

FEAR OF THE FUTURE: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENCES OF PARTNERS OF PROBLEM GAMBLERS

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**The views expressed in this presentation are those of the authors*

Introduction

- ❑ Gambling – can be viewed as a recreational pastime both in Australia & Internationally.
- ❑ However 2% - 5% of the adult population gamble at a problematic level (Productivity Commission 2010; Volberg, 2007).
- ❑ For each problem gambler, up to 17 others are affected including partners, family, friends and communities (Hodgins et al., 2007)

Previous Research

- This study was informed by a rich body of literature that has considered how gambling affects significant others within the family
- (Dickson-Swift et al, 2005; Grant Kalischuk, 2010; Hodgins & el-Guebaly, 2004; Downs & Woolrych, 2010; Patford, 2008 & 2009; Slade & McCombie, 2003)

Previous Research (cont)

- ❑ In addition to the literature from gambling research the authors have accessed research that focuses on family dissolution.
- ❑ Thus it has been possible to integrate research relating to family dynamics and transitions alongside the specific crisis that is precipitated by the discovery of problem gambling
- ❑ (Amato, 2010; Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Cano et al., 2002; Clements et al., 2004; Fincham et al., 2006; Fincham et al., 2007; Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Parker, 2002)

Negative impacts of gambling upon families

- ❑ Financial and material losses
- ❑ Psychological and social stress
- ❑ Conflict at home and in relationships
- ❑ Coping with distressed children
- ❑ Difficulties fulfilling roles normally taken by gambler in the family
- ❑ Legal repercussions

Narrative analysis - aims

- ❑ Uncover a shared narrative
- ❑ The shared narrative shows how participants made sense of the experience of discovering their partner's gambling
- ❑ Show how the narrative develops against the background of the participants' experiences
- ❑ Uncover how socio - cultural issues, values and beliefs and personal histories all interact to allow the construction of the narratives
- ❑ Identify how the movement of the participants' experiences enabled them to move to a reconstituted sense of self that allowed them to either remain in the relationship or to leave

Methodology

- ❑ Qualitative approach, in-depth interviews
- ❑ 18 partners and ex-partners of problem gamblers across Australia interviewed
- ❑ Convenience sample accessed via:
 - CGER data base of partners previously engaged in gambling research (6)
 - Gam-Anon meetings (3)
 - Advertisements placed on Google and Facebook (7)
 - Personal contacts (2)

Participant characteristics

- ❑ Seventeen female participants and one male
- ❑ Ages ranged from 22 to 69 years of age
- ❑ Nine were divorced or separated from the gambler at time of interview
- ❑ Nine remained in the relationship

Interview structure

- ❑ In-depth interviews used guided by an interview schedule
- ❑ Designed to explore
 - When and how the gambling behaviour had been discovered
 - Changes over time including changes to their emotions and reactions
 - Impacts on health and wellbeing of partner
 - Support received or given to both the partner and the gambler

Analysis

- ❑ Narrative analysis was used to uncover how participants made sense of the discovery of the gambling
- ❑ Narratives enable us all to integrate the flow of human experience and to react accordingly
- ❑ The telling of a story about ourselves is a way of telling 'how we are'
- ❑ Our sense of identity is defined by the stories we tell

Analysis (cont)

- ❑ Through narrative analysis a 'shared story' is uncovered that is identified from the total stories told by participants
- ❑ The focus is not so much on the sequence of events unfolding but on how the experience unfolds against the background of the participants' experience
- ❑ The analysis shows how cultural and social issues, values and beliefs interact in the construction of the narrative

Analysis (cont)

- The movement of each participants' experience enables them to progress to a reconstituted relationship with their partner
- It shows how they developed a new sense of self that allowed them to either continue in the relationship or leave

Results

- Participants' narratives were categorised into three types:
 1. Gaining control, becoming independent and separate
 2. Being together, gaining control and more independent
 3. Being together, being protective, supportive and self nurturing

Results (cont)

Composite stories are presented here using parts from individual narratives. Each composite story begins with the discovery of gambling, followed by fear and disbelief

Following this, different examples are shown to illustrate the various directions the narrative types took as they reflected individual's social and cultural norms and expectations.

Composite story 1

Gaining control, becoming independent and separate

Nine of those interviewed told how they needed to take control of the gambling, of family finances and of their relationship

They ultimately realised that they needed to take control of their own lives, by ending the relationship

Disbelief/fear/powerlessness

It's that fear of the future. I just call it the black hole. Fear, incredible fear, anger. I would be shaking as I went through his stuff with anger and anxiety and there was the fear of not something, there was the fear of finding something and probably at that stage there – I was a mess. Really I just remember being disassociated from my children, from my life, it was just tied up in knots and so stressed about it (Gail).

Disbelief/fear/powerlessness (cont)

I was gutted, devastated because I was working supposedly for us to get ahead in life and just the lies and the betrayal and the broken promises (Barbara)

It's the hardest thing I'd have to say I've ever dealt with in my life because it just caused me so much anxiety (Joanne)

Gaining control

I had to take on the whole burden of the finances so I was in control of his account and in control of his card (Joanna).

I would go through his stuff to see if he was still gambling. Anyway I became the worse version of myself. I became someone who I hated. If I went through his stuff and actually found something then I was in the dilemma of, “Do I say something?” because then I admit that I’ve been through his stuff (Gail).

Becoming independent and separate

All that time I was actually needing to challenge myself too ... I wasn't going to put myself in jeopardy ... I thought of myself that I was able to do that because I didn't actually allow myself to be financially, I guess, destroyed by the gambler (Maureen)

I've got to get my life back on track now too, financially and emotionally (Connie)

Becoming independent and separate (cont)

“There’s a bank statement.” And there’s part of me going, “The only person who touches the bank now is me. I know how much money is there or not there but no one else touches it. If I haven’t spent it it’s there. I don’t have to be so scared of it.” But that fear of these envelopes was enormous. I couldn’t open them and I was just – but not opening them I felt bad. I was just so terrified of these envelopes (Gail)

Associated values and beliefs

I had no expectation that we weren't going to be together for the rest of our time (Jill)

Even if you spoke to the doctor, he would say basically, "You'll learn to get over these things." That I'm married forever and blah blah (Leonnice)

He's a grown man, like who am I to tell him what he should do with his money (Joanne)

Composite story 2

Being together, gaining control and becoming independent

Four of the participants provided narratives that highlighted how they found a sense of independence within the relationship and were able to redefine their sense of self within that relationship

Disbelief/sense of powerlessness

I think I turned a blind eye to it because I was powerless, I didn't like it at all, the embarrassment increased ... I just didn't want to answer the phone ... Well, not feeling safe (Yasmin)

Well, I felt a little bit numb in that I hadn't detected that earlier (Tess)

It was more upsetting more than anything ... Yes, it was definitely a struggle (Jennifer)

Gaining control

I've even got so bad as to say to him at times "I'm sorry, I'm sitting up to eat tea, I haven't ... your meal isn't happening until you've made a phone call." (Yasmin)

I started going to the petrol station where we pay for petrol. I started going with him to the supermarket and paying for the supermarket groceries (Tess)

Becoming independent whilst still together

I just weighed up the pros and cons. He's not such a bad person. He is a fantastic father, an absolutely amazing father (Leanne)

I guess it was just perseverance and the hope that eventually it was going to stop once I took control over his money. No doubt that was the best and the worst thing; that was probably one of the few things that helped (Jennifer)

Associated values and beliefs

In saying that, it's not my responsibility to make him do it (Yasmin)

People aren't aware of how devastating it is, how progressive it is, how much it can really tear apart a family (Tess)

Composite story 3

Being together/ being protective and self nurturing

Five narratives explained the way that the participants adopted a self nurturing stance whilst offering protection and support to their partners

They did not experience such a strong need to be in control or independent

Disbelief/sense of powerlessness

I guess a mixture of anger and disappointment
(Christine)

I felt like I'm chained and drowning (Bridget)

It takes a lot for you to get your head around it
(Laurie)

Being protective, supportive and remaining in the relationship

I think he was going through a difficult period in his life ... I guess it's just empowering the partner because at the end of the day a very hard decision may have to be made such as "it's me or it's the addiction." (Christine)

It's like you're growing together (Bridget)

He gambled and I've stuck by him, it's part of our relationship (Christine)

Being self nurturing

I had to look after myself. You just need some time out and you need to rejuvenate and look after yourself and just having time to nurture yourself (Amy).

I wouldn't have been here if I didn't get that counselling on myself (Bridget)

Associated values and beliefs

I think that when you get older and you get married at an older age you are really conscious of what you expect in a marriage and how to communicate. It was a hurdle I wasn't prepared for (Kimberley).

It's happened. You can't change it. So either put it to bed and get on or if you want to carry it with you, you're not going to solve the problem (Laurie)

Discussion/links to previous studies

Confirmation of findings in gambling research regarding implications of gambling for significant others in family including feelings of mistrust, fear, isolation, anger, disbelief, financial and material losses, and a need for taking control within family (Dickson-Swift et al., 2005; Grant Kalischuk, 2010; Lorenz & Shuttleworth, 1983; Patford, 2008, 2009; Valentine & Hughes, 2010).

Discussion (cont.)

- The narratives confirmed earlier work of Patford (2008 & 2009) in their relief at ending the relationship, and that of Downs & Woolrych (2010) and Hodgings & el-Guebaly (2004) who placed finances and debt as high priority issues for these families
- Dickson-Swift et al. (2005) noted that partners took control of themselves in addition to family finances

Discussion (cont.)

- Family research places coping strategies for families in crisis as central, within a framework that emphasises control, tolerance and support (Krisnan & Orford, (2002)
- A focus on renegotiation of family relationships adds to the knowledge of family relationships (Valentine & Hughes 2010)

Discussion (cont.)

- Fincham et al., (2007) places constructs of forgiveness, commitment and sanctification as central to enabling families to remain together
- Kalischuk (2010) uses the concept of a co-created pathway to show how families move back and forth through transition, transformation, transcendence and termination in their journey of discovery

Limitations of study/ suggestions for further research

- ❑ A small convenience sample
- ❑ Predominantly female volunteers
- ❑ Did not include problem gambler narratives
- ❑ Did not include CALD communities
- ❑ Did not consider families impacted by alcohol and other drugs

Strengths of study

- ❑ Rich qualitative data
- ❑ No previous research using narrative analysis in this area
- ❑ No previous research integrating the research on general relationship dissolution
- ❑ Findings will open up new areas of exploration that will link relational and dynamic processes within families experiencing a variety of stressful situation

Implications

- ❑ Confirmation of earlier studies emphasising the intensity of emotional experience for families of problem gamblers
- ❑ Support services need to be responsive to:
 - Individual coping strategies
 - The needs of partners and significant others to renegotiate their sense of self in the light of the discovery of their partner's gambling

Implications (cont.)

- ❑ Need for wider education of problem gambling to encourage early detection and awareness within society of signs and symptoms
- ❑ Increased availability of supports for significant others including children within family
- ❑ Above supports to be responsive to younger partners who need support

Conclusion

The study has combined an understanding of general relationship breakdowns and relationship strengths at times where taken for granted assumptions about the future of relationships is challenged, with knowledge of specific issues facing those experiencing gambling problems within the family

Conclusion (cont.)

This provides service providers with a wider set of guidelines and understanding with which to help those experiencing such problems

It is evident that societal norms, and associated pressures affect the way family members perceive their options for assistance and change or adaptation

Finally

- ❑ As a researcher this study was hard to undertake
- ❑ The stories told were extremely powerful, sad and traumatic yet at the same time we were constantly amazed by the participants' ability to transform themselves and their relationships
- ❑ We would sincerely like to thank those who participated – it was an honour to listen

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