

Chapter 4

Gambling Activity

This chapter begins by sketching a pattern of gambling activity as it relates to frequency, amount of time and money spent, forms of gambling, the social context of gambling, and other issues relating to the sample who took part in this research. Differences in gambling activity attributable to ethnicity or cultural background have also been identified, although the quantitative research stages will prove more instructive here.

Attention is also given to the language of gambling and gamblers; how gamblers recount the 'mesmerising, seductive experience' of 'visiting their best friend' and other descriptors, as a way of trying to understand the allure and addictive nature of gambling that act as such powerful hooks for problem gamblers. Not unexpectedly, families of people affected by problem gambling describe gambling in very different terms indeed, and due attention is given to the meanings and values that are carried through these descriptions of gambling as well.

Given the emotive, evocative ways in which gambling is described, it is surprising to note that in gambling research, little attention has been paid to the semiotics of language as a way of uncovering and explaining the symbolic potency of gambling addiction. This chapter goes some way towards addressing this gap in the research, by identifying and interpreting gambling activity through the subjective language of the study participants. In doing so, the structural and social context of gambling is addressed as an important part of the gambling experience for problem gamblers.

The data reported is qualitative in nature; that is, it aims to describe people's experiences, interpretations and understandings of gambling activity. The data does not purport to document, with any statistical accuracy, the prevalence of different types of gambling activity in Victoria or elsewhere.¹

4.1 Demographic Profile of Research Participants²

4.1.1 Problem Gamblers

Demographic profiles of the Stage One research participants were defined by gender, age, employment status, income, household and family structure and ethnicity.

¹ Prevalence data is already well documented in numerous studies for the VCGA, and certainly, the upcoming quantitative stages of the Study of Clients of Problem Gambling Services will make a further contribution to this body of knowledge.

² The demographics of the research participants should not necessarily be viewed as being representative of the spread of problem gambling in Victoria; rather, they described the characteristics of the people who volunteered themselves for the project. Few men and people of indigenous and CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) backgrounds responded to our call for participants and, as such, are under-represented in this report.

Gender

More women than men contacted the project team and women slightly outnumbered men in the overall sample. The over-representation of women in this project resonates with other gambling research such as that conducted by Dixey (1987), Brown and Coventry (1997) or more recently Surgey (2000), which examines women's experiences of problem gambling on electronic gaming machines. There is also emerging evidence to support a growing participation of women in gambling activities in the United Kingdom (Volberg, 2000).

The over-representation of women however, should not be read as necessarily representative of the demographic profile of problem gamblers in Victoria. Gender differences in help-seeking behaviour means that more women than men could be expected to participate in research projects such as this, while the fact that the sample was drawn from a number of random recruitment processes meant that there was a different population cohort from those in previous studies.³ Accordingly, caution is required in interpreting the gender breakdown of 65 per cent women to 35 per cent men as it may simply reflect that more female gamblers are interested in taking part in research.

Age

The youngest research participant was 19 years old and the oldest 78. The majority of participants were in their thirties and forties, a pattern reflected in Jackson et al. (2000), who noted that the majority of clients presenting to Gambler's Help problem gambling services are aged 30–49.

Although problem gambling currently has the most impact on the 30–49 age bracket, both gamblers and service providers involved in the current study warn of an emerging generation of young problem gamblers. In regional centres, opportunities for social interaction are seen as becoming limited to the pub, alongside the EGMs, and an even younger generation is being primed by PlayStations to associate electronic gaming with fun, entertainment and reward.

Employment status

All respondents of working age were employed, although several had lost jobs though gambling and sought employment in other fields, while the majority claimed that gambling had not affected their employment situation, in part, 'because no one knows.' Several participants had retired. One university student participated.

Income

Of the employed problem-gamblers, very few earned what could be termed a substantial wage, with the average annual income (before tax) typically falling into one of two categories: less than \$20,000 per year or \$20,000–\$40,000 per year. Only one person interviewed earned in excess of \$40,000 per year. All respondents were in considerable debt as a result of their problem gambling.

³ For example, Jackson *et al.* (2000) source their sample solely from the Minimum Data Set used as a client assessment tool in Gambler's Help agencies.

Household and family structure

Approximately half the participants were married or in de facto relationships, with those women not in relationships tending to be widowed or separated/divorced. Unlike the results reported by Jackson et al. (2000), very few of the problem gamblers had dependent children. Those who did had older children who lived away from home.

The eight problem gamblers' family members who took part in the project reported having dependent children living at home.

Ethnic background

As found in Jackson et al. (2000), approximately one quarter of participants were born outside of Australia, in countries including Nigeria, Poland, England, Germany and New Zealand.⁴ Interestingly, only the respondent from Nigeria acknowledged ethnicity as an issue in her problem gambling. When asked if her husband was Nigerian, the respondent replied: 'Lord no! If he was Nigerian he would have disowned me. Gambling does not exist in Nigeria. A very small percentage of the very wealthy bet on the soccer pools in the UK, but otherwise it is unheard of.' Such comments also indicate the difficulties in separating issues of class from issues of ethnicity when discussing the prevalence of gambling activities among particular cultural groups.⁵

As indicated earlier, the sample of problem gamblers who took part in this qualitative research is in some respects similar to, but in other ways different from, samples used in other studies. Volberg & Abbot, for example, report that 'problem gamblers in most jurisdictions are significantly more likely than other gamblers or non-gamblers to be young, minority blue-collar males' (1996), findings which do not resonate with the sample used here. On the other hand, participants did share demographic characteristics consistent with those reported by Jackson et al, namely being older, in their thirties, and more likely to be female than male' (2000: 16).

Indeed, while the sample featured here was slightly in favour of women, the respondents, men and women alike, reported a stark gender imbalance in patrons frequenting gaming venues: 'Eighty per cent of the people are women. The XXX⁶ is open at 9 am. Lots of women tell their husbands that they are going to get the groceries, and stop in there. They only take half their groceries home.'

The gender dynamics of EGM gambling are addressed further in Section 4.3. Gender and Gambling.

⁴ It is anticipated that the quantitative stages of this research, which will allow us to include a significantly larger proportion of gamblers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, will shed more light as to the cultural specificities of problem gambling for different ethnic groups, and identify any needs and barriers to effective service delivery.

⁵ Issues affecting specific cultural and ethnic groups has been well documented in Cultural Partners Australia Consortium (2000).

⁶ The names of all gaming venues mentioned by participants have been omitted from the report.

4.2 Distribution of Gambling Activity

Electronic gaming machines, known colloquially as ‘pokies’, were overwhelmingly the form of gambling that presented significant problems for those interviewed. To cite one respondent, ‘they’re in a league of their own.’

While most respondents could gamble ‘socially’ or ‘harmlessly’ (as they put it) on activities such as bingo or Tattslotto, the pokies prompted an entirely different set of responses. The wife of a problem gambler said that for her husband, ‘it’s the horses and the pokies—the pokies were a trap—they were all excitement for him.’ Another participant said: ‘my problem is with the pokies. I bet it’s the same for 99 per cent of the people you talk to.’ Other gambling activities included horseracing and football betting, while one respondent reported trying Internet gambling: ‘I was there with my laptop and credit card. It wasn’t as much fun as the machines.’

Service providers in both metropolitan and regional locations reported that most of their clients’ problems were with pokies:

‘Ninety-five per cent of our problems would be with the pokies ... ’

‘Pokies are by far the most common form of gambling activity that most clients have a problem with ... ’

‘Even those who gamble on other forms also gamble on pokies ... ’

‘They often have a pokie problem tacked on the end as well ... ’

‘I have clients who gamble on other things but don’t have a problem with it. It’s the pokies they have a problem with ... ’

Some service providers in the regional centres reported that a few, usually male, clients, also had problems with betting on horses or casino gambling. Such findings correspond with the Jackson et al. (2000) study which reports that approximately 70 per cent of clients present with an EGM gambling problem, 10 per cent present with problems associated with off-course betting at the TAB, and the remainder are variously split across casino, card games and miscellaneous forms of gambling.⁷ Very few service providers mentioned bingo or Tattslotto as causing problems, however, one indicated that current advertising campaigns are targeting pokie gambling over other forms of gambling, which may account for the larger numbers of this group seeking help. The service provider said, ‘there used to be more TAB players before the advertising.’

While most respondents reported a problem in limiting their expenditure on the pokies, many spoke of gambling activities that they could safely be involved with and enjoy, activities that one participant aptly described as ‘safe gambling’:

‘He has two dollar bets on the horses—that’s ok. The pokies are different though ... ’

‘Bingo was controllable, not the pokies ... ’

⁷ The central role that the pokies play in exacerbating problem gambling is reported in a wide and growing body of literature which indicates that machine gambling contributes disproportionately to problem gambling in Australia (1995; Dickerson, 1996; AIGR, 1997; Productivity Commission, 1999). Elsewhere, Lesieur and Blume (1987) report that gamblers who favour EGMs are more likely to score in the ‘at-risk’ categories in the South Oaks Gambling Screen.

'A lot of blokes spend Saturday betting on the horses or on the footy—I can do that and it's not a problem for me—the pokies are different ...'

'I started going with a friend and playing Keno—then I found the pokies ...'

The increasing prevalence of pokies as a form of gambling powerfully influenced the opinions of family members towards gaming and gambling. Very few family members gambled other than to 'buy the odd Tattslotto ticket.' One woman, whose mother had a gambling problem, remarked that 'I'm very negative about the pokies. I don't go and I don't play', while another interviewee, whose wife had what he described as a 'serious gambling problem', was scathing in his criticism of the role that EGMs play in government revenue raising:

'I've never been 'pro' serious gambling, but once it got personal, it turned me dead against them. It is an immoral and unethical means of getting money. There have got to be better ways of building hospitals without destroying families ...'

Indeed, the pokies have dramatically changed the landscape of gambling in Australia, through their sheer immediacy of play, and their ubiquity in pubs and clubs around Australia. In fact, Australia has 20 per cent of the total number of high-impact EGMs in the world, which are considered to be the most addictive (Darbyshire, et al. 2001) form of gambling and gaming.

Volberg (2000) says the introduction of even more rapid online and interactive games is likely to lead to an increase in the prevalence of problem gambling, a warning echoed by several of the project participants. One respondent said: 'my biggest challenge is to resist the Internet—they advertise everywhere on other sites I visit.'

There is considerable debate surrounding the effectiveness of proposed measures to reduce the spin rate and/or for machines to periodically shut down, breaking the gambler's rhythm. Respondents suggested re-engineering the machines to 'snap them out of their reverie', to quote one service provider.

4.2.1 Frequency and Spend of Gambling Activity

Participants reported visiting gaming venues, predominantly hotels in their local area, on a frequency that included 'daily', 'three to four times a week' 'fortnightly', or 'whenever I get the money I have to go'. An average gambling session could last anywhere from two to 12 hours. As one woman said: 'I'd just pop in for six hours or so'. Most participants would stay 'until the money runs out' or 'until I've spent every last cent.'

Respondents found it difficult to put a figure on how much money they had spent through gambling: 'the pokies don't issue receipts'. The common theme to emerge was that 'I blew the lot.' One respondent, who had a criminal conviction as a result of her gambling, said: 'I really don't know how much I spent—I would spend every last cent. I spent seven thousand dollars in one day. I got a personal loan for it.'

Although people found it difficult to determine how much they would spend in an average session, they could recount the cumulative financial cost of their gambling:

'I've blown in excess of \$200,000 over ten years ...'

'I've blown the house ...'

'I get paid fortnightly and I never have anything left ...'

'I've spent a big chunk of my husband's pay. I've lost everything ... '

'I owe \$31,000 in credit ... '

'I was \$179,000 in debt ... '

Losing their money produces feelings of great shame and guilt among problem gamblers:

'When I lose I feel so dirty, so 'what have I done ... '

'I used to go after work. I'd lose all my money by 10 or 11 pm. I'd be too scared to go in the house—I'd sit in the car. I'd have to ask my partner for money and he'd give it to me, but a fortnight later I'd have to ask him again ... '

'It's like losing a loved one. I feel guilty if I re-gamble. I feel terrible. A compulsive gambler will lose whatever he can lay his hands on—you feel bad about losing ten dollars or a thousand dollars ... '

4.3 Gender and Gambling

Overall, the 19 women participants tended to have been gambling for shorter periods of time than their male counterparts, yet still reported significant gambling problems. The men had been gambling since childhood, usually on horseracing, although for some, the pokies and football/sports betting were also part of their gambling repertoire:

'I started at an early age. I got started through my father—he was a gambler—he used to take me to racecourses as a toddler, on family outings. I was probably about 12 when I placed my first bet. I've been betting on a regular basis ever since ... '

'I started when I was just a boy. It was in the family. My older brothers did it. Mostly it was horses, now it's sports betting ... '

'My father was an SP bookmaker, I got seriously into it through a mate of his ... '

Each of the men who provided these comments had been gambling for the best part of 20 years before they sought help for their gambling behaviour.

By contrast, the women gambled exclusively on the pokies and for a significantly shorter period of time—the longest period any of the female respondents had been gambling was 10 years. Such results accord with the work done by Potenza et al. (2001) who said that female problem gamblers, when compared with male problem gamblers, tend to engage in shorter durations of problematic gambling before contacting the gambling helpline. That finding raises the possibility that women, once they begin gambling, develop gambling problems more rapidly than men, which concurs with the preliminary qualitative results outlined here. When asked how long she had been gambling before it became a problem, one woman said 'it wasn't overnight, but it was very fast—a few days'. Others also referred to the rapidly escalating frequency of their gambling activity:

'Initially, I went once a week, then it became three-four times a week, then it became daily—I would have gambled 24 hours a day if I could ... '

'I was gambling for about six months. I was very lucky. I knew in six months that it wasn't right, that I was wasting money. Still, I was surprised at how quickly I went from not being a gambler at all to someone who had quite a serious problem with it ... '

Such a pattern, termed telescoping, has been observed in women with alcohol dependence, suggesting that women are more likely than men to move rapidly through the multiple landmark events associated with the development and progression of alcoholism (Potenza et al. 2001: 22). As Potenza et al. argue, 'the difference we observed could also be related to types of gambling, such as casino slot machine gambling, that are more frequently problematic for women. It has been suggested that machine gambling leads more rapidly to problematic use, given its greater rapidity of action' (2001: 23).

While very few of the family members interviewed were gamblers themselves, it is interesting to note that many of the female gamblers who took part in the project reported that they initially began gambling through a family member, partner, husband or boyfriend.⁸

'I used to go with my husband, we controlled each other. The last few months I've been going myself ...'

'We used to gamble together—one pay would go on the bills and the kids, the other would go on the gambling. It's falling behind on the bills that I'm now trying to reverse ...'

'My aunt and uncle lived on the south coast of New South Wales—I went to the RSL with them—that was 14 years ago. I enjoyed going—it was fun. I didn't have to talk to people ...'

4.4 Reasons for Gambling

Respondents were asked to articulate the reasons why they started gambling and why they then kept on gambling. The reasons and motivations for beginning to gamble were as diverse as the respondents themselves, although tend to correlate to certain common groupings such as chasing losses, relationship problems, self-esteem, stress and/or anxiety:

'The reason I started is a bit to do with the fact that I'm an idiot! I was uncertain about my employment—things weren't going so well, I was wondering whether I would have a job ...'

'I went with my girlfriends a couple of times, they kept going on about it—I went out of curiosity ...'

'I went away with my boyfriend on holiday. He was into gambling. I didn't enjoy it initially. When we came back to Melbourne I had an urge to go—I didn't know why ...'

'I work in Welfare, in Child Protection, I had a bad case when a child was murdered. I used to go just to clear my head. Because I'm single, I had no one to come home to talk to. It was a 'debriefing' I could have done without ...'

'I am a pensioner and I live alone. I started going with a friend and playing Keno—then I found the pokies ...'

⁸ The family members interviewed were not necessarily related to the gamblers interviewed. In fact, we only managed to interview one husband (who was the gambler), and his wife, who was a 'conscientious objector' to gambling.

'Heaven knows why I started—I can't ever remember when I started. I think it was about seven years ago. It was when the pokies first started in Queensland in the pubs and clubs. I used to go with my sister to the casino and it would make me sick. The pokies were different ...'

While the motivations for starting to gamble were varied, chasing losses or chasing 'the winning feeling' was cited as the principal reason as to why respondents kept gambling, with escape and boredom, as well as protest, cited as secondary or related motivations for continuing to gamble:

'Now I'm just chasing. I've lost so much I have to keep chasing. I'm always playing the maximum 50 x 20 lines ...'

'I thought I was going to win—I kept chasing my losses ...'

'I keep thinking maybe next time I'll get lucky ...'

'I was bored, and the hope of winning my money back. I smoke as well—I have an addictive personality ...'

'It just kind of snowballed—my father was a gambler, and I just became involved or developed my habit from being with my dad ...'

'There's always underlying causes—something lacking in my life. I was looking for excitement ...'

'It was a security thing—I could lose myself in it. I played cards (electronic card games). When I was a kid, I played with my grandparents, who used to look after me when my mother was sick—it was comforting for me ...'

'I liked winning. I didn't become addicted until seven or eight years ago. When I found out the pokies were coming to Melbourne, I thought 'oh no'. I became addicted to escape a bad relationship—I found it too hard to deal with things and it became an addiction ...'

'I was always chasing the winning feeling ...'

'Gambling is shutting the door on something that's worrying you ...'

'I played with my mum, and I saw her win \$2,500 on a five cent machine. I thought if she can do it, so can I ...'

'It was my reward. I thought I deserve this. I give so much to the community, I'm very involved, with people placing demands on me all the time. It was my little protest I suppose ...'

'It's like you're in a fight. You want to keep on going until you've beaten it, until it's down ...'

Interestingly, in light of previous research on gender and gambling (Surgey, 2000; Brown & Coventry 1997), several men cited unhappiness in their relationships, or relationship breakdowns, as being triggers for their gambling problem:

'The longing for affection—I couldn't talk to anyone about that, so I kept on gambling. The more frustrated you get the more you gamble ...'

'I started playing seriously when my wife left me ...'

'For me, it was when a girl I was going to marry got pregnant to my mate. I got into drugs and other things then, so the gambling was just one of many things, but it was the thing that got me ...'

Even more significantly, in light of the argument that male help-seeking behaviour is incongruent with their gender socialisation (Meth et al. 1990), each of the men quoted above (and others included in the research) had sought help for their gambling. Such preliminary findings suggest caution for the traditional explanation of men being emotionally closed-shops acting as a barrier to seeking help. For this research anyway, as many women as men turned to gambling as a result of relationship issues, and a growing number of men are also seeking help for their gambling behaviour, challenging those models developed along traditional gender lines.

Many participants, particularly women, reported that they started gambling to escape, 'to take my mind off my problems', but the solution to their initial problem had become a new and far worse problem. One respondent said: 'I didn't have to worry about the underlying problems in my life, then gambling became the problem in my life. Part of me couldn't believe it—I'm an intelligent person and yet gambling affected me in a very negative way. It ostracised me and kept my self-esteem low.' The manner in which the 'way out' became the problem, was particularly noticeable for those women who reported that going to the venues was a form of recreation that got out of hand: 'I can't go to them anymore—that was my weekend, my treat. I'm trying to find other things to fulfil me.'

Other respondents couldn't articulate their motivations for continuing to gamble, other than to make reference to the 'pull' of the machines, a theme we develop in the following section: 'I can't say why I keep doing it—I just like the machines, the different patterns and cycles on them.'

Circumstantial factors were also seen to be major contributors to the gambling problem, with credit betting and the ready access to cash in and near gaming venues seen as 'asking for trouble', making it too easy and accessible for people to continue gambling beyond their means:

'The biggest problem is with credit betting, having bankcards linked to TAB accounts. That's deadly, it's just asking for trouble. It's the last thing in the world that should happen—family lives are being destroyed. No credit should be allowed and family bank accounts should not be linked to the TAB ...'

'They should ban ATMs in venues—there's no justification for them. We don't have them in shops or in offices or in other public places ...'

4.5 The Social Environment of Gambling

One of the most powerful themes to emerge from the research was the way in which gamblers spoke of the gambling environment as being places of safety and security. The bright lights in hotel gaming venues in particular, attracted people: 'the signs on the outside are big and inviting—the lights and everything' ... 'the attraction is that people get blown away by it, by the glamour. It's a false image of what people think they are.'

The atmosphere inside the venues was seen as a safe haven from the 'outside world'. One woman said: 'I used to go with my sister to the casino and it would make me sick. The pokies were different—I felt safe in there', while another respondent identifies that 'the evenings are a problem—it's dark outside and inside everything is one—you become obsessed by the machine.'

For many of the respondents in rural and regional areas, the importance of pubs and clubs as recreational or social points meant that the pokies were both highly visible and hard to avoid—significant barriers to beating an EGM problem:

'The problem is that lots of parties and leaving dos are held at the pub. We need to go somewhere where there is no temptation. I went to a wedding recently. Thirty per cent of the guests would be sneaking out every 20 minutes to play the pokies and have a smoke ...'

Indeed, the safety, accessibility and convenience of the environment is recognised by several of the regional Victorian respondents who acknowledge that, for many, women in particular, the gaming venues are frequently the only place they have to go:

'Out here, husbands put their cars in for a service, the wife goes in and does the shopping and has to go and sit somewhere ...'

The importance of pubs and clubs as recreational meeting points was cited by gamblers and service providers as acting as a significant barrier to the self-exclusion program. In rural and regional areas in particular, many gamblers feared their social life would grind to a halt if they voluntarily barred themselves from gaming rooms, their concern being that they would be unable to join friends for social outings at the local pub or club and, more importantly, 'every one would know about it then.'

4.5.1 Time Stands Still

Losing track of time was another of the recurring themes that emerged when respondents described the activity and experience of gambling. For many, the venues created an environment in which 'time stands still,' with a number of respondents experiencing a sense of time distortion, in which minutes blur into hours as they 'zone out' or 'lose themselves in it.' As one female participant put it 'it was my 'two hours' that just got out of hand.'

The relevance of the concept of time to gambling is explored by Surgey (2000) in *Playing For Time: Exploring the Impacts of Gambling on Women*. Surgey's work explores the various ways in which the concept of time is used and interpreted by female gamblers to speak of the motivations and reasons for gambling (i.e. 'unrewarded time', 'time in a vacuum', 'time of change'), whereas in the present qualitative study, the metaphor of time typically served as a means of giving meaning to the excesses of gambling itself:

'You do get carried away and lose track of time ...'

'The clocks on the machines don't do anything ...'

'Five minutes turns into one hour, even though they have clocks and everything ...'

'The time goes that quick. You look at your watch and it's 9.30 am. Next thing you know it's a quarter to two ...'

4.5.2 Gambling Alone: Communities Without Interaction

Descriptions of the gaming venues ranged between warm sociality and extreme social isolation. On the one hand, gaming rooms were regarded as safe, particularly for women, and familiar, with 'the regulars' all knowing one another.

'Every time you go there you see the same people. The faces are so familiar. You recognise everyone. It's like recognising all the drunks at the hotel ...'

On the other hand, the gaming venues many respondents frequented (predominantly pubs and clubs in their local area) were communities without interaction, the jangle of an EGM paying out the only way to awaken people 'mesmerised by the machine.'

This curious contradiction between sociality and social isolation was captured in the comments of many project participants. As one woman put it, 'there's coffee and biscuits, it's a group place but you don't have to talk to anybody.' The husband of a problem gambler, when asked if his wife had ever spoken about what she likes about playing the pokies, said:

'They are sleazy, dark, grim, dismal places. She reckons it's a social outlet, but then says no one talks to her except for blokes leaning over and putting another dollar in as a pick up. That scares the hell out of me. There's electronic jangling and banging—as a social outlet it's the pits ...'

Highlighting the socially isolating nature of problem gambling was the fact that most respondents in the project tended to gamble alone. Despite expansive overtures on the part of the gaming venue operators to create a friendly, fun space, gambling was, for the majority of research participants, 'something I do by myself.'

'My wife and I never sit together—couples rarely do, it's very solitary ...'

'I only go for the company—it's not the people at the venue, it's the machines that are my company ...'

'I go mostly by myself, fortnightly or weekly I go with my boyfriend. One person can control the other better sometimes ...'

'I gamble by myself—I spend heaps of time there (at the TAB). I'd stay from the first race to the last race if I could. As it is, I have to knock off from work to place a bet ...'

'A gambler is always a loner—I go by myself ...'

'Always by myself—you don't want anybody near you. The machine is your whole being—you're mesmerised by the machine. I couldn't even tell you who was sitting next to me most of the time ...'

'Always by myself—friends just get in the way. I never even bothered pretending—we'd go out for a night and I'd just go straight to the pokies ...'

'Having a play made me feel like I'd gone somewhere, even though I didn't want to talk to anyone. People around you just give you the shits, they get in the way ...'

The increasingly isolating nature of an activity so widely and enthusiastically promoted as 'a fun night out' accords with a wider sociological shift occurring in contemporary society; the increasingly individualised nature of social and civic participation.

Accordingly, the title of this section borrows from *Bowling Alone*, by the American sociologist Robert Putnam (1993), which addresses the decline in social capital and increase in social fragmentation of contemporary American society by describing the changing pattern of social interaction and community involvement. For Putnam, many of the social activities that were once undertaken with others are now undertaken alone, or among people united by the most tenuous of social ties. The gambling community, united, if at all, through a shared shame and desperation, seems to possess many of the characteristics that Putnam describes in *Bowling Alone*. Sharing physical space rather than any real social intimacy, the gambling community can be both socially isolating and

isolated to the extreme. Two respondents, on the isolating nature of compulsive gambling, said:

'All my friends gamble, I never see them anymore ... '

'It's very lonely, very anti-social, yet the staff are very friendly—it's like a solitary social club, if that makes sense at all ... '

Such comments are supported by service providers' observations that many of their clients become socially withdrawn and isolated through their gambling:

'As they get more addicted they lose their network of support and also don't engage in relationships ... '

'For many, by the time they come to counselling they have lost all their social skills and their friendship networks ... '

'They avoid relationships because it's easier to remain secretive about their behaviour ... '

'Friends will often avoid them because they are either fed up with them or too worried/stressed about them—they don't know what to do anymore and just "back off" ... '

'They are often asked for money and feel used ... '

4.6 Lovers and Best Friends: The Language of Gambling

In describing and making sense of the gambling social environment, attention needs to be paid to the language of gambling and gamblers; the words, images, metaphors and associations they draw on to describe the activity and experience of gambling.

The language of the research participants is a useful point of introduction to the powerfully addictive potential of electronic gaming machines. Furthermore, identifying the vocabulary of problem gamblers can help inform the human service industry by providing service providers with a better understanding of the very particular meanings and values that are carried in their clients' language.

Gamblers used a range of expressions to describe gambling activity. Playing the electronic gaming machines was variously described as 'pinging', 'going pinging' (references to the noises the machines make), 'the pokes', 'going for a poke' 'having a play' and 'going for an afternoon.' Such descriptors, obfuscating the activity by abbreviating it or by not mentioning it at all, allow playing electronic gaming machines to develop into a familiar activity that alludes to the sense of comfort and security discussed previously. In much the same way that the allocation of nicknames to humans is reserved for people with whom there is a degree of familiarity or social intimacy, the language of gambling suggests a similar level of comfort and closeness to the machine.

The language, images and metaphors participants drew upon to describe the gaming environment were indications of the depths of their gambling problem, and the hold the machines have over many participants. Time and time again, respondents spoke of the machines as being lovers and friends, as filling a gap that nothing else could:

'I used to dream about them, I used to smell them in my dreams ... '

'I dream about the patterns, I wake up with the noises in my head ... '

'You just fall in love with them. They can give a feeling that nothing else can give you. It fills a gap in your life—just the thrill of seeing it spin. I could go and sit all day and just play three lines. Thirty dollars, forty dollars—it just wasn't enough unless I was gambling \$100 at a time. You think 'I can go without this, or I can go without that'—you don't care until you've spent every last cent ... '

'Once you get there, you don't want to leave. You don't want someone else to have your machine, to get the money on your machine—you want to stay there all night ... '

'You don't realise how involved you get with the machine—everything else becomes obsolete ... '

'I don't feel anything except me and that machine. I feel great. It's where I want to be. When I lose I feel so dirty, so "what have I done", but you are so in love with that machine ... '

'I never thought about a thing. I couldn't tell you who was sitting next to me, even if I'd known them for years. All I cared about was the machine in front of me ... '

A number of service providers reported that their clients would become preoccupied with thinking about gambling: 'the poker machine is the only 'person' they can relate to', and 'it is as if the gambler is having an affair with the poker machine.'

While considerable research has gone into explaining the reasons why gamblers are drawn to the machine⁹ (e.g. Skinner's theory of reinforcing effects through 'random', intermittent wins or long intervals without reward), little attention has been paid to attempting to understand this 'social' relationship between player and machine, and the meanings and values that participants place on the activity itself. It is here that the notion of 'commodity fetishism' provides a useful analytical framework for conceptualising the relationship between player and machine.

With its roots in the writing of Karl Marx, commodity fetishism occurs when inanimate, material objects are spoken of in terms that are more commonly reserved for people or animate beings. In so doing, inanimate objects (such as money in Marx's example) are endowed with magical powers, capable of transforming social relationships.

Much of the language of gamblers in this study resonates with this idea of commodity fetishism. In the language of problem gambling, electronic gaming machines are the subject of feelings and emotions—such as love—usually reserved for other people. In support of this association between machine and human properties, several service providers reported that 'you will often find women gambling on machines that have warm memories or good associations, or 'new age' ones with dolphins and rainbows.' As a further example of commodity fetishism, a number of respondents, for example, had 'lucky machines' that would magically deliver a win: 'I play only three machines, they're my favourites. If they're not free, I'll have a lemon squash and bide my time until they're available. I think 'I can win on this machine'.' In this formulation of the 'lucky machine', the machine takes on a life of its own, operating seemingly without human intervention. As a fetishised object, the lucky machine requires no human input—the machine itself will magically generate a win. Several respondents claimed that 'you can tell when a machine is becoming lucky—you can sense it.' The notion of the lucky machine reveals perhaps the

⁹ See Walker 1992a and 1992b for a summary of these predominantly psychological interpretations for EGM behaviour.

cruellest lesson of gambling: machines can't have luck, rather people have luck (and sometimes very little of it). For the problem gambler however, the human opportunity of 'being lucky' is transferred to an inanimate object.

While commodity fetishism offers one interpretation for problem gambling behaviour, further research needs to be conducted into the allure of the machine that enables it to be fetishised; to take on a 'life' of its own. Commodity fetishism fits with what service providers in this study report about the difficulty of the broader community in understanding a gambling addiction.

Several service providers said apparently irrational, 'out of control' behaviour is easier for people to understand when it is a substance rather than an object involved. However when a machine has become your best friend, it is reported as extraordinarily difficult for family and friends to come to grips with the relationship. The difficulty for 'outsiders' in understanding the problem also lends credence to the importance of language as a way of understanding the very particular social world in which problem gamblers are situated. The very fact that we refer to 'problem gamblers' suggests that it is the person who has the problem and not the machine, whereas the authors would argue that, from the qualitative evidence of this study, there is something about the machines that makes them problematic, and more attention needs to go to understanding how their design and workings play on human psychology to control and seduce.

4.7 Stigma and Shame

The language used to describe problem gambling also suggests a socially unacceptable activity shrouded in secrecy and shame. Stereotypes of irrationality are frequently carried in community attitudes towards problem gambling activity, with the perception being that problem gamblers are 'weak willed', 'irresponsible' or even 'plain stupid'. The wife of one problem gambler said: 'I felt real shame, I felt like we were the dropkicks of the family.'

While many spoke of feelings such as 'most people probably think we're dickheads', the problem gamblers interviewed were also quick to identify a possible reason for such negative attitudes towards problem gambling:

'There's no image or stereotype of a problem gambler. It's not like when you're a little kid and your mum shows you a bum in the street and says "son if you keep drinking that's how you'll end up." There is no picture of what a gambler is ... '

The service providers interviewed were particularly instructive here, with many commenting that there is a lack of understanding and acceptance of problem gamblers, with one service provider even being asked 'how they can work with such losers?'

'Non-problem gamblers just don't understand how people can get addicted ... they don't understand why they just throw their money away ... '

'Many feel they have a choice to go or not ... '

'An "I don't have a problem with it, so why should you?" mentality exists ... '

'There seems to be more understanding and acceptance of alcohol or drug addiction because people know it is a physical or chemical addiction ... '

A few mentioned that 'the general community probably think that problem gamblers are only those with lower socio-economic status,' a perception that interestingly extended to gamblers as well, with several expressing surprise when they see 'a well-dressed person in there.' Only one service provider (from a regional location) perceived the general community to be quite aware of and compassionate towards the issues around problem

gambling. Several service providers said the community perceived problem gamblers as 'seedy', the fear being that 'this person's going to steal from me', and if they do commit a crime they are seen in an even worse light.

For some problem gamblers, this perception was reality. When describing her return to work after time off to 'sort my shit out', one interviewee recalls the following situation:

'It was hard with the police case hanging over me. A lot of people wouldn't employ me. When I went back to nursing, there was a lot of bullying at work—"you can't look after Mrs. So and So—she's got beautiful jewellery and you might steal it." They were worried about the drugs—they thought I might be getting into that as well. One day a watch went missing and everyone thought it was me ...'

The same woman describes the stigma which members of her own family imposed on her:

'My brother wouldn't let me see my niece or nephew for a while—that was hard. My nephew said to my niece the other day: "You shouldn't do that (bet on the Footy Bets), you'll end up like Auntie Sandra"¹⁰ ...'

The flip side of these perceptions is that such feelings of shame make seeking and getting help all the more difficult. One man, who was keeping his gambling a secret, reports that he has 'not had a play for 11 or 12 days, but I've got no one to skite to. That makes it hard to keep going.'

The problem with getting and seeking help is perhaps accentuated for those in rural and regional centres where 'everyone knows everyone'. One respondent said: 'in regional centres there's an issue of confidentiality. It's like with domestic violence, you can't take a woman down to the police station because the sergeant is playing golf with the husband.'

Some of the language used in the research literature to define the problem relies heavily on these notions of stigma and shame. Brown & Coventry say 'compulsive gamblers are those who engage in an act that they believe is detrimental but feel unable to stop' (1997: 4). While such appeals to compulsion regard gambling as 'an incurable illness', in which the gambler is weak and powerless, they also focus on the deficiencies of the individual, leading to stigmatising effects. It puts people in a category that demands special attention, which then becomes a vicious circle for gamblers and families of people affected by problem gambling. The language used to describe certain behaviour, the messages transmitted through media and other communication channels serves to construct the 'problem gambler' as a class apart; a form of social classification that stigmatises rather than supports.

¹⁰ All names used in this report are pseudonyms

Chapter 5

Impact and Effects of Problem Gambling

5.1 The Gambling ‘Problem’

The term ‘problem gambling’ is fraught with conflicting and competing meanings and interpretations. How is a problem defined? Who decides what is a problem? Do gamblers, their families and service providers speak of a gambling ‘problem’ in the same way, in the same language? And how is a problem measured, when the impact and effects of gambling devastate individuals and their families in so many different ways? This chapter teases out some of the competing (and complementary) definitions and frameworks within which problem gambling is talked about by gamblers, families affected by gambling and service providers.

One of the principal barriers to effective service delivery, as identified by problem gamblers, was that many of the problem gambling service providers were not ex-gamblers and ‘didn’t speak my language, didn’t understand my world’. This emphasises the need to understand the different frames of reference within which people conceptualise, define and articulate ‘a problem.’ It is only when the forms of problem gambling, and its various manifestations and interpretations are fully understood, that effective contributions can be made to improving models of service delivery and community information in respect of problem gambling.

5.2 Defining the Problem—Competing Perspectives

Service providers were asked if it was possible to describe or quantify the scale of the problem. While all claimed that they could not speak for the whole of Victoria as they only saw ‘slices of the problem rather than the whole pie’, they nonetheless saw problem gambling as being a ‘big’ or ‘increasing problem.’

‘New people are coming every week ... it’s an ongoing situation ... ’

‘Ever since the pokies came here, I have seen more and more people for their problem gambling ... ’

‘We only see those who choose to come to counselling. I see many people at venues who look like they need treatment ... ’

‘We only see the tip of the iceberg! ... ’

‘It’s more than the two or three per cent prevalence figure ... ’

‘My clients tell me that they know other people who need help and aren’t seeking treatment ... ’

‘Gambling affects more people than just the problem gamblers themselves ... ’

‘It’s like an iceberg. We only see the top 10 per cent, the rest is hidden ... ’

As well as pointing to a potential underclass of problem gamblers who do not seek help, such comments would seem to support, in qualitative terms, what a growing body of other research is able to quantify: that the prevalence rates of problem gambling in Victoria, and indeed elsewhere in Australia, are on the rise (Darbyshire et al 2001; Productivity Commission 1999).¹¹

When measuring or assessing the severity of problem gambling for individual clients, service providers typically fell back on one of three classificatory frameworks typically used to ascertain the severity of a gambling problem for a presenting individual:

- the South Oaks Gambling Screen (see Lesieur & Blume 1987);
- the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), designed by the American Psychiatric Association, and widely used in Australian clinical settings to measure a variety of disorders, including problem gambling;
- the Minimum Data Set required by the Department of Human Services in Victoria at client intake.

Of particular concern for this report however, which seeks to understand problem gambling through the eyes of problem gamblers and their families, is that such models held little currency with the gamblers interviewed, who spoke of their 'problem' in ways that captured the huge social and financial impacts and effects of their gambling on their own and others' lives. In other words, rating 'SOGS plus 5' on the South Oaks Gambling Screen meant next to nothing to a problem gambler: the impact of a relationship breakdown, the loss of a home through gambling, or a criminal conviction, among other things, being the very real, very personal indicators through which problem gamblers measured the impact and severity of their gambling activity on their own and others' lives.¹²

When asked what constituted 'problem gambling', the majority of gamblers mentioned 'spending beyond your means':

'When you spend money you can't afford to spend. I spend more than I intend to. Some people go heaps of times and only spend ten dollars. It depends on other people's income ...'

'Someone who bets beyond their means. Someone who can't control themselves. The frequency is irrelevant, the money is irrelevant if you go beyond your means ...'

Others spoke of the problem in terms of the 'hold' that it has over them and their behaviour:

'When it has control of you. It's got nothing to do with what you gamble on. I know people who are beside themselves if they don't get their Tattsлото numbers in— what's the difference? ...'

'When you go and don't come out until you've lost every last cent. When you think what can I do or sell to make up for what I've lost ...'

¹¹ For comment on the increase in international prevalence rates, one can refer to Potenza, 2001; Volberg, 2000.

¹² Such social definitions of problematic behaviour become all the more murky when gambling is considered in a cross-cultural context. Differences in understandings and perceptions of risks, and of problems, are accentuated when attempting to make sense of gambling in very different cultural terms. What is judged 'a problem' by western standards does not always correlate to the same behaviour when made sense of through a non-western cosmology or frame of reference. Still, almost all of the studies in the gambling literature are Western-based and the results are often generalised to other ethnic and cultural groups.

'Going to the pokies by yourself—that's a problem. Going to relax—that's a problem. Needing and wanting and thinking about going—that's a problem. Thinking the pokies aren't fun—that's a problem. Going beyond your limits—that's a problem ...'

Such perceptions of problem gambling behaviour correspond to some definitions of gambling behaviours such as those below, which describe gambling in terms of actions, impacts and effects. However greater attention needs to be paid to allowing gamblers' own experiences of gambling and its consequences, as defined and articulated by gamblers, to stand as equally legitimate indicators of 'the problem.' Accordingly, some service providers take their cue from the clients themselves. Freethy, for example, reports that Gambler's Help Southern allows 'clients to self-define; there are no entry barriers such as screening with clinical tools' (unpublished: 4).

Some Definitions of Gambling Behaviour

Social gambler

Uses gambling as a form of recreation. While wins are hoped for, punters expect to lose and so control their behaviour (Blaszczynski, et al, 1997).

Moderate problem gambler

Constitutes about two per cent of the population. It is associated with gambling more than once a week, losing more than fifty dollars per week, gambling related debts, motives of winning rather than playing for entertainment, chasing losses, concealment of gambling, and guilt and depression (Dickerson, 1990).

Excessive problem gambler

Relates to about 1–2 per cent of the Australian population. This behaviour leads to more than just financial problems and includes: relationship conflict and breakdowns, accumulated debts, borrowings, loss of productivity at work or school, criminal behaviour and serious health issues such as suicidal thoughts (Blaszczynski, et al 1997).

As can be seen in the following diagram, the Productivity Commission classified 2.1 per cent of problem gamblers, using a three-levelled gambling continuum model, based on a variant of the SOGS instrument in combination with other self assessment questions and indicators of harm for measuring problem gambling (Dickerson's method was also used to estimate the number of severe gamblers).

Productivity Commission’s Gambling Continuum

| Most people | Problem gamblers | |
|--|--|--|
| | A minority – 1.1% | A small group – 1% |
| No problems (Level 1) | Moderate problems (Level 2) | Severe problems (Level 3) |
| Entertainment Hobby Social activity Pleasant surroundings | Chasing losses Guilt Arguments Concealment of gambling Some depression High expenditure | Depression Serious suicide thoughts Divorce Debt and poverty Crime |

5.3 Use and Appropriateness of the Term ‘Problem Gambling’

The highly clinical or medical models of assessing and defining problem gambling do not extend to the treatment of problem gambling. All service providers saw problem gambling as a complex knot of social and structural issues, with several pointing out the weaknesses in the individual ‘disorder’ model promoted by the DSM-IV problem gambling measurement tool.

All were satisfied with the term ‘problem gambling’ as a way of defining gambling activity, as it tended to relate to particular behaviours and not deficiencies within the individual:

‘Problem gambling is when a person recognises gambling as creating problems for them, whether the problems are economic, family or whatever. It is useful because it covers partners and family members as well and it fosters ownership of the problem. For treatments to work, the person must perceive that they have a problem. The disease mentality of the DSM definition doesn’t do this ...’

‘Any gambling that causes issues or disturbances in their life whether it is financial, relationship problems etc. It is useful because it allows a continuum of problem gambling, from those who are just starting out because they are bored or lonely to those where it is just an addiction or habit. Clients also prefer not to be seen in black and white terms, that is, they are either a pathological gambler or not ...’

‘Problem gambling is when it causes problems like not being able to sleep or eat and causing anxiety or stress when they drive past venues. It is when gambling takes over their life and their personality characteristics change, that is, they’re not who they used to be. It is useful because it is flexible and tailors to individual perceptions of the problem ...’

‘Problem gambling is a result of spending too much time and money on gambling and losing control over it. It leads to impact on themselves, their family and the community. It is useful because it doesn’t force it to be an individual problem. It allows a wider spectrum of problem gambling than the DSM ...’

‘I define problem gambling in behavioural terms. It’s a coping strategy—a way to escape other things in their life. It is very useful because you don’t describe the person and label them—there is more to the person than the behaviour. It also doesn’t help owning the problem ...’

5.4 Manifestations of the Problem

There was commonality between clients and providers of problem gambling services in measuring the impact of problem gambling on individuals and communities. As has been comprehensively documented in a range of sources, the effects of problem gambling behaviour typically manifest themselves in the following ways:

- poor work performance/study performance;
- unemployment;
- debts/bankruptcy;
- loss of housing, poorer nutrition (of individual and of loved ones, especially children), poorer hygiene due to unpaid water and electricity bills;
- increase in criminal related offences (especially domestic violence);
- health related problems (especially stress and anxiety related problems) for both the gambler and their loved ones (e.g. wives of problem gamblers were more likely to have physical health problems or to be depressed);
- high rates of divorce/separation;
- increased sexual risk-taking behaviours;
- higher rates of suicide ideation or suicide;
- high levels of co-morbidity with substance/drug abuse;
- high levels of co-morbidity with psychological disorders such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, anxiety disorders, Attention Deficit Disorder, depression, affective disorders.

Most of these impacts were reported by clients, family members and service providers alike, who identified some or all of the above effects of problem gambling as impacting upon themselves, their partners or loved ones, or their clients.

In broad terms, the effects of problem gambling reported here can be grouped into financial/employment and family/relationship impacts.

5.4.1 Financial/employment Impact

The financial losses experienced through problem gambling have been discussed earlier in section 4.2.1 of this report. Consideration now needs to be given to the impacts of these losses on gamblers, their families and the wider community.

Service providers said gambling impacts upon their clients' financial and/or employment circumstances in the following ways:

'Problem gamblers gamble all their rent and food money and savings or spend all their pay in one hit ...'

'They are always in debt ...'

'I know some who have lost their homes to gambling ...'

'They can't pay their bills ...'

'It's harder for them to find work if they have a history of problem gambling ...'

'In a rural town, it's hard to get employed again once you've been to court for stealing—everybody hears about it ...'

'Some have to cover up for their crimes at work which is very distressing—they have to change their own characteristics ...'

The financial/economic impact of problem gambling affects the wider community, with many service providers mentioning the effect of problem gambling on the local economy and small businesses in rural communities:

'People are spending their money on the pokies instead ...'

'The local shoe shop and Manchester shop has closed down because there's no business ...'

'The money leaves the community and goes to gaming providers and their shareholders ...'

'I've seen small businesses close down due to theft ...'

'Some problem gamblers are unreliable and don't turn up for work—in small communities, workers are important and are often close friends of employers. Employers are often worried about their employees and call the community health service for advice ...'

Very few of the problem gamblers reported that gambling had impacted on their employment. However, for those who did report that gambling had affected their employment, the consequences were quite catastrophic, as evidenced in the following comments:

'I lost my job through it. I'm still struggling with the aftermath of that. I had a cash advance, you might say, from my company. I used to be in a management position, now I'm in a lowly admin position ...'

'A while ago I took time off work to play. I guess it impacts on you if you're feeling crap all the time ...'

'I was working as a fundraiser for an organisation, and I used to skim 'expenses' from them. When they found out, they laid criminal charges. It was then that I realised it was a huge problem. I had a breakdown—I couldn't remember anything that happened for two weeks ...'

'I've borrowed money for work, for living money, rather than for the gambling. I took a "director's" loan—I guess you'd call it embezzlement. Yes, I gamble to the point where I'm skating on the thin edge of legality ...'

While the majority of people interviewed claimed their gambling did not affect their employment situation, all could speak of the wider financial impacts of their gambling on themselves and their families, through limiting opportunities for leisure and recreation, and through being increasingly unable to provide material needs (food, clothing, shelter) for their families:

'I'm buying less expensive clothes. I used to be a pretty flash dresser. I've cut down on expensive clothes. Now I'll settle for a Target T-shirt instead of RM Williams' clothes ...'

'When I started putting the rent in, and cutting back on food for the kids, I knew it was time to get some help ...'

'It came at a time when I didn't have young kids—I'm grateful for that. I always paid my bills, and I always paid my rent. I now have a beautiful relationship with my kids ...'

'My kids would ring and say 'Mum where are you, what are we having for tea?' If it was a good night, I'd say, we'll have a pizza. If I'd had a bad night, I'd say, we'll have to have toast ...'

'When I think of all the things I could have given my kids over the years I make myself sick ...'

For some of the families affected by problem gambling, the loss of disposable income for leisure and recreation hit hard:

'Lending him so much money has left me short for other things like shopping for clothes ...'

'I'm retired. We don't have the resources for major holidays. It wasn't a cashed up retirement to begin, but now we're running pretty close to the line ...'

For most, however, it was the realisation of watching money disappear, of having to re-mortgage or sell family homes that was particularly devastating, as it dramatically reflected the scale of debt accumulated through problem gambling.

5.4.2 Family/relationship Impacts

For all their monetary losses, many problem gamblers said their greatest losses from gambling were relationships with partners, families and friends:

'For a long time it didn't interfere—my husband didn't know. Now he does, we have fights over the debts rather than the gambling—he thought that all the bills had been paid ...'

'It's very strained. Things get on an even keel, then I do something stupid. It's disastrous losing that amount of money—it makes you feel like garbage ...'

'He [boyfriend] is understanding, because he gambles too. We have a very honest relationship. He's never been angry at me ...'

'It's been knocked around by this. My wife is still with me, but we have had separations ...'

'I'm single—it's been a barrier to forming new relationships ...'

'My relationships were non-existent for two-and-a-half years. You have an underlying sadness about that, but you don't care. People come over and you don't even open the blinds ...'

'Your relationships are terrible. You're nasty and you've got the shits with everyone ...'

'I've done time, my marriage has broken up. The gambling's cleaned me out over the years ...'

Equally, service providers reported that problem gambling negatively impacts upon intimate and familial relationships through the gambler 'not being there' for children or partners:

'Children are neglected because no money is spent on them, no holidays are taken ...'

'Arguments (and sometimes violence) are common, especially over money issues ...'

'Some find that their partners have blown all their super ...'

'Some gamblers are very angry or moody when they lose money or can't gamble and put their anger on their children and partners ...'

Likewise, families identify the heartache and frustration of living with a problem gambler:

'It's very difficult. I often wonder "Why me?" I have to control all the finances and juggle a full-time job and the kids. It's so much pressure. The gambling is like the third person in the marriage. I never know if he is gambling so it creates a lot of anxiety. It affects my own self-esteem too. I just have to try and keep going ...'

'It's really difficult. I'm torn between love for him and protecting myself and my family. It's hard having to draw the line and be strong. It's sad that I can't trust my own twin brother. He's been in Tasmania for the last six months and I haven't had any contact with him ...'

'I don't live with her but I know she creates a lot of stress on my father who is already sick. My siblings and I are constantly worried about her—what will happen when the money runs out? I'm really scared that my father will hurt her one day if he gets too angry ...'

'It's devastating. I lie awake at night. It's a constant worry. It's destroyed me ...'

'It was very hard for a long time because of the trust factor. I found he was sneaking the credit cards. It was frustrating being his keeper and being in charge of the money. He had no access to the key card. It became my responsibility ...'

For about half of the gamblers interviewed, their partners and families were aware of their gambling problem, unwanted circumstances usually forcing their hand and prompting the gambler to confide:

'I'd come home and he'd say 'where's the shopping?' I'd have blown the lot ...'

'My boyfriend only found out in the last few days. I told him straight away when I lost \$1,400. He noticed I was depressed anyway ...'

'She's not totally aware—she became aware through the calls to the TAB, she's not aware of how much I spend ...'

'My family are aware—they were there the night I got the bank statement [\$169,000]—the cops had already been in contact with them about the fundraising money. I collapsed in the middle of a family discussion ...'

'I told them when it became too great for me to handle, when I knew I was hurting them ...'

'I had to borrow money from them. My partner knows—I had a court case because of work—I was convicted of theft from my employer ...'

Service providers report a similar pattern when it comes to seeking and getting help:

'Most people I see are there because they've had to acknowledge that they have a problem, when they know that they just won't get their debt back, no matter how hard they chase. That's hard, because to stop gambling is to give up hope ...'

For most gamblers, having their hand forced through the desperation of their circumstances is one of the key precipitators for presenting to Gambler's Help.

However, while the families and partners of problem gamblers were aware of the gambling problem, many of the gamblers interviewed could not tell their friends, emphasising the socially isolating nature of problem gambling:

'They don't know how much I've spent. I'm too embarrassed to tell. They know I play, but they don't think I've got a problem ...'

'Generally, because of my feelings of guilt at borrowing money, I find someone I haven't had an impact on—I tend to change friendships ...'

'For some, they think I'm a criminal. I borrowed a lot of money from people, but for some reason I always borrowed \$1,800 ... I'd say I'm in financial trouble and I'm too embarrassed to tell my parents. Every time I borrowed something, I'd always sign something. It was amazing who came to your aid and who didn't come to your aid. People were very judgemental ... it's been good to prove them wrong ...'

'I only told a couple of very close friends ...'

'You'll be lucky if they'll hang around ... you only care about getting the Five Frogs ...'

Gambling impacted on friendships through the gambler's inability to afford social outings:

'It affects everything—you plan something, to go out to dinner say, and then you have to cancel because you have no money, so you lie and say you're not feeling well. You've generally got the shits with the world, so you take it out on them ...'

'I have no money to do other things like go to nightclubs'

'I couldn't afford to go out—I'm lucky to still be living in my own house. I'm getting the CV joint fixed on my car this week—I can afford to fix it after three years. When I wasn't gambling, I was thinking about gambling—I just let everything go from my life ...'

5.5 Concealment and Deceit

For gamblers and families alike, it was the lies that were told and the money that was pilfered or 're-directed' to support a gambling problem that had the greatest impact on their lives and relationships:

'I play by myself—I tell my wife I'm going to visit my mate Paul¹³ on a Saturday morning. I spend about 20 minutes with him, and then I go down to the XX. I'll stay there one or two hours then I go home and say "Oh yeah, Paul's great" ...'

'I've started to get into the super and other places where my wife thinks we've still got ten grand. My wife is starting to get suss about the money—I don't have quite as much cash in my wallet ...'

'I say I'm going to visit my dad who's in an aged-care home ...'

Likewise, service providers report that lying is a huge component of problem gambling, with relationship breakdown due to loss of trust, betrayal and deceitful/secretive behaviour and also the high stress it causes: 'a lot of partners just can't take it anymore and end up leaving.'

However the concealment and deceit that problem gambling produced perhaps hits hardest for family members who are, or become, aware of their partner or loved one's gambling problem. One respondent, speaking about her mother, said:

'She lies about it, she denies she has a problem, she becomes aggressive and defensive when you ask about it.' She avoids me and other families so we can't ask—she's secretive, she covers it up all the time. She avoids us—we have to go and visit her. That creates a lot of stress on my father who is already sick [with cancer]. It puts a constant stress on me and my siblings – we are always worrying about her—what will happen when the money runs out. My father might hurt her one day if he gets too angry ...'

As identified in the research findings detailed in this chapter, while there is some discrepancy between clients of problem gambling services and the service providers in defining and assessing what constitutes problem gambling, there is considerable continuity when it comes to assessing the consequences of problem gambling, with gamblers and service providers alike speaking the same language on this issue. In many ways, shifting the emphasis away from gambling behaviours to the consequences of gambling to measure the degree to which an individual qualifies as a problem gambler, may offer a way around some of the limitations imposed by the existing assessment and diagnostic instruments.

The very subjectivity of the consequences of gambling for individuals and their families, and the ways in which gambling variously and discretely impacts upon peoples lives, needs to be taken as seriously as any statistical quantitative assessment tool when treating problem gambling. An opposite comment from one respondent supports the need to value the personal experience of gamblers over SOGS, DSM-IV or the Minimum Data set when it comes to measuring the severity and impact of a gambling problem:

'Don't attack the problem from the point of view of statistics. Saying two per cent of the population are problem gamblers only trivialises the problem. The fact that I've done time, I've lost relationships, and I'm in counselling—that's what they should be talking about; about how it fucks up people's lives ...'

¹³ All names used in this report are pseudonyms.