognitive theory of gambling, Walker (1992) argues that most patterns of irrational thinking among gamblers essentially consist of the illusion that “one has more control over the outcome than is in fact the case” (pp. 139-140) or the overestimation of one’s chances of winning independently of any actions taken. In the context of poker machine gaming, roulette and dice – gambling forms where outcomes are completely random – any perceived control is necessarily illusory. Nevertheless, regular gamblers report the use of a wide variety of strategies (e.g., changing machines in a systematic fashion; see Joukhador, Blaszczynski & Maccallum, 2004; Livingstone, Wooley & Borrell, 2006) that make sense only on the assumption that the player can exert control over outcomes based on knowledge of the game. While many of these strategies have been termed products of illusorily perceived “primary” control because they rely on the idea that it is the player who has control, players also report employing “secondary” control strategies, in which they seek to achieve favourable outcomes by aligning themselves with influential higher or external forces (Rothbaum, Weisz & Snyder, 1982), such as luck (Keren & Wagenaar, 1985; King, 1990; Ocean & Smith, 1993; Duong & Ohtsuka, 2000), magic (Felson & Gmelch, 1979; Henslin, 1967), or justice (King, 1990). Although conceptually distinct, primary and secondary strategies tend to blend together: for instance, in Keren and Wagenaar’s (1985) study, many of the interviewed regular blackjack players spoke of ‘changing-up’ play, not as a mathematically appropriate strategy, but, rather, as the necessary response to a period of bad luck. Thus, a very broad range of gambling behaviours can be described as products of an illusion of primary or secondary control over objectively random outcomes.

The basic experimental paradigm for studying the determinants of the illusion of control dates back to Langer (1975), and involves exposing people to uncontrollable events without explicitly indicating that the events in question are uncontrollable. While various elaborations on the design have yielded considerable insight into the illusion of control (e.g., Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Matute 1994, 1995), most work since Langer has employed very minimalist tasks that are often somewhat abstracted from the gambling context (e.g., involving the judgement of the degree of contingency between a button press and the onset of a light). Although minimalist tasks are often helpful from a scientific perspective, there is a noticeable difference in “feel” between a casino and a psychology experiment, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, there is the issue of instructional demand effects. The fact that minimalist tasks involve only a few abstract stimuli leads to the use of instructions that either reveal the research aim (e.g., Alloy & Abramson, 1979), or deliberately conceal it by directing participants to focus simply on obtaining the target outcome as often as possible (e.g., Matute, 1994). In the former case, participants proceed to carry out the somewhat unnatural task of monitoring their control levels without expressly seeking reinforcement. In the latter case, participants could come to expect that, since they have been given the task of maximising reinforcement levels, there must be a systematic way of obtaining the target outcome.

It is in part due to such considerations that many studies have featured experimental tasks based on actual gambling activities, such as poker machines (e.g., Ladouceur & Sevgiry, 2005), roulette (e.g., Dixon, 2000), and lotteries (e.g., Langer, 1975; Wohl & Enzle, 2002). However, the use of existing gambling game formats can cause participants to base their post-experimental ratings of control not only on what they immediately experienced during the experiment, but also on their existing beliefs about that form of gambling. A partial solution to this problem is to gauge relevant beliefs at the start of the experiment. Recently-developed gambling-related belief questionnaires (Jefferson & Nicki, 2003; Joukhador, Blaszczynski & Maccallum,
2003; Raylu & Oei, 2004; Steenbergh, Meyers, May & Whelan, 2002; Wood & Clapham, 2005) could be employed for this purpose. However, such self-report tasks may not capture many of the elements of decision-making that emerge when people are asked to make judgements in real time. Accordingly, there would appear to be a need to develop tasks that capture the important elements of gambling decision-making, but which are more immune to contamination from variations in previous gambling experience as well as instructional sets.

Apart from the appropriate design of these experiments is the issue of how the strength of the illusion of control might be determined. Some researchers have drawn inferences regarding the illusion of control based solely on participants’ average bet amounts (e.g., Burger & Schnerring, 1982; Gilovich & Douglas, 1986), or estimates of the number of reinforcements expected in future rounds of the task (e.g., Budescu & Bruderman, 1995; Langer, 1975). However, these measures necessarily equate the illusion of control to the expectation or perception of success. As noted by Walker (1992) in the quoted passage, confidence and control are not equivalent.

Many other studies have adopted a simpler approach in asking people to rate the degree of perceived control over task outcomes on a visual analogue scale. Due to their brevity, measures of this kind invariably treat control as a unitary construct, making no distinction between primary and secondary facets. This is not a problem if people do not seek secondary control or fail to distinguish between the two types of control processes. However, should either of these conditions not hold, people may find a single question about “control” somewhat confusing. Another concern is that there is some evidence that rating scales of this kind confl ate perceived success frequency with control. Jenkins and Ward (1965) found that responses to questions containing the word “control” were strongly positively related to reinforcement frequency, while responses to less transparent questions about contingency were not influenced by reinforcement frequency at all. Jenkins and Ward subsequently argued that people actually interpret “control” to mean ‘attainment of the target outcome’. Accordingly, in answer to questions that refer explicitly to the degree of perceived “control”, people may not be giving a rating of perceived contingency at all.

Despite this, most studies of the relationship between success frequency and the illusion of control continue to employ explicitly worded measures as the sole measures of perceived control. Thus, although higher reinforcement frequencies are consistently found to produce higher perceived “control” (Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Tennen & Sharp, 1983), it is not clear whether reinforcement frequency is a fundamental determinant of the illusion of control (Thompson et al., 2007), or if the trend is an artifact of the wording of the questions. To address this issue, a more systematic approach is required.

In view of these considerations, the aims of this paper are fourfold. First, we describe an experimental task that was designed to achieve a compromise between the incorporation of novel stimuli and the preservation of a gambling game format. Also described is an experimental procedure geared at minimising instructional demand effects, and, in fact, quantifying some of those effects through the pre-experimental assessment of gambling-related beliefs. Second, we present a perceived control measure that we developed with a view to preserving the primary-secondary distinction and avoiding the potential confusion with reinforcement frequency that arises from explicit references to ‘control’. Our third aim was to use the newly-developed measure in determining whether people do in fact distinguish between primary and secondary control processes and, by implication, whether there are grounds for deploying a perceived control measure that conceptualises control as a multi-faceted construct rather than the general unitary construct gauged by traditional measures. Finally, we employ the new task, the new measure and a traditional explicitly worded measure in testing Jenkins and Ward’s conjecture regarding the differential effects of reinforcement frequency on ratings of perceived “control” and responses to more subtle questions about perceived contingency. We subsequently seek to make a more general statement regarding the relationship between reinforcement frequency and the illusion of control.

**Method**

**Participants**

One hundred students from the University of Adelaide participated in the study, but three participants who responded identically to all the items of the newly-developed measure of perceived control were excluded. A technical error resulted in the loss of another person’s pre-experimental-questionnaire data, so some of the reported analyses contain only 96 data points, as will be made clear in the relevant tables and figures.

**Materials & Procedure**

The overall design of the experiment was as follows. Upon completing a pre-experimental questionnaire concerned with gambling-related beliefs, each participant played 100 compulsory rounds of the gambling task described later. This was done under one of five conditions, in which the average reinforcement frequency ranged from one win in every 16 rounds to one in every two. Participants were not told how many rounds they would be playing, but were informed that they could terminate the game and cash out on remaining credit at any point after completing an impressions-of-the-game questionnaire. This questionnaire appeared automatically after 100 rounds of play.

The pre-experimental questionnaire contained the Drake Beliefs About Chance (DBC) Inventory (Wood & Clapham, 2005), which required participants to rate their degree of agreement with 22 erroneous statements about the nature of gambling (e.g., “Wins are more likely to occur on a hot machine”, “I can improve my chances of winning by performing special rituals”). Statements that referred to
At the commencement of the first round, participants were informed that their task was to bet on the occurrence of a goal from a free kick. They were also advised that the outcome of each kick was determined by a random number generator, and that the bet amounts were calibrated to ensure a negative long-term winning expectancy. The experiment was described to participants as an investigation of emotional responses to a new, sports-themed gambling game that operates on the same principles as a poker machine. This instructional set encouraged participants to ‘just play’ without concerning themselves with the degree of control inherent in the task. The reference to poker machines served to guard against participants automatically assuming that the new sports-themed game possessed a video-game-like skill component.

The third element of the experiment was the “impressions of the game” questionnaire. Placed amid filler items regarding emotional responses to the game, this questionnaire contained two questions about perceptions of control over game outcomes. One of the questions (Measure A in Figure 2) followed the traditionally employed single-item rating-scale-based form. The new measure (Measure B in Figure 2) encompassed 13 randomly-ordered items.
presented in the form of to-be-evaluated causal explanations for wins. Each explanation implicated a phenomenon associated either with primary control or secondary control. The objectively accurate account, “It was all chance”, was also among the items.

Results
As an initial calibration check, we looked at whether responses to the various measures showed sufficient variability. For the gambling-related beliefs measure, the observed mean of 59.7 was slightly higher than those observed among in-treatment gamblers and members of the general community in the DBC Inventory’s original validation study, but the standard deviation of 15.63 was in close agreement (Wood & Clapham, 2005; Gamblers: $M = 48.4, SD = 15.84$; Community: $M = 44.9, SD = 14.08$). Responses to the traditional rating scale (Measure A in Figure 2) of perceived control also showed a reasonable degree of variability: 30 participants stated that they had no control, but a similar number (29) perceived a level of control that was moderate or higher (i.e., ratings of 3-6).

The distribution of responses to the newly-developed perceived control measure is summarised in Table 1. Most statements, including the correct “It was all chance” statement, were awarded non-zero ratings by approximately 60% of participants. Only four participants provided ratings of zero on all of the primary- and secondary-control-related statements while awarding maximal ratings to the ‘Chance’ statement.

**Primary and Secondary Control: Factor Analysis**
To test the validity of the theoretical distinction between primary and secondary control built into the newly-
Table 3. Initial communalities and factor loadings and communalities produced by a PAF analysis with oblimin rotation for 11 retained statements of the newly-developed measure (N = 97)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement referring to:</th>
<th>Initial communality</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Communalities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>F3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lucky play pattern</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucky person</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge of luck</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player profiles</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal-keeper</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucky moments</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>-.82</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>-.62</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>-.62</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer games</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>-.48</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: Factor loadings < .4 are suppressed

Factor analysis. Upon ascertaining the factorability of ratings on the retained 11 statements (KMO = .88; Bartlett's test: $\chi^2 (55) = 428.82, p < .001$; initial communalities shown in Table 3), we conducted Principal Axis Factoring based on the criterion that a factor should be extracted if it has an eigen value of .7 or above – a value appropriate for small sample sizes (Jolliffe, 1972, 1976). The procedure resulted in the extraction of three factors with initial eigen values of 5.03, 1.26 and 0.99 – all lying above the inflection point of the scree plot. After extraction the factors accounted, respectively, for 42, 7 and 4 percent of total variance in ratings. Table 3 shows the factor loadings of the statements following a direct oblimin rotation. The loadings were relatively strong, with the lowest loading (for ‘Computer games’ on Factor 2) having a magnitude of .48.

Most crucially, the pattern of loadings corresponded to the clustering observed at the data screening stage. Factor 1 corresponded to ‘perceived secondary control’ in subsuming the four luck-related statements and the more stimulus-specific statements regarding player profile choices and goalkeeper movements. Factor 2 subsumed statements relating to direct – that is, primary – control: ‘Skill’, ‘Strategy’, ‘Practice’ and ‘Computer games’. Factor 3 contained the single ‘Chance’ item.

Reinforcement Frequency and Perceived Control

In further assessing the advantages of the newly-developed measure over the traditional measure, we set out to determine whether, in line with Jenkins and Ward’s (1965) findings, the newly-developed measure would, by virtue of not referring explicitly to control, attract responses less reflective of the experienced win frequency. However, since participants were, from the outset, informed that the experimental task was designed to operate on the same principles as a poker machine, we expected that responses to
both measures would additionally depend on participants’ individual beliefs regarding the nature of poker machine gambling. Thus, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses to assess the degree to which indices of the three facets underlying the new measure and, by contrast, responses to the traditional measure, could be attributed to variability in the number of experienced wins over and above the effects of variability in DBC scores. The indices of the three facets of illusorily perceived control were factor scores calculated using the regression method. The Cronbach’s-alpha levels associated with the perceived primary control and perceived secondary control factor scores are detailed in Table 3.

For each of the four regression analyses, the DBC score was entered into the regression at Step 1, followed, at Step 2, by the index of win frequency – the percentage of compulsory rounds that resulted in wins. The results are summarised in Figure 3.

As the adjusted R² values associated with Step 1 of each analysis indicate, existing gambling-related beliefs accounted for a substantial amount of variance in all the indices of perceived control. However, the traditional measure was the only measure of perceived control to also be influenced by the experienced win frequency (adj R² at Step 1 = .23; adj R² at Step 2 = .34).

Consistently with Jenkins and Ward’s observations, then, these results imply that the factor scores derived from the newly-developed measure constitute a purer measure of perceived control. Moreover, the findings suggest that reinforcement frequency ceases to be a determinant of the degree of illusorily perceived control once the effects of existing task-related beliefs are controlled for and the degree of perceived control is measured as a multi-faceted construct associated with causal explanations for success.

**Discussion**

Motivated by a concern for the finer methodological points of investigating the determinants of the illusion of control, we used a novel experimental task, instructional set and pre-experimental belief assessment procedure to demonstrate two important advantages of a newly-developed measure of illusorily perceived control. Firstly, ratings of agreement with the various causal explanation statements comprising the measure were found to reflect a distinction between primary and secondary control – a distinction not recognised by the traditionally employed single-item measure. Secondly, responses to the newly-developed measure were, in contrast to responses to the traditional measure, found to be completely independent of the experienced reinforcement frequency.

The present findings were additionally informative with respect to the definition of the illusion of control construct and the body of research on the person-based and situational determinants of the illusion.

**Definition of the illusion of control** Our factor analysis produced quantitative evidence for what has up to this point been the largely qualitative observation that illusions of control involve perceptions of secondary as well as primary control. The analysis also uncovered a third facet of the illusion: ‘acknowledgement of the role of chance’.

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1 The standardised residuals in each analysis displayed only a slight tendency to increase in line with the values of the dependent variable.
Subsequent regression analyses produced evidence of a differentiation, in terms of dependence on win frequency, between the perceived degree of “control” and the three facets of causal explanation for experienced successes.

This collection of findings accords with Skinner, Chapman and Baltes’ (1988) proposition that, in perceiving control, agents draw upon beliefs about relations between themselves and ends (the available reinforcement), means (potential causes) and ends, and themselves and means, with each of these three types of relational beliefs being held independently of the others. Within this framework, ratings of control on the traditional measure could, in light of their positive relationship with win frequency, be considered reflective of agent-ends-type beliefs. Meanwhile, responses to the newly-developed causal explanations measure constituted expressions of means-ends-type beliefs about the game. In fact, the three-faceted structure uncovered by our correlational analysis of responses on this measure corresponded to the structure obtained by Skinner, Chapman and Baltes (1988) in an analysis of children’s agreement ratings for means-end-type statements about school performance. In that study, ratings pertaining to personal effort and attributes were found to form one cluster (analogous to our “primary control” facet) while ratings pertaining to powerful others and luck formed a second cluster (analogous to our “secondary control” facet). A third cluster was defined by ratings on statements about unknown causes, of which ‘chance’ is an instance, at least from an intuitive point of view (Batanero, Henry & Parzysz, 2005), and most prominently among children (Biehl & Halpern-Felsher, 2001; Green, 1984).

While this correspondence between findings importantly demonstrates that illusions of control have the same etiology as perceived control in general, Skinner, Chapman and Baltes’ framework does not account for the source of segmentation in control beliefs. The adaptive advantages of possessing three independent belief types as opposed to an integrated representation of agent-means-ends relations remain unspecified. Lewandowsky and Kirsner (2000) proposed that contradictions in expressed beliefs stem from variations in the context of knowledge acquisition and utilisation. Whether the contexts governing the acquisition of information about primary strategies, as opposed to ‘higher forces’, ‘chance’ and ‘control’, differ systematically is an open question.

Determinants of the illusion of control: Prior beliefs The results of our regression analyses highlighted the prominence of pre-experimentally assessed gambling-related beliefs in shaping perceptions of control. One could argue that it is hardly surprising that beliefs about poker machine gambling were found to influence perceptions of a task introduced to participants as a “poker-machine-type game”. However, in real gambling environments, all people – regardless of prior gambling experience – approach poker machines with precisely the knowledge that they are about to play something called a ‘poker machine’ and a set of beliefs about the nature of poker machine gambling.

At the same time, a legitimate question to pose is whether self-reported gambling-related beliefs precede and determine illusions of control over game-specific stimuli, or whether these beliefs simply covary with game-specific perceptions of control. The covariation could be underpinned by the optimal organisation of control beliefs suggested by Skinner, Chapman and Baltes (1988) or the variations in acquisition and usage postulated by Lewandowsky and Kirsner (2000). In the present study, the DBC Inventory was selected as a measure of gambling-related beliefs due to its brevity, focus on poker-machine-gambling, and relevance to a population without extensive gambling experience (namely, the university students in our sample). A disadvantage of the measure is that its items related principally to a priori beliefs about illusory control and superstition. Thus, future research should concern itself with tracking the determining effects of a broader set of gambling-related beliefs – most notably, those relating to what Walker (1992) considered the second broad dimension of erroneous gambling-related cognitions: optimism or hopefulness about winning independently of control attempts. In general, the structure of gambling-related beliefs among members of the general community and frequent gamblers requires examination.

Reinforcement frequency Crucially, reinforcement frequency, a situational feature that has long been considered a fundamental determinant of the degree of illusorily perceived control, was found to exert no influence on perceptions of control, as gauged by the newly-developed, more subtly worded measure. While this result requires replication, perhaps with a different range of reinforcement frequencies, ensuing studies could also explore the illusion-of-control-elicitation effects of other, more gambling-specific outcome sequence features, such as the frequency of big wins (Aasved, 2002), the general ordering of wins and losses (e.g., whether wins are concentrated at the beginning or end of the sequence; Burger, 1986; Coventry & Norman, 1998; Langer & Roth, 1975), and the degree of ‘need for control’ in the face of losses exceeding a certain threshold (Walker, 1992).

Whatever set of potential determinants is selected for further investigation, future research could fruitfully make use of the experimental task, procedure and multi-faceted outcome measure described and piloted in the present study.

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