

Dropouts and Continuers in Gamblers Anonymous: Life-Context and Other Factors

R.I.F. Brown

University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

The design, aims and rationale are outlined of a follow-up study of dropouts from Gamblers Anonymous. A cohort of those attending for the first time and dropping out after more than one meeting was contacted and the cooperators given a structured interview examining factors which may have contributed to decisions to dropout. A comparison group of continuers from the same meeting who had been totally abstinent for at least a year were given the same structured interviews. This first of four parts examines life context factors making it more difficult to maintain attendance, commitment to the treatment program, perceived pre-meeting expectations and reasons for coming, impacts of the first meeting, effects of pressures to maintain attendance and the influence of spouses.

Although Gamblers Anonymous (GA) has been well established for more than twenty years and compulsive or pathological gambling is now listed as a disease, there is little in the literature of the social or biological sciences about the program of treatment offered by it, the only help as yet at all extensively available to alleviate this condition. There is an excellent ethnomethodological study of Alcoholics Anonymous (Robinson, 1979) but there are only two participant observation studies of GA (Scodel, 1964; Cromer, 1978). There are numerous attempts to estimate the effectiveness of

Send reprint requests to: R.I.F. Brown, Department of Psychology, Adam Smith Building, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8RT, United Kingdom.

Address correspondence to author at: Dept. of Psychology, Adam Smith Building, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8RT United Kingdom.

Hector Currie and David leSage were volunteer interviewers. A. J. Weir and J. G. Gillies read the manuscript and contributed corrections and suggestions. Without the vigorous cooperation of many members of the Glasgow Wednesday Group of Gamblers' Anonymous and especially without the meticulous recordkeeping of Pat and the moral and political support of Walter this study would not have been possible.

Journal of Gambling Behavior, Vol. 2(2), Fall/Winter

Alcoholics Anonymous, summarized in Leach (1973), but no published writings examining the effectiveness of GA. Like all treatment agencies, and especially those working with the addictions, GA has a considerable drop out rate but no attempts to measure this rate or to investigate the factors which might affect it have ever been published.

Attendees at a single group of GA in a large Scottish city had a variety of suggested reasons as to why newcomers left, about which there was little agreement among themselves, and there was a willingness to contact all those who had discontinued attendance over the previous two years and ascertain whether they would be willing to cooperate in an interview with an independent investigator from the university of Glasgow with the aim of helping GA improve the way in which it helped people with gambling problems.

Since attendees at only one weekly meeting were not likely to have learned enough about GA in their short time with it to be useful critics and informants on its program and presentation, the present study concentrated on attendees for more than one meeting who had subsequently dropped out. To distinguish those factors which might have contributed specifically to the departure of the dropouts from those which might have caused common dissatisfaction to all attendees, a comparison group of pinholders (i.e. those who had been totally abstinent from gambling for at least one year while attending GA) here called continuers, was also studied.

Although the focus of the study was the effects of various aspects of the treatment program offered and their possible contributions to dropout, several controls were deemed necessary as decisions to dropout or continue might have additionally been affected by:

- (a) various external practical considerations making it difficult for newcomers, both dropouts and continuers, to continue to attend meetings, independently of whether they wanted to or not,
- (b) a possible relative lack of commitment by dropouts to carrying out the advice given through the program of treatment to the same extent as the continuers may have done and a consequent failure to give the GA system of treatment a comparable trial,
- (c) possible different original reasons for coming, e.g., if the newcomer came because of internal subjective feelings such as despair and self disgust, this may have different effects than if the member came because of external troubles,
- (d) the extent to which pre-meeting expectations of GA, whether pleasant or unpleasant, were realized,
- (e) possible different impacts of the first meeting attended on dropouts and continuers which could have affected their subsequent progress,

- (f) possible differences in the continuing existence of pressures which might have maintained attendance at meetings, e.g., unheard court cases at which it might be pleaded that the defendant was now attending GA, and
- (g) the influence of wives who might or might not support the husband in his recovery program.

After these factors had been controlled for, the principal aim remained to investigate the effects of any factors in the conduct of meetings, the program of treatment that GA offered or the ways in which GA presented itself to or related to new members which might affect rates of drop out. These are considered in parts 2 and 3 of this study (Brown, in press a, in press b). As a byproduct the study gave rise to a picture of a section of GA attenders in general, dropouts and continuers alike. An integration of all findings from all parts of the study is presented in part 4 (Brown, in press c).

METHOD

After extensive consultation with members of GA regarding their theories and hypotheses about which aspects of the GA program or its presentation led to the retention or defection of new attenders, a structured interview schedule was developed. This is principally reported on in the second and third parts of this paper (Brown, in press a, in press b). Further controls and consistency checks were designed without consultation with GA and they are reported on here together with the order in which the various topics in the schedule were presented.

All first attenders at a meeting of GA in a major urban center in Scotland during a period of twenty eight months were the subject of initial scrutiny. Of these, 97 gamblers had first attended during that period and had at the time of enquiry been absent for more than six weekly meetings. Of these 47 (48.5%) had attended for only one night and the remaining 50 ex-members or drop outs were contacted by GA through the post. They were asked for their cooperation in an interview with an independent assessor from the university of Glasgow about their experience of GA, and assured that any information they gave would remain confidential even from GA and unattributable to any individual. There were no replies from 24 and, of the remaining 26, 13 agreed to cooperate and 13 declined. A visitor from GA enquired after each of the 24 "no replies," contacting spouses and neighbors where the gambler was not himself available, but no further cooperating dropouts were made available in this way. The sample interviewed thus consisted of all comers during the period of study who fulfilled all three of the following conditions: attended more than once (only 51% of all comers) dropped out and could be traced after about fifteen months (27% of all comers fulfilled the first two conditions) and were willing to cooperate (13% of all comers fulfilled all three conditions).

The 2-3 hour interviews were conducted according to prepared schedules by two independent interviewers, both recent graduates in psychology, who had previously

attended two or three meetings of GA to gain some understanding of what they were asking questions about. Each interviewer saw an equal number of subjects from both groups. A time and a place for each of the 12 interviews with dropouts was arranged in advance through GA and at each interview two GA members first met the dropout, introduced him to the interviewer and then retired. The same two psychologists, using the same structured interview schedule but without the last section of it, interviewed 12 continuers, each holding at least a one year pin, indicating total abstinence for that period.

Because of the small number of pinholding continuers available, no attempt was made to match for age or social class but there were no significant differences in either respect. All members of both groups were male; all but one were married; the average age of the whole sample was 39.6 years; members of both groups were predominantly from social classes three and four with no members of social classes one or five in either group.

Each interview was conducted strictly according to a prepared schedule and exactly the same wording was used with each subject. The interviewer was defined as "a social scientist doing research on mutual therapy groups for the university and for GA in cooperation." After a statement of the aims of the study, it was explained to the subject that the independent interviewers did not know his name and so nothing which he personally said could be reported back to the GA group as his, although the generalized results of the study as a whole would be. The interview schedule itself contained some two hundred questions. About forty of them were open-ended and invited replies ranging from a few sentences to lengthy personal histories. These were paraphrased on the spot by the interviewer and a few verbatim phrases were noted. All ratings and classification categories used in the ensuing content analyses of open questions and freestyle descriptions were discussed together and then carried out independently by the author and the two interviewers. Another one hundred and sixty questions were closed, allowing only of "Yes, No" or some other given alternative replies.

To avoid any tendency for dropouts to make facile attributions of the major reasons for their discontinuance to external practical considerations such as illness in the family or changes in working hours, the section of the questions which controlled for the effects of changes in life circumstances was placed at the beginning of the interview. The interviewer elicited from the interviewee his own free-style account of his total experience of GA before any specific topics that the investigators might think were important were probed. In this way it was hoped to avoid any distortion in the interviewee's perception of what was or was not important for them in their personal experience that might arise from the interviewer's perceived concentration on certain topics. The interview schedule was accordingly structured in four parts:

Part One enquired about changing circumstances in the gamblers' lives which might account for dropping out and prevented them from continuing to attend. It included questions about working hours, illnesses of self and spouse, etc.. This section comprised twenty closed questions and ended with an open ended question about what they now saw in retrospect as their reasons for coming to their first meeting. Results from this section are all reported in the first part of this paper.

Part Two elicited a freestyle account in the gambler's own words of their ex-

JOURNAL OF GAMBLING BEHAVIOR

perience of gambling and of GA. This was subjected to a form of content analysis the results of which are reported in the second part of this paper (Brown, in press a).

Part Three asked many detailed questions, mostly closed, about 13 major topics and aspects of the program and meetings of GA and their experiences of them and attitudes to them:

- (1) Attender's Preconceptions of GA and Their Effect
- (2) The Effects of Attender's First Meeting
- (3) The Influences of Wives
- (4) Attender's Execution of the GA Program

all of which are reported in the first part of this paper and:

- (5) Attender's Experiences of Subsequent Meetings in General
- (6) The Handling of Falls or Relapses by the Meeting
- (7) The GA Handbook
- (8) Therapies
- (9) Administration of Meetings
- (10) Personalities and Cliques
- (11) Social Relations Outside Meetings
- (12) Difficulties in Identification with the Group
- (13) Positive and Negative Images of GA

Part Four was administered to the dropouts only. They were asked about their present level of gambling and for a summary in their own words of why they left. Results are reported in both first and second parts of this paper.

All of the 24 "no replies" were visited by a member of GA in an attempt to trace them, but it was not considered commensurate with the principles of GA to visit either the dropouts themselves or their families once a clear refusal of co-operation had been made.

RESULTS

The Unavailable and the Non Co-operators

No information was sought about the refusers, but of the 24 "no replies" who were visited by a member of GA it was established that seven had left their previous addresses suddenly and without trace ("done a moonlight flitting" was a common description); three were in prison; five were reported by the interviewer who saw them or their wives to be "in deep trouble;" and there was no information about the remaining nine.

Demographic Variables

their average age or in family size but the continuer's children were significantly older (16.5 yrs average) than those of the drop outs (4.3 yrs average) ($t(45) = 2.04, p < .05$).

Changes in Background Circumstances and in Debts and Other Pressures Sustaining Attendance

During their period of attendance at GA there were no significant differences between continuers and dropouts in changes in working hours, changes in domestic responsibilities or in changes in health. Significantly more continuers than dropouts had gone to live elsewhere (Fisher's Exact Probability Test, $p < .05$). There was no significant difference between the two groups in the numbers reporting pressures from their wives, relatives or other agencies to attend; in awareness of failing mental or physical health due to gambling; in threats of court actions over debt or crime; or in threats or actions of marital separation (Fisher's Exact Probability Tests).

The average weekly income of the two groups differed by only 10p per week. There was no significant difference in the numbers of continuers and dropouts in debt when they first attended (Fisher's Exact Probability Test) but, of those who were in debt, the average continuer owed 51 weeks of his income and the average dropout owed only 16 weeks of his income, a difference which approached significance (Mann-Whitney U Test, $U = 22.5, p < .10$, two-tailed) and significantly more continuers than dropouts were in debt to money lenders but not to relatives, friends or businesses (Fisher's Exact Probability Test, $p < .05$).

Remembered Reasons for First Attending

The responses to the open-ended question "Why did you come?" were assigned by three raters to one of three categories labelled: (A) 'Reasons mentioning subjective feelings and attitudes to self' (e.g., despair, feelings of inadequacy, need for help, self disgust, etc.); (B) 'Reasons mentioning specific external troubles' (e.g., financial domestic, etc.); (C) 'Reasons mentioning awareness of harm being done to others'. There were no significant differences between the groups in the numbers of people making any of these three classes of statement (Chi-square Test).

Pre-Meeting Expectations

The comparison groups did not differ significantly in the numbers reporting any expectation or in the numbers reporting that their expectations were realized (Fisher's Exact Probability Tests).

The Effects of the First Meeting

Using the same system as described previously the reported feelings after the first meeting were classified into Strongly Positive; Slightly Positive; Slightly Negative; Strongly Negative. The dropouts reported significantly more Strongly Positive reactions as opposed to all the other classes of reaction than the continuers did (Fisher's Exact Probability Test, $p < .05$).

Dropouts reactions to their first meeting are more often of an unreal elation, with a quality of dreams of instant passive cure, e.g., "got my eyes opened," "walked on air," "fantastic," "thought I was cured," "was looking ahead to having money again and doing things" whereas continuers, although still positive or at least ambivalent, are more often realistic and sober, e.g., "felt a bit better than when I first came through the door," "there was hope for me," "not particularly impressed but felt pretty good." Other continuers mention effort or personal development required, e.g., "a great deal to be learned," "saw years of struggle and character change ahead" and, perhaps the archetypal continuer's statement, "not too happy; so much relief but feeling some effort needed; next meeting would bring the crunch."

There was nothing in particular about the first meeting which either continuers or dropouts report as putting them off. There was no significant difference between the groups in the numbers who felt that the members of GA were in any more or less trouble through gambling than the respondents were; in reporting feeling that people in GA had the same problems as them; in being encouraged that some people in as much trouble as them had managed to stop gambling; in finding it difficult to speak about themselves at the first meeting; in feeling that other people were quite friendly; or in feeling that they were neglected (Fisher's Exact Probability Tests).

Carrying Out the Advice of the Group

Specific questions compared the two contrasting groups on the extent to which those who had been advised by GA had carried out that advice. No significant differences were found between the groups in the extent to which they disclosed all of their debts to their spouses; accepted that they were compulsive gamblers; made a list of their total debts; contacted all their creditors; told all their creditors they were compulsive gamblers; read the handbook once; read the handbook daily; handed their paychecks over to their spouses; arranged for someone else to collect their paychecks or for them to be paid into a joint account; kept on their person the phone number of a GA member; phoned a GA member when in difficulties; or felt ashamed to tell anyone they were attending GA.

The Influence of Wives

All of the respondents were married except one of the dropouts. Each one was asked about whether his wife ever or regularly attended Gam-anon, the linked organization for relatives, and, if so, whether she liked the other attenders and whether she felt that they helped her. Each one was asked whether his wife liked GA members; still went to Gam-anon; and would like the GA attender to go back to GA. There were no significant differences between the two groups (Fisher's Exact Probability Test) on any of these issues except that possibly fewer wives of dropouts ever attended Gam-anon ($p < .10$) and no dropout's wife was still going to Gam-anon ($p < .005$) at the time of the study.

Dropout's Gambling

Most dropouts (10 out of 12) regarded themselves as having stopped gambling for periods averaging 12 weeks while attending GA, and only half had resumed gambling since leaving. Of these, 3 out of 12 appeared to be gambling substantially and 5 out of 12 regarded their present level of gambling as satisfactory.

Final Direct Question On Why Dropouts Left and Expectations of Return

Six dropouts (50%) advanced changes in circumstances as reasons for leaving GA, e.g., wife took job, job prevented him from attending, etc.. One single subject provided such a flood of these (injury to his back, long distance travel, lack of funds, wife having a baby, embarrassment about wearing a belt for his hernia and helping wife at home) that, although it is possible that all of these make a powerful combination, they sound more in the nature of (unnecessary) excuses. Two dropouts were concerned mainly about personality clashes and cliques. No other reason was mentioned by more than one individual.

Ten of the twelve dropouts thought they were likely to return to Gamblers Anonymous some day.

DISCUSSION

Changes in Background Circumstances as Factors in Dropout

In spite of the evident readiness of dropouts to offer adverse changes in

JOURNAL OF GAMBLING BEHAVIOR

life situation as reasons for their discontinuance, they suffer no more such potentially adverse changes.

Remembered Reasons for First Attending and Pressures Sustaining Attendances at Meetings

The continuers may have been under more pressure to maintain their attendance because they had continuing debts to pay off. They owed nearly three times the number of weeks of income that the dropouts did and the pattern of debt was different (more to moneylenders). It is however possible that the dropouts with the heavier debt pressures were those who did not cooperate in the study, giving a false picture of the freedom from debts of that group relative to the continuers.

The significantly older families of continuers may be a continuing pressure on them to attend, as teenage children may know more about what is going on and exert greater pressure on parents than younger children.

Giving the Treatment a Full Trial

Although both comparison groups appeared to give the treatment program a fair trial, this appearance is based upon retrospective reporting and it is impossible to account for the effects of social pressures on both groups to say that they had carried out all the advice but there is no evidence from this study that lack of commitment by dropouts to carrying out the program of treatment is an important factor in dropout, indeed it could be argued that the pressures to report commitment may have been greater on continuers.

Possible Influences of Wives

Although there was some suggestion that continuers may have received a little more support from their wives, this trend is not strong enough to demonstrate the influence of wives as an important factor in dropout. A large proportion of wives of both groups in this sample attend Gam-anon themselves and are reported as helped by it and almost all are reported as seeing their gambling spouses as helped by GA.

Pre-Meeting Expectations and the Impact of the First Meeting

The only agreement in the retrospective reports of any two dropouts that any positive expectation of the first meeting was not met was that GA would not cure them and make social gamblers of them again, although the dif-

ferences between the numbers of continuers and dropouts saying this did not reach statistical significance. Most of the major 'disappointments' were really pleasant surprises, e.g., that GA was not a mob of down and outs. Since there are insurmountable ethical difficulties in questioning first attenders as they come in the door, the inevitably retrospective reports of expectations are open to the many distortions that subjective reinterpretation in the light of experience can produce. Although 75% reported favorable reactions to the first meeting, this finding is based upon a sample totally unrepresentative of those who did not come back for a second meeting and inevitably of those who refused to cooperate.

The significant difference in the impact of the first meeting as seen in retrospect by the comparison groups could be important factors in later dropout. The self reports of dropouts suggests that there could be a glib and hasty acceptance of an illness analogy in which all self-blame is dispersed and, with it, all implications of self effort required—the instant passive cure is seen as having arrived. If this is so, then it is not the unmet pre-meeting expectations which is a factor in drop out, but rather the failure of the expectations raised by GA itself at the newcomer's first meeting which goes uncorrected.

First Attendance at Gamblers Anonymous

Although nothing is known of the experiences of those who dropped out after only one night or can be known of those who dropped out later but refused to cooperate with this kind of study, among this accessible section of the sample (dropouts at least 13% of all comers and continuers about 7% of all comers) (Brown, 1985) an overall picture emerges of a clientele which is under considerable pressure, especially domestic, to attend and does not have high expectations of help. This clientele appears to be received by an organization which succeeds in convincing them that it addresses itself specifically to their problems and gives them an initial hope of overcoming them. The advice of the organization is then extensively carried out.

Gambling Dropouts Untraceable or Refusing to Cooperate

No systematic attempt could be made in this study to determine the gambling status of all the dropouts. Efforts to trace the 24 Non-repliers make it apparent that gambling very probably continues to do great damage in their lives. Most of the cooperators (75%) had not resumed gambling or were only gambling lightly. Nothing is known of the 13 Non-cooperators, and it is possible that they were less easily traced and willing to cooperate just because they also had resumed gambling to various degrees, possibly more heavily than the cooperators.

There is an obvious need to study the effects of the first meeting on the 'one nighters' (and this is in preparation) but the principal aim of the present study remains, now that life-context and other possible contributing factors have been thus reviewed, to investigate the effects of any factors in the conduct of meetings in general after the first one attended, the program of treatment that GA offered or the ways in which GA presented itself to new members or related to them beyond just the first meeting which might affect rates of dropout and it is to these topics that subsequent parts of this paper will address itself.

REFERENCES

- Brown, R. I. F. (1985). The Effectiveness of Gamblers Anonymous. In Eadington, W. R. (Ed.) *The Gambling Studies: Proceedings of the Sixth National Conference on Gambling and Risk Taking, Vol. 5, The Phenomenon of Pathological Gambling*. Reno: Bureau of Business and Economic Administration, University of Nevada.
- Brown, R. I. F. (in press—a) Dropouts and continuers in Gamblers Anonymous: 2. Analysis of free-style accounts of experiences of Gamblers Anonymous. *J. Gambling Behavior*.
- Brown, R. I. F. (in press—b) Dropouts and continuers in Gamblers Anonymous: 3. Some possible specific reasons for dropout. *J. Gambling Behavior*.
- Brown, R. I. F. (in press—c) Dropouts and continuers in Gamblers Anonymous: 4. Evaluation and summary. *J. Gambling Behavior*.
- Cromer, G. (1978). Gamblers Anonymous in Israel: A participant observation study. *International Journal of the Addictions, 13*, 1069-1077.
- Leach, B. (1973). Does Alcoholics Anonymous really work? In Bourne, P. & Fox, R. (Eds.). *Alcoholism: Progress in research and treatment*. New York: Academic Press.
- Robinson, D. (1979). *Talking out of alcoholism: The self-help process of Alcoholics Anonymous*. London: Croom Helm.
- Scodel, A. (1964). Inspirational group therapy: A study of Gamblers Anonymous. *American Journal of Psychotherapy, 18*, 115-125.