

Significant life events and social connectedness in Australian women's gambling experiences

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ABSTRACT

AIM – The aim is to examine significant life events and social connections that encourage some women to gamble. Specifically, how do these events and connections described as important for women who develop gambling-related problems differ for women who remain recreational gamblers? **DESIGN** – 20 women who were electronic gaming machine (EGMs, poker machines, slots) players were interviewed using a brief interview guide. They also completed the nine question Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) from the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI). 11 women self-identified as recreational gamblers (RG) while 9 had sought and received help for their gambling problems (PG). Using a feminist, qualitative design and an adaptive grounded theory method to analyze their histories, a number of themes emerged indicating a progression to problem gambling for some and the ability to recognise when control over gambling was needed by others. **RESULTS** – Although both groups (RG and PG) reported common gambling motivations differences appeared in the strength of their social support networks and ways of coping with stress, especially stress associated with a significant life event. **CONCLUSIONS** – The human need for social connectedness and personal bonds with others emphasised the usefulness of using social capital theories in gambling research with women.

KEYWORDS – women, gambling, gender analysis, social capital theory

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Introduction

Over the last fifteen years the number and availability of electronic gaming machines (EGMs), also referred to as poker machines, 'pokies' or slots appearing in Australian casinos, clubs and hotels has increased enormously, a trend which has been mirrored in many other countries (Productivity Commission, 2010). More than 6,000 gaming venues provide EGMs throughout Australia with 99,826 elec-

tronic gaming machines in the state on New South Wales [NSW] alone (Australian Gaming Council, 2008/2009). EGMs were introduced into clubs NSW in 1956 and in all other jurisdictions except Western Australia in the mid-1990s (Productivity Commission, 2010). The widespread expansion of the availability of EGMs in Australia and elsewhere has been connected to increasing numbers of women

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gambling (Brown & Coventry, 1997; Hing & Breen, 2001; Kweitel & Allen, 2003; Productivity Commission, 2010). A sharp rise in women's involvement in gambling has been correlated with the increased access to EGMs (Productivity Commission, 1999). National survey data indicate that problem gambling rises more than proportionately with the number of regular gamblers, especially for EGM gambling (Productivity Commission, 1999). In NSW, 93 per cent of women problem gamblers report EGMs as their preferred form of gambling, compared with 72 per cent of men (Productivity Commission, 2010). Why women are drawn to EGMs, their motivations, and why some develop gambling problems using them, is generally not well understood (Delfabbro, 2009).

It is important first to contextualise the 'club' environment in Australia. Clubs are not-for-profit community based organisations, providing services and infrastructure to the local area. They are places of leisure and recreation, providing sporting activities, food and beverage and gaming activities for members. Club members are people from all walks of life and with many different interests. Clubs also contribute to their local communities, through employment and training, direct cash and in-kind social contributions to local organisations and community based activities (Hing, Breen & Weeks, 2002). They are a central component of recreational activity for many people across Australia. It is generally accepted that clubs are safe and respectable places for people to socialise and enjoy their leisure time, thus creating attractive places for women, in particular, to visit alone or in groups. Women appear to be attracted to, and participate fre-

quently in EGM gambling in clubs (Hing & Breen, 2001; Productivity Commission, 2010). The feminisation of gambling (Volberg, 2003) indicates more women are gambling, developing gambling problems and seeking help for these problems. Yet, little is known about the progression from recreational to problem gambling for women.

Apart from a few researchers (see for example, Casey, 2006; Dixey, 1996; Li, 2007) contextual influences such as significant life events and social connections that encourage women to gamble are largely unexplored. A significant life event is seen as any factor that influences a change in a person's life (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Reacting to such events and subsequent lifestyle changes, whether happy or sad, often adds stress to people's lives. Meanwhile, social connections often develop from having shared common interests. The strength of social connections and development of social capital within them affects wellbeing (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2010). Social capital refers to the idea that social networks are a collection of invisible relations with value and power through their common interests (Bourdieu, 1989). These intangible relationships can produce benefits distinguishable from economic capital and human capital. Productive benefits are usually seen as trust, mutual values and participation (Carroll & Stanfield, 2003). These values usually nurture a sense of well-being, belonging and cohesion.

With these concepts in mind, it is useful to ask in what ways do significant life events and social connections influence a common recreation activity like gambling and contribute to the development

of gambling-related problems for some women but not for others? Thus the aim of this paper is to examine significant life events and social connections that encourage some women to gamble in a way that creates problems for them.

Women's gambling behaviour and motivations to gamble

Limited research has been undertaken in recent times concerning gender differences and gambling activities generally. In a review of clinical findings on women pathological gamblers, Wenzel and Dahl (2009) reported that women commenced gambling when older, engaged in a narrow range of gambling forms mostly games of chance, they often gambled to escape from emotional stress, some women progressed from recreational gambling into problem gambling swiftly, but that quick and intensive gambling treatment seemed to be effective in assisting them to recover. However Piquette-Tomei, Norman, Corbin Dwyer and McCaslin (2008) pointed to a concentration of studies concerning women and gambling before 2002 but to a gap in gendered research since then. They advocated new gendered research on gambling, including an in-depth understanding of the progression to gambling problems to inform the treatment needs of women who gamble problematically (Piquette-Tomei et al., 2008).

Some earlier studies examined gambling from a gendered perspective including distinctive motivational issues for women. For instance, in Australia, using a grounded theory approach, Brown and Coventry (1997) in their study of women's gambling behaviour identified gambling motivations as recreation and leisure, a way to escape

from everyday stress, and to cope with psychological co-morbidity. For women on low incomes, gambling losses were disproportionately high. Brown and Coventry's (1997) study also found that gambling in venues can alleviate feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Gambling venues were places where women could socialise safely. The authors concluded that a sense of community belonging was found in some venues. Further, they contended that progression to problematic gambling tends to be quicker for women compared to men, as women on lower incomes experience financial problems sooner than men (Brown & Coventry, 1997). For Trevorrow and Moore (1998) investigating associations between loneliness, social isolation and EGM gambling, women with gambling problems were found to be lonelier and more isolated than women with no gambling problems. They concluded that loneliness and isolation appeared to increase as control over gambling decreased. A later Australian quantitative study with EGM gamblers by Thomas and Moore (2001) found women commenced gambling to cope with feelings of isolation and scored higher on the measure for loneliness than men. Higher scores on measures of anxiety and depression were reported for women than for men. For women gamblers, negative mood (depression and anxiety) appeared to be associated with a susceptibility to excessive gambling. Similarly, the Women's Information Referral Exchange [WIRE] (2008, p. 4) noted associations between problem gambling and social isolation being recycled:

For some women, feeling socially isolated is one of the reasons they take up gambling in the first place; for others,

social isolation is the result of their problem gambling as it erodes their relationships with family and friends. Often, both of these dynamics are in play and serve to reinforce each other.

Thus in Australia early evidence has emerged suggesting women's gambling motivations and behaviours are different to those found for men. Building substantial knowledge about gender-related motivations and gambling progression should benefit women's treatment and prevention efforts. Without this critical data there is a lack of 'sensitivity to the unique clinical issues that may be significant to this [female] population' (Toneatto, Boughton, & Borsi, 2002, p. 3). On these issues, women's gambling warrants separate research attention to men's gambling.

Recent studies in Europe and North America are reporting more dimensions to women's gambling behaviour and motivations. The diversity of issues being raised is adding depth to understanding the lived experience of women who gamble. For instance Casey (2006) examined the importance of gender role expectations for women about gambling in their lives and their experiences of power and powerlessness through participation in the UK National Lottery. Casey (2006) contended that women who gamble participate as individuals but within their familial, domestic and financial limits. Women negotiate traditional responsibilities such as budgeting and caring roles to justify their leisure time gambling activities. How women express their ability to care, to negotiate expected responsibilities according to societal expectations and to experience leisure activities exists within a shared and ex-

pected belief system. Women who do not adhere to this system may be seen as irresponsible. So many traditional gender role expectations persist. Contextually, gender plays a part in most social interactions and can affect women's leisure time decisions including their choice to gamble or not.

In a Canadian ethnographic study designed to provide a contextualized understanding of women's ways of gambling, Li (2007, p. 629) found that on reflection, women interpreted gambling emotionally as their hope, their escape, their therapy, their reward, and their social life. Their hope was for financial betterment, their escape was from life's never ending problems, their therapy was for better functioning in coping with life, their reward was some temporary happiness and their social life was enhanced by gambling in venues with others who also enjoyed gambling. In constructing a picture of contemporary women's gambling culture Li (2007) noted that gambling became a psycho-emotional reaction for women coping with difficult life situations. Their emotional attachment to gambling provided some pleasure in betting on something unknown in the hope of a better future. Li (2007) recommended further qualitative research into women's gambling by women researchers to generate a deeper understanding of the topic, its sensitivity for women gamblers and their vulnerabilities to gambling-related problems. As well, Svensson, Romild, Nordenmark and Mansdotter (2011) in Sweden highlighted the social construction of gender and how this has contributed to an environment where women tend to gamble on domestic games of chance, thus supporting Wenzel and Dahl (2009) findings. In the U.S.A., Schull (2002) ex-

amined female compulsive gambling on poker machines in Las Vegas and identified women's need for escape as high. Participants recounted how they were escaping pressures of work and family caring, with poker machines providing an opportunity that allowed for disconnection.

Despite the fact that most Internet studies indicate a predominance of male gamblers, women in the U.K. are increasingly being drawn to this type of gambling as something they can easily engage in within the safety, anonymity and comfort of their own home (Corney & Davis, 2010). Although most published research on women's gambling is terrestrially based, with the rapid expansion of online gambling opportunities, updating gender issues relating to online gambling is imperative. As Li (2007, p. 634) recommends, "To avoid stereotypic labeling and victim blaming, female gamblers' experiences should be contextualized and understood in given socioeconomic, historical, cultural, family, and personal circumstances in which these experiences are produced". This research, examining significant life events and social connections that encourage some women to gamble in a way that creates problems for them, attempts to address this gap. Further, the value of investigating women's gambling in the context of significant life events and social connections can be extended by discussions based on social capital theories.

The importance of social capital and significant life events

The concept of social capital can be useful to enlighten the discussion surrounding women's gambling experiences. Putnam (2000) used the concept of 'social capital

theory' to look at how bonds and connectedness add value to individuals, communities, and society as a whole. These bonds are manifested in social organisational membership, and in participating in social activities. If high levels of such bonds exist, people are thought to be happier, and have a strong sense of obligation to others within their network; the central idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value (Putnam, 2000). Indeed, it has long been established that experiencing a social connection with others is essential to a person's sense of well-being, both physical and psychological (Bullen & Onyx, 1998; Burke & Hulse, 2002; Putnam, 2000). In contrast, confusion about social connections can produce feelings of alienation and even psychological distress. In Holdsworth and Hartman's (2009) study concerning the social cohesion involved in communities, participants overwhelmingly cited neighbours and neighbourliness as the foundation of a strong community, and for feeling valued and socially connected. Social capital theory can also help to explain people's motivation, including motivations to gamble, particularly gambling to relieve loneliness, to escape from stress associated with coping with a significant life event, and to feel connected to community. In relation to gambling and social factors, McMillen, Marshall, Murphy, Lorenzen and Waugh (2004, p. 153) reported that 'social isolation, disconnectedness and the need to participate in acceptable recreational activities were frequently identified as factors for triggering gambling-related problems'.

Significant life events, specifically traumatic life events and the resulting stress have also been identified as contributors in

the development of gambling-related problems (Dickerson, Baxter, Boreham, Harley & Williams, 1995; Jacobs, 1986). A definition of a significant life event proposed by Holmes and Rahe (1967) is any set of circumstances that signifies or necessitates change in a person's ongoing life pattern. Accordingly, exposure to stress associated with a significant life event affects a person's susceptibility to experiencing negative consequences at any particular time. Thus, the stress related to a significant life event is seen as serving as a precipitating factor in the onset of various issues including both physical and mental health concerns, and related co-morbid disorders (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Billings and Moos (1981, p.140) have noted that a person's efforts to cope with significant life events are generally viewed as 'a complex set of processes directed toward moderating the impact of such events on physical, social and emotional functioning'.

Investigations by McMillen et al. (2004) found that older women tend to experience gambling-related problems and they progress to problem gambling in a relatively short time compared to men. The authors contended that significant life changes occurred for older women as their traditional caring roles altered, when children left home or on retirement from work. A sudden sense of loss, feelings of loneliness and social isolation may influence gambling participation. With more time available, some cope by commencing gambling hoping to regain some social connections (McMillen et al., 2004). Social isolation has been identified as a motivation for women's gambling as well as an explanation for women's quick progression to problem gambling. Using social

capital concepts, building new social networks for these women is very important for their social and emotional wellbeing.

Research concerning significant life events and gambling behaviour has found that stress linked to a significant incident in a person's life can be a catalyst for some people to increase their level of gambling (Boughton & Falenchuk, 2007; Brown & Coventry, 1997; Holdsworth, Nuske & Breen, 2011; Pierce, Wentzel & Loughnan, 1997). For example, the Department of Justice (2009) conducted a gambling survey in several waves using a stratified sample across eight regions in Victoria. For the study 15,000 people were interviewed by telephone and the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) within the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI) (Ferris & Wynne 2001) was used to categorise participants into risk groups. In Wave One, participants with gambling problems were found to be more likely than those without gambling problems to have experienced a significant life event in the past 12 months. These events included: a change to a person's financial situation; injury or illness; increased levels of conflict; the death of a loved one; change in living conditions, moving; change in work conditions and/or conflict at work; legal problems; and divorce or separation. In the Wave Two findings of the same study (2011), 5000 of the same participants were again asked questions about significant life events. It was found that people with gambling problems reported a higher number of life events. For instance, almost 43% of participants reported the death of someone close, and more than one third reported changes to financial situations as major significant events occurring in their lives. These prob-

lem gambling participants appear to have a diminishing store of productive social capital. Based on Bourdieu's (1989) theory, negative gambling consequences such as reduced social participation, decreasing mutual values and less opportunity for meeting obligations, represent a loss of social capital. Reducing social capital for people struggling to cope with significant life events may lead to a declining sense of community and weakening social connections. Thus, examining associations between social capital theory and gambling engagement may give us insights on ways to better understand and therefore assist women with gambling-related problems.

Methodology

This study is positioned within a feminist, qualitative approach to research, which seeks to interpret, understand and explain the meanings of participant's experiences 'beyond the limits of what can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis' (Wolcott, 1994: 11). As such, qualitative research adopts methods that uncover the meanings of people's experiences of their social world, such as in-depth interviews and other narrative techniques to develop new knowledge (Neuman, 2000), which fits well with a feminist approach. Participants are able to articulate their own personal experiences, insights and concerns within the wider societal context.

Twenty women poker machine players were interviewed for the study, 11 of whom were identified as recreational gamblers and 9 as problem gamblers. The women were located in various parts of Australia and interviews took place in March - May 2011. Ethics approval was

obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Southern Cross University, Australia. Participants were contacted from the research database of gamblers of the Centre for Gambling Education and Research at Southern Cross University who had agreed to participate in research using a random sampling system. We contacted women by mail, inviting them to participate in the research. To be eligible, the participants needed to be current problem gamblers, recovered problem gamblers or gambling recreationally. All interviews were conducted by telephone, by two experienced and qualified researchers named in the study and each took approximately 45 - 60 minutes. Participants were reimbursed for their time with a shopping voucher. An interview schedule helped guide the discussions which included questions about motivations for gambling on poker machines, changes to gambling behaviour over time, any perceived differences between women's and men's gambling experiences, as well as family and social networks. An interview schedule in qualitative interviews helps 'where the categories of response are focused but not necessarily pre-determined' (National Statement on Ethical Research [NSER], 2007:26). At the end of each interview participants were administered the standard nine question Problem Gambling Severity Index [PGSI] within the Canadian Problem Gambling Index [CPGI] (Ferris & Wynne, 2001) to determine where they sat in the problem gambling continuum. Interviews were digitally recorded with consent and notes taken to ensure accuracy (Charmaz, 2005; Puchta & Potter, 2004). Interviews were then transcribed by a professional transcription service.

An adaptive grounded theory approach was drawn on to analyse data from the interviews with the emphasis is on an open-minded approach to the research with willingness to listen to participants' experiences and then grounding the analysis in the research data. Strauss and Corbin (1999:24) pointed out that grounded theory draws on a 'systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about phenomenon'. Grounded theory allows theory to be constructed out of the research; new knowledge emerges through the research data. Utilizing grounded theory, Layder (1998) developed an adaptive grounded theory approach to facilitate the experiences of participants within the wider social, cultural, economic and political systems. Adaptive grounded theory combines both objectivism and subjectivism to identify and explain connections between system (macro) and life world (micro). Thus, this research used a theoretically based sample and inductive logic to explore the influences and motivations that result in some women remaining recreational gamblers while others develop gambling-related problems.

Transcripts from the interviews were analysed and coded with emerging themes identified. This meant that data collection and analysis were undertaken simultaneously (Strauss & Corbin, 1999). Since the analysis process can be subjected to bias, the transcripts were independently analysed by two researchers. Once the analysis was completed the third researcher reviewed the recurring themes identified by the two initial researchers. From this process the key recurring themes were confirmed.

In Table 1, women in the recreational gambling group have been labelled RG and assigned a number from 1-11. Women in the group who have received help for their gambling and were largely in recovery have been labelled PG and a number assigned from 12-20. The two groups are represented in Table 1 below:

Within qualitative narrative research there are no claims to generalisability, however to ensure validity the researchers utilised the conceptual elements determined by Sandelowski (1986) in response to Lincoln and Guba (1985) who called for rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research. For instance, credibility was determined by sharing of ideas and rereading of transcripts by all members of the research team. Consistency was observed by the researchers' clear provision of an 'audit trail' through the research process, while neutrality was maintained as the researchers remained true and focused to the words of the participants as the analysis is described below.

Results

While the average age of both groups of participants was similar (65 years for the PG group and 55 years for the RG group), the family status of participants fell into two distinct groups. In the PG group the majority (7) of participants reported living on their own, while in the RG group the majority (10) reported living with their partner. The results of the PGSI (Ferris & Wynne, 2001) confirmed a higher rate of problem gambling in the participants who had sought and received gambling help (PG) compared to the self-reported recreational gamblers (RG). The following analysis explores the understandings of the par-

Table 1: Representation of participants

Interviewee	Age	Household type	PGSI Scores *
RG1	48	Lives with partner & child	0
RG2	80	Lives with partner	0
RG3	48	Lives with partner & 2 children	2
RG4	76	Lives with partner	1
RG5	36	Lives on own	0
RG6	30	Lives with partner & 2 children	0
RG7	45	Lives with partner & 2 children	4
RG8	50	Lives with partner	0
RG9	71	Lives with partner	7
RG10	62	Lives with partner	2
RG11	60	Lives with care	0
PG12	72	Lives on own	20
PG13	37	Lives on own	22
PG14	73	Lives on own	11
PG15	60	Lives on own	20
PG16	25	Lives with parents	19
PG17	63	Lives on own	19
RG17	60	Lives with carer	0
PG18	70	Lives on own	18
PG19	61	Lives with partner	9
PG20	70	Lives on own	19

***Scoring index for PGSI:**

0 = non-problem gambler

1 – 2 = low-risk problem gambler

3 – 7 = moderate-risk problem gambler

8+ = problem gambler (Ferris & Wynne, 2001)

Participants in relation to their EGM gambling experiences. It compares and contrasts the experiences of women who have received help (PG), and the self-reported recreational (RG) gamblers. In the discussion the similarities in narratives within the stories of the two groups highlight risk factors that may precipitate movement for individuals between the two groups. This is important in raising understanding of the motivations and meanings that gambling holds for both groups.

Participants in the problem gambling group talked about two alternative starting points to their gambling journey. They either began gambling socially with family and friends, often early in their lives (four), or they began gambling after a significant life event (six). For all six of these women, it was at a significant point of change in their lives that they acknowledged their gambling became a problem. Participants described how their level of gambling was not a problem until a major event in their

life changed their view of themselves and their world. For these participants, gambling rapidly escalated to a problematic level with changes involving relationship conditions that in turn led to changes in their social connectedness. These changes necessitated a realignment of their sense of self that often created a profound feeling of discomfort or stress.

The link between social capital and significant life events

Focusing on the concepts of social capital and significant life events within the narratives of the participants revealed two major themes: motivation to gamble and continuation of gambling activity. Three subthemes were identified relating to motivations to gamble: reduction in loneliness and social isolation; withdrawal from stress following significant life events; the need for social activity and excitement. The two groups of participants, recreational and problem gamblers, expressed differing elements within the themes and subthemes highlighting the importance of social capital in their lives. The following analysis uses participants' narratives to explain these themes.

Both groups of participants described similar issues in their motivation to gamble, but for different reasons.

Loneliness and social isolation

For the problem gambling group loneliness was a significant motivating factor. This was often associated with a change of situation either physical or emotional. Comments from the PG group of participants included wanting to gamble when lonely and/or bored, and as a way of being around people. This sentiment was ech-

oed by one participant who had recently separated from her partner:

I was lonely, coping with the separation from my partner. I think it was also boredom and frustration that made me go to them [the gaming venues]. (PG17, aged 63 years)

Six of this group stated that they were socially isolated at the time their gambling escalated. Some had moved away from family and other social support networks, while others had found themselves living alone and socially isolated. Comments from participants with gambling problems in relation to being socially isolated included:

I moved out of the area from where I was used to living and the club was the only thing that there was in that town, with the pokies. So I'd go up there because I had no friends in the area and I don't think that helped me. So I'd just go up there every day. It had become an everyday event. (PG15, aged 60 years)

I think for women ... see women, what does a lonely woman on her own? ... I've never admitted to being lonely until just fairly recently and generally most of the time I haven't been but where do you go when you're sort of on your own, you've got nothing else to do except watch the television. It's a place you can go where there're other people and you can chat to people behind the bar, the serving people and people chat to each other a bit. There's a bit of an understanding among addicted gamblers. (PG14, aged 73 years)

Similarly one participant related that gambling replaced a missing element in her life when she said:

It's something missing in our lives and we've tried to compensate with the poker machine (PG19, aged 61 years)

Three of the participants in the RG group made some similar comments. For instance, the following comment shows the sense that the woman interviewed was becoming concerned about her level of gambling. Her children had recently left home and she was coping with a re-defined role; her caring role had subsided considerably:

Not enough to do I think, just the husband at home. He goes and plays bowls and I think oh well, I'll go and play the pokies. That seems to be getting more and more often, going to the pokies instead of going visiting. It's just going to the pokies, which is not good. (RG8, aged 50 years)

Withdrawal from stress associated with significant life events

Significant life events, or times of major change such as separation or the death of a loved one, seemed to initiate the move from recreational to problem gambling behaviour for many of the participants as the following comments highlight:

Playing the poker machines. That's my way to run away from a bad situation at the moment. ... Mainly I'm not happy with my life and the stress of the family and my work situation. (PG19, aged 61 years)

He [my husband] went into a nursing home and I left him there. So my outlet then was, to get over the grief of separating, the guilt, that sort of thing, that turned me back to the pokies again. (PG18, aged 70 years)

My eldest daughter committed suicide; it would be 10 years ago in a couple of months, and that was what I think triggered the gambling problem that I had. I then took on the rearing of her daughter who was 13 at the time which was a huge stress. (PG14, aged 73 years)

For the PG group of women interviewed, the experience of gambling was embedded within the need to escape, to forget and/or to de-stress after experiencing a traumatic and significant life event. Comments from participants about gambling on electronic gaming machines as a means to escape included reasons such as: 'getting out of the house'; 'to deaden feelings', and 'to run away from a bad situation'. The following comment illustrates this element of escape clearly:

It was escaping. Running, running away from things has always been a problem with me. If I had a fight or if something traumatic had happened I'd run away from it by going to the club and playing the pokies. (PG18, aged 70 years)

Five of the participants in the recreational gambling group gave comments that echoed the above, albeit at a less serious level. The need for escape and to cope with stress involved with a significant life event was

still a strong motivational factor for many of this group. In addition, comments from the recreational gambling group of participants related to gambling as a way to 'not have to think about things', as a way to de-stress. For example, when asked what attracted her to the electronic gaming machines, one woman said:

I guess the atmosphere, they're mindless ... They totally engage you which I guess is part of the problem. You really don't think about anything else while you're there playing ... And just being able to relax because you don't have to think about other things. (RG2, aged 80 years)

Thus gambling seemed to provide a way of contributing something that was missing in some of the participants' lives, often following some traumatic experience such as the death of a loved one, divorce or a move away from participants' social networks

The need for social activity and excitement
Comments from the PG participants indicated that they gambled as a social activity, as well as to relieve stress associated with a significant life event. Indeed, all the PG participants noted that the draw of attempting to be socially engaged was a strong lure. They explained the excitement related to noises, colours, winning, of money images floating in the machines and appearing on the screens. The excitement helped to alleviate stress and helped them to cope after experiencing a major lifetime event. This is clearly explained by one participant who said:

Playing the pokies filled a bit of a gap and it was exciting. (PG19, aged 61 years)

Similarly, excitement played a major element in the stories of the RG group of participants. Three comments from recreational gamblers show the power of excitement, and how these participants believed that playing the pokies helped them to cope with their stresses:

Well it's always the thrill of maybe winning something big. It's always there. I don't know why, but I guess if you didn't think that you were going to maybe have a win well you wouldn't play them would you? Because that's what they're all about isn't it? Enticing you to play so that you can maybe win. And to get your mind off other things, stress in your life and that. (RG2, aged 62 years)

It took on a life of its own. When I was away from the hotel I could hear the music, I could look at traffic lights and think of the gaming machines, and \$1 coins used to tease me as well. Playing the pokies was a way to help me cope when all that stuff went wrong in my life. (RG11, 60 years). I enjoy it. I find it a challenge, I do. I try to read it but that's me. I statistically probably calculate everything that I see come up. How many times etc. that's what I'm like, so I do sort of look at it and calculate it and I listen around. Hear the machines that are going off more often. I'm probably bad for that. I spend more time psyching it all out than doing what I'm doing to enjoy it. I listen. You notice

it. Certain machines will pay out and it's funny how it works ... An enjoyment. I like to see how many times I have to press the button before I finally get those free spins. If it's only a 1cent machine, how many times do I have to press that button every time before finally they will come up. That took \$7 or \$9 just to get one lot of free spin. That's a lot of money if you were paying whatever and a higher price. I find that playing the pokies actually gives you hope as well, and it is a relief, time away from the everyday stresses. (RG3, aged 48 years)

The social aspect of gambling was emphasised in the following comment:

It's usually because we have dinner at the club. If we have dinner there then we'll play the pokies afterwards but it's only because ... it just happens to be a meeting place to meet up with friends. It wouldn't be because the pokies are there. It's only because it's a place that's local and it happens where everyone can meet up. (RG1, aged 48 years)

One of the women talked about how gambling, in her view, was a normal activity as she transitioned from adolescence to adulthood:

I think when I was about 18 it was just a fun thing, normal teenage stuff. You go to the club with your friends, you think it's great because you can start playing the pokies because you're over the age and that's it. (RG6, aged 30 years)

The stories of the RG group tended to take a different path to the PG group. The RG participants recognised clearly that the crossroads ahead could include a path leading them towards gambling-related problems. This group of RG participants primarily began gambling with family or friends, often early in their lives, as a social event and for a 'bit of fun'. As has been seen above in Table 1, these RG participants were mostly in stable family situations with continuing and secure relationships. They described how their gambling was aimed at being sociable, was very much in control, and was not seen as problematic for themselves or those around them. Participants in this RG group did however, when asked about gambling motivations, describe elements of escape from normal daily pressures, but emphasised the social nature of their outing. For some in the RG group playing EGMs at clubs was perceived as a way of making new social contacts, even though they were already socially engaged. These findings highlight the fundamental draw of the EGM, the role they play in perceptions of being able to offer an escape function, and to offer increasing social interaction. These findings were also identified as the original draws for participants in the PG group. Thus, it can be seen that there is some vulnerability for EGM gamblers that may occur at a critical point, such as at times of change or movement associated with a significant life event.

Continuing to gamble

Continuing to gamble was common to all PG participants. They explained how their increased gambling led to an increase in stress and loneliness; further gambling only served to intensify these issues. The

reasons participants began gambling appeared to provide fuel for the problem they sought to remedy, which is summarised by one of the women interviewed who said:

My blood pressure started going up and I realised the excitement was not very productive, not very good. (PG19, aged 61 years)

However, another explained that she did not feel comfortable with her gambling activity, thus signaling a potential problem:

It's a habit that it's something that I do and sometimes I wish that I didn't. I, god, those bloody machines, the flashing lights. What is it about them? (RG7, aged 45 years)

The two groups of participants, those who identified themselves as recreational gamblers (the participants in the RG group) and those who were recovering from problem gambling (the participants in the PG group), told similar narratives of their gambling experiences in regards to the motivations and draws of the electronic gaming machines. However, the participants in the PG group tended to focus much more on particular issues such as the lure of excitement related to gambling, of their desire to reduce loneliness in their lives, and their wish to escape from stress often associated with a traumatic significant life event than did the participants in the RG group.

Discussion

This innovative study, using social capital concepts to explore women's gambling in relation to significant life events and

social connectedness, has revealed two major themes, women's motivations to gamble and their continuation of gambling activities. Within these themes, several sub-themes emerged (reduction in loneliness and social isolation, withdrawal from stress following significant life events, and the need for social activity and excitement) providing new and valuable information on influences contributing to gambling related problems for some women but not for others.

Significant life events spoken about by the participants in this study included: the death of a loved one, separation and divorce, leaving family, friends and other support networks; retirement, and children leaving home to begin their adult and independent lives. Similar significant life events were identified by the Department of Justice (2009; 2011) as contributors to increased gambling and gambling problems. In addition, these significant life events have been shown here to be associated with factors impacting on participants' well-being, their level of connection to their community and to their social networks, concepts underpinning social capital theories. When people do not feel socially connected then feelings of loneliness and isolation can arise (Bullen & Onyx, 1998; Putnam, 2000). For instance, PG participants in our study spoke about becoming physically, emotionally and socially isolated from others in their communities at times of a significant life event, and they described how at these times they were motivated to gamble more. Their shrinking social networks appeared to contribute to their increasing motivation to gamble, a finding similar to other research on women's gambling moti-

vations (Brown & Coventry, 1997; Thomas & Moore, 2001). McMillen et al. (2004) identified significant life events as having the potential to create a sense of loss than can, in turn, lead to feelings of loneliness and social disconnection. In contrast, for our RG participants, social capital issues such as building social connectedness, encouraging friendship and bonds between people (Putman, 2000) were seen as valuable for maintaining a non-problematic or recreational level of gambling. It seemed that one major difference between the two groups of participants' overall narratives related to their levels of social capital and their ability to cope with significant life events and stressful changes that precipitated for some, at downward spiral into problem gambling.

While both groups of women spoke about gambling as a withdrawal from stress, as a release or escape associated with a significant life event in their lives, those who identified as recreational gamblers largely had adequate support networks. These networks assisted them in creating balance in their lives, along with a sense of personal well-being. This contrasts with the PG group of women; many of whom spoke about loneliness after coping with divorce or separation, and of feeling anxious, symptoms also reported by WIRE (2008) and Thomas and Moore (2001). Most women in the PG group did not have strong social ties with their communities, which as Putnam (2000) argued, is important for a strong sense of belonging and well-being.

Both groups of women explained gambling as an exciting social activity. Based on Casey's (2006) research, the women in this study appeared to be affected by

gender role expectations. The RG group of women gambled as individuals while maintaining traditional female responsibility within their personal, family and financial limits. They seemed to justify their social gambling activities by managing their leisure time and spending according to expected gender role responsibilities. However the PG group of women gamblers may be represented as irresponsible others who risked much to continue their gambling, in their search for some relief, company and excitement. Their risky gambling stands in contrast to their normative femininity and gender role expectations (Casey, 2006). Although gender role expectations seem to support women's gambling decisions in the RG group, they do not appear to have the same effect for women in the PG group.

Using the women's stories – their narratives, a significant life event often led to stress, which triggered, for some PG participants, an increase in their gambling and/or a continuation of gambling in problematic ways. A person's struggle to cope with a significant life event is usually an intricate process aimed at tempering the impact of the event on their functioning (Billings & Moos, 1981). For instance, some participants spoke about gambling on EGMs as being a way to cope emotionally with loss and grief due to their partner's death. Traumatic life events were identified as the catalyst for increasing or continuing gambling for PG participants. Increasing their gambling compounded and recycled their emotional vulnerability with more stress, more isolation and even ill health. In accord with Trevorrow and Moore (1998), as loneliness and isolation grew, control over gambling seemed to

shrink. Continued gambling led to gambling problems for some women, a finding supported by other researchers (Li, 2007; Schull, 2002; Wenzel & Dahl, 2009). The emotional vulnerability that many of the PG group of participants experienced fits well with Li's (2007) argument that women's problem gambling is a psycho-emotional response to troubling life situations where women struggle with a lack of hope for a resolution to their problems. Despite outward signs that these women were participating in a social activity, inwardly they were worried and stressed about their continued gambling. From social capital theory, they appear to have limited social interactions, low levels of bonding with others and a poor sense of well-being (Putman, 2000). Increasing and/or continuing to gamble in problematic ways as a consequence of a significant life event appeared to be associated with feelings of emotional vulnerability and lower levels of social capital for the PG group.

As with all research, there are limitations. The average age of the participants was largely 50 years +, being due to the random sampling used via the data base of gamblers used. It could be argued that within this age group, loneliness and isolation is more dominant than in the general population. People who experience problems with gambling are not a homogeneous group and as such cannot be stringently placed into categories; there are many circumstances influencing gambling and problem gambling (Błaszczynski & Nower, 2002). Indeed, each participant's individual views and experiences has value and adds to understanding the impacts of the social research being undertaken, in this instance the experiences of women who

gamble on EGMs. In addition, the sample is relatively small consisting of 20 participants. This was due to the limit of funding the researchers received to conduct the research. Thus saturation in the data collected was not a consideration. However, because this is qualitative research large numbers are not seen as necessary or indeed beneficial (Merriam, 1998; National Statement on Ethical Research [NSER], 2007). Nevertheless, further qualitative research is needed to examine specific subgroups of people who gamble who were not prominent in our study. One such gap is the group of younger women as the average age of participants in our present study was 51.5 years, with the youngest participant being 25 years and the oldest being 80 years.

Conclusion

Gambling on EGMs in gaming venues across Australia and elsewhere can be seen as a normal, socially acceptable part of many people's cultural repertoire. Thus, socialising by gambling with family and friends in what are generally perceived as safe and comfortable places is generally considered a leisure and recreational activity. For the women interviewed in our study, the club was a secure place where they could gamble in a social setting. Playing EGMs was seen as a way to socialise, to escape from everyday problems and to cope with stresses, including those stresses resulting from the impact of experiencing a significant life event. Many of the women experiencing problem gambling had dealt with significant personal loss including a close relatives' death, divorce, separation, a physical move, or another changes. Their changing life situations had significant im-

pacts which appeared as lower levels of social capital. It was evident that the need for social connections and excitement can lead, at times of change, to increased levels of gambling, as can the drive to reduce stress. Most women in the PG group appeared to be particularly vulnerable to these factors.

Indeed, it was seen in our study that the need for and access to social connectedness and the establishment of bonds with other people underlined many of the experiences shared by both RG and PG groups of participants, emphasising the usefulness in drawing on social capital theories and concepts for gambling research. From the participants' narratives, recreational gamblers gravitate to gambling for very similar reasons as those who gamble at problematic levels. However having continuing social bonds and secure values, women in the RG group tended to develop a variety of ways of coping, such as adhering to gender role expectations, emotional control and recognition of the lure of EGM gambling. They tended not to be motivat-

ed to increase their gambling when faced with the trauma associated with a significant life event. As gambling motivations can be similar, the impacts of significant life events can create a need for escape in order to cope with the associated stress involved, and for social interaction. Satisfaction in meeting these needs, possibly by some rise in levels of social capital, might see the strength of gambling triggers reduce.

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