

Internet Gamblers and their significant others: interplays of commentary in understanding real lives

Dr Kahryn Hughes
Professor Gill Valentine
Dr Charlotte Kenten
School of Sociology and Social Policy &
Leeds Social Sciences Institute
University of Leeds



Study:

New Forms of Participation: problem Internet gambling and the role of the family, funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Responsibility in Gambling Trust (RiGT).

Aim:

- To explore the role of the family around Internet gambling and elicit new information on what is currently described as 'self-correcting' strategies in problem Internet gambling.



Internet Gambling



‘... transcends geographical and temporal boundaries in a giant global casino: an environment in which individuals are free to bet, unhindered by any of the restrictions associated with terrestrial games of chance’ (Reith, 1999:124).



Internet gambling:

Involves a whole set of *virtual* spaces, relationships, money, and forms of engagement and play



Problem Internet Gambling?

Often described as:

- as a set of 'behaviours' forming 'pathological gambling' (addiction) or 'problem gambling' (psychological models of harm);
- identified through policy, vulnerability of individuals/populations;
- fundamentally individualised



Problem in context?

- For every individual with a gambling problem it is estimated that somewhere between a further five to 17 other individuals are adversely affected by it (Lesieur 1984, Kalischuk et al 2006).
- To date little evidence about how problem gambling is defined in relationships with 'significant others'; particularly those who are not in a marital relationship but whose lives may also be closely interwoven financially or emotionally with a problem gambler. e.g., partners who may be living either together or apart, children, siblings, adult parents, carers (e.g. of disabled people), or tenants/housemates.
- Research has not addressed family coping in detail.



Methods 1

- 1) Online scoping survey to collect information about Internet gambling participation and basic demographic information
 - Cost effective
 - Accessible to target population – hard to reach
 - Recruitment tool for interviews



Methods 2

- 2) Interviews:
 - a) An initial life-history interview with self-identified problem Internet gambler; follow-up interview at three months
 - b) A semi-structured interview was conducted with a significant other e.g. partner, parent, child, carer.



Interplays of commentary?



- Using relational approach, asking people to generate commentaries (retrospective, prospective; narrative accounts) of what the problem has been, what it has become, able to explore dynamic negotiation processes within and across particular relationships



Internet Gambling: virtual, individualised world?



Our study:

- Gambler-Participants suggest this relates mainly to *opportunity*, but the *circumstances* and *context* of their play is profoundly rooted in material practices and relationally bound spaces
 - Emotional response
 - Money available (e.g, accounts, family finances)
 - Shaping contexts of their play



Disclosure

- Processes of disclosure were *direct* - the gambler deliberately told a significant other about their problem; and *indirect* –someone else informed their significant other(s) or the problem emerged accidentally (e.g. a partner opened a credit card statement).
- How individuals mobilised family dynamics to disclose their problem gambling shed light on the emotional functioning of families.
- Disclosure was a simultaneous process of sharing ‘the problem’ and redefining ‘the problem’



Problem migration

I mean it's an awful lot of money, but, you know, we'll settle...from a practical point of view, you know, I can kind of cope with that. ... It's the high end of emotional things that you go through, what a change you see in your relationship with your partner from one day to the next, you know, because it really, really as I say did feel like I was going from being with a partner and [several] children to go... the whole responsibility and much more debt that I thought we had and [having one more child] ... I was just trying to understand because that was my biggest worry as I say at the start I couldn't understand. I couldn't understand why anybody would do that. Why anybody from a non-gambler's point of view, it's such a selfish thing to do to lock yourself away for hours ... and, you know, spend thousands of pounds that you didn't have, which is taking money away from the family. And, you know, it just seemed so selfish and I was really after an answer to why would anyone do that?

K, Wife, [Poker, Blackjack, Casino]



A problem shared? problem gambling and problem migration



- The problem often migrates from something the person did by themselves and to themselves (debt, addiction) to something they have done to their family
- Profoundly challenges existing explanations of problem gambling drawing either on addiction or psychological models of individualised behaviour
- Begins to reveal how particular practices are produced and in turn shape particular webs of relationships



SO: He used to get a cob on, cos I'd sit there and laugh at you, didn't you? And then he'd storm out, and he'd go down to the arcade.

Partner: Any excuse.

SO: Cos he was stressed and he needed to get away from all the nagging and.

Partner: Yeah see you don't understand cos you're not a compulsive gambler.

SO: It's not that I don't understand but you used to turn round to get away from the nagging, I said yeah but you're giving me reason to nag, by gambling, if you didn't gamble, I wouldn't nag. *[edit]* Like since he's say 90% stopped, *[edit]* And it's only really been since November, hasn't it?

Partner: Well no it's been since January, told you.

SO: Well January, November, well he started going to the meetings in November, didn't you?

Partner: But I wasn't following it, I wasn't doing it. As I told you, the reason I done it was for like sort of to go at first, cos I didn't want to go...

SO: Yeah I know you didn't want to go, *[edit]* to me he was asking for help, like saying I need to stop, I need to stop, you were, but you needed you stop.

Partner: Yeah I needed to stop, but I didn't want to stop.

SO: Yeah but you needed to stop. And the only way you can stop is if people push you.

Partner: Yeah but it's not I've learnt now that I've got to do it for me not for you.

SO: Yeah, but you've also got to still have someone say pushing you behind you, backing you up.

Partner: Yeah, I know that.



Pathways Out: Family Support and 'Self-Correcting Strategies'

- As definitions of 'the problem' were shaped within the family, so too, were strategies for recovery. So, for example, where gamblers/SOs did not consider the problem to be an addiction, (i.e., a health problem), they did not consider formal agencies as sources of support.
- Pathways out of problem gambling may entail participation from extended as well as immediate family, e.g., financial control often taken over by the problem gamblers' significant others. Partners, and one gambler's parents, even returned to work in order to provide financial help. Money thus passed intergenerationally, as well as horizontally.
- Strategies for recovery cannot be seen as 'self-correcting' in any simple way



Recovery and identity

- Spoiled identities require *material* work within these relationships, in addition to what might be termed therapeutic work/talking
- Ideas of identity migration (eg. from gambler to non-gambler) therefore cannot focus solely on the identity work of the individual.



Understanding 'real lives'?

- Contributes to a developing approach to relational contexts as dynamic and processual and facilitates an understanding of the formation of 'problems' and 'solutions' in identity and living practices which addresses relational as well as more individualised dimensions of lives that are lived
- Cannot talk about problem Internet gambling as a static subject, but must understand the processes by which Internet gambling becomes problematic for the gambler and for their significant others over time
- More broadly, demonstrates how experiences and effects of problem Internet gambling are managed within families, masking the extent both of participation and of problem gambling to formal agencies; also require different sorts of help for changing needs over time

