A thematic analysis identifying concepts of problem gambling agency: With preliminary exploration of discourses in selected industry and research documents

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Abstract

The focus of this exploratory analysis was the idea and locus of *agency* in conceptualisations of gambling and problem/pathological gambling within corporate and academic domains as presented in public discourses. In order to *unpick* and analyse how such agency is being conceptualised and presented, the author carried out a preliminary thematic analysis of selected public documents. While annual financial reports, academic articles, and public testimony constituted the sample for analysis, the intention was to propose a methodology and framework of analysis that might be applied by future researchers to an expanded selection of documents deemed to be of interest. A notable overlap of themes was found wherein agency for (problematic) gambling was placed with individual gamblers against an assumed neutral backdrop of free-market forces, with industries only agentic in responding to the consumption demands of freely choosing (and implicitly self-actualising) individuals (except where credit is taken for the generation of increased consumption as translated into profits). In conclusion, it is suggested that the legitimacy and practice of political-economic and institutional analyses be reclaimed, providing complementarity to current reflections on the nature of agency and assisting us to better understand the notion of (gambling-related) harm production.

Keywords: problem gambling, agency, discourse, habitus, field, thematic analysis, neoliberal, individualism, harm production

Introduction: Theoretical approach and key concepts

The focus of this study is the idea and locus of *agency* in conceptualisations of gambling and problem/pathological gambling within corporate and academic domains as presented in public discourses. In order to *unpick* and analyse how such agency is being conceptualised and presented, a thematic analysis of selected public documents was carried out. Documents were mainly the annual or financial reports of gambling corporations, academic monographs, and the public testimony of the CEO of the American Gaming Association presenting to a UK gambling legislation review committee. While the selection of documents for this exploration was far from exhaustive, it is hoped that the overall analytical framework and methodology might provide some inspiration and direction for future researchers.

Firstly I will articulate a few key concepts that inform my analysis and discussion, namely *agency*, *discourse*, and the related concepts of *habitus* and *field*.

Agency

This term may refer to socially generative action and/or the independent action of autonomous individuals within society. It is often used in theoretical debates about the nature, manifestations, locations, and limits of societal generation/regeneration within individual-social structure framings. In fact, many theorists conceptually site agency along points on an individual-structure continuum. Various theorists also conceptualise individual agency and social structure as happening at the same time, via the same processes, a viewpoint shared by this author (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1986).

For this study, the representation of (problematic) gambling agency through public discourse by corporations and academics/researchers is of central interest. Incidentally, such focus may serve to remedy to some degree the usual concentration by researchers on the putatively aberrant psychology of individual problem gamblers, as we cast our gaze toward the socially constituted and constituting psychological reasoning of figures in the corporate and academic domains or fields.

Discourse

The following exploration was generally informed by the critical interpretation of language and knowledge as it relates to social power, a chief proponent of this being Foucault (1971, 1972, 1979). Foucault demonstrated how the discursive construction of illness, pathology, normality, and deviance had power-infused ramifications for social practices, i.e., the subjection of some by others. He included in his analysis the construction and expert treatment of new forms of pathology, the social elevation of emerging medical and psychiatric disciplines, and the marginalisation and "treatment" of population segments defined as being deviant (1971, 1972, 1979). Thus discourses were seen as being socially formative or "practices which form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). Furthermore, in the power they carry, discourses were said to be instrumental in processes of societal governance (1971, 1972, 1979).

While there is a general understanding of what discourse means in social theory, there are also important differences, necessitating some explication of how the concept is used as part of the theoretical framework for this discussion.

Broadly speaking, I concur with the social constructionist approach whereby social structure, social practices, and the associated discourses are all seen as part of the same phenomenon (Burr, 1995, p. 63). In particular, I am interested in the role of discourse in what is socially produced, promoted, and legitimated as knowledge and the intimate relationship of such knowledge with social power. Associated with this, it is interesting to think about *who* gets to decide what is knowledge: Who are the gatekeepers carrying the keys of legitimacy? What are the conduits through which they speak? What are they saying? As they are of special interest for this study, I summarise Burr's take on the

various dimensions of discourse below, as provided in her comprehensive review of theoretical approaches. I would argue that all senses are relevant for this discussion, although there is not space to articulate the various implications in detail:

- discourse as the *version of events* that is given precedence; e.g., when we define or represent something in a particular way, we are producing a particular knowledge which brings power with it (1995, p. 64);
- discourse in its *performative dimension*, i.e., the accounts that are being constructed and the effects for the speaker or writer—the rhetorical devices being used and how they are employed (1995, p. 47); and
- discourse as imbedded in *power relations with political effects*; e.g., "representations of people as free individuals can serve to support power inequalities between them while passing off such inequalities as fair or somehow natural" (1995, p. 62).

Importantly, discourses are not "just talk"—they are socially constitutive in important ways and, as suggested above, deeply implicated in the exercise of social power.

Habitus and field

In addition to the theoretical ideas of agency and discourse, my approach was informed by Bourdieu's ideas of field and habitus in accounting for the constant production and reproduction of social life (1977, 1992). For Bourdieu, habitus refers to ways of thinking, behaving, and speaking that are part of an integrated orientation to the world that is habitual and embodied. It is part of our natural flow of interchanges with life and the world as we experience it. Certain ways of thinking and reasoning are thereby said to underpin all choices, actions, and *regulated improvisations*, providing the framework of possibilities for individual human beings and, at the same time, reproducing the given regularities of social organization.

Bourdieu's concept of field is crucially linked to that of habitus. As areas of social organisation they are said to provide orienting *situated contexts* for human behaviour and interaction, carrying their own logic and principles along with associated preferences and options. Fields thus provide the arenas where the habitus may be informed, instilled, developed, and reproduced. In this sense the fields of the (gambling) corporate world and research academia form foci of this analytical exploration. The concepts of habitus and field thus provide a vehicle for understanding the variations in discourses about problematic gambling and other phenomena across different social domain

Methodology

Methodological approach: An overview of thematic analysis

A thematic analysis of key documents was carried out, with a focus on concepts of agency in gambling-related matters. Broadly speaking, thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting on thematic patterns within data. As noted by Braun

and Clarke, while it is widely used, "there is no clear agreement about what thematic analysis is and how you go about doing it" (2006, p. 79). They elaborate on this, stating that such analysis is poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged, even though it is a widely used qualitative analytic method (2006, p. 77). In fact, a variety of methodologies may be referred to as *thematic analysis* and may be aligned with a range of ontological and epistemological positions and theoretical frameworks. Braun and Clarke helpfully expand on this point, saying that:

> Thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants, or it can be a constructionist method, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. (2006, p. 81)

They further explain that thematic analysis can be a *contextualist* method sitting between the two poles of *essentialism* and *constructionism*, characterised by theories such as *critical realism* (e.g., Willig, 1999, as cited by Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81). This contextualist approach focuses on the ways that individuals make meaning of their experience as well as the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of reality. Therefore, as articulated by Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality (2006, p. 81).

For this study, a thematic analysis was carried out within such a critical realist—broadly constructionist—framing, strategically focussed on unpicking the surface of reality in discursive presentations of (problematic) gambling. This is in line with Braun and Clarke's description of a thematic analysis at the latent level, going beyond the semantic content of the data and starting "to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations—and ideologies—that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (2006, p. 84).

Following this epistemological backdrop, the methodology for the current study is described below, including some explication of why and how decisions about the subject matter for focus (*data set*) and the documents (*data corpus*) were chosen, including some rationale within broader societal discussions and government policy frameworks.

Method for the current study

As noted above, a strategically focussed thematic analysis was carried out on selected public documents of gambling corporations and monographs by research institutions working in collaboration with or deriving funds from gambling corporations. These themes were then analysed and compared.

Research rationale within the broader context and researcher's experience

My interest in agency as a focus of attention, analysis, and deconstruction was informed by my 10-year experience as a gambling research and policy consultant that this is a prime point of interest and contention in public discourses, particularly as it relates to the meaning and causation of problematic gambling and associated notions of *responsibility*. Common debates and understandings about the nature of problem/pathological gambling incorporate *where* and *how* it might be generated and who or what might be responsible, with responsibility being a key though unquestioned concept. In turn, such debates have major, direct policy implications for gambling policies and prevention strategies, contributing to the central contentiousness of the issue of the agency primarily responsible for problem/pathological gambling. As noted previously, "the way in which you define a problem will determine what you do about it" (Borrell with Boulet, 2001, p. 6) (though, in retrospect, *determine* should be tempered to *orient* to allow for a range of other rational and nonrational influences).

Because I work within an epistemological framework that necessitates explicit ownership of choice of subject matter and its parameters and tools for investigation, my focus on agency also derives from an interest in peeling back the moralistic and value-ridden overlay of the notion of responsibility—the more common term utilised in problem gambling policy and research, often with the implication that those who "have" gambling problems are not responsible people (or morally mature in some way) and that they really "should" be. With the potential to enhance clarity of reasoning, the idea of agency reshifts our focus to the point(s) from where gambling problems might be generated, at the same time removing the confusing obfuscation or clouding inherent in ideas of responsibility. This is not to say that responsibility should not be considered—just that it appears to be more helpful to look at *sites* of causality and aetiology first before considering where responsibility might rightfully be situated. In addition, the concept of agency usefully and holistically broadens the often narrow conceptualisations of the problem/pathological gambler in empirical psychological/psychopathological research. Such research is largely inspired by the DSM-IV nomenclature and its underlying theorisations of individual "malfunctioning" gambling agents, providing a divide between those exhibiting pathologically compulsive behaviours and those enjoying gambling as a recreational pastime. The spaces between these two groups are—of course—populated with *borderliners*, or *at-risk* persons, moving in and out of the two aforementioned categories.

The choice of documents by gambling corporations and research bodies for this exploration was informed by the well-established roles of their authors in social production and reproduction. Specifically, corporations and expert bodies are influential in providing structural and cultural framings for our daily interactions as well as the orienting fields and discourses for reflexive activity, innovation, and discussion. In particular, gambling corporations and research bodies share an interest in the construction of agency for gambling and/or problematic gambling activity, even while the nature of the interest may both differ and overlap. Research reports emerging from industry-academic partnerships may be seen to be of special interest given the trend for

universities and research institutions to be increasingly dependent on corporate funding and associated corporate interests and agendas (Adams, 2004; Gare, 2006; Giroux, 2005). While this exploratory study is necessarily confined to these two types of institutions, it is hoped it might serve as a useful starting point for similar investigations involving other institutions, such as governments and welfare bodies.

As mentioned, discourses of gambling industries and governments tend to promote the idea that problem/pathological gambling is an individual pathology or a form of aberrance or irresponsibility located and generated primarily within individuals (perhaps via faulty genes, etc.)—usually and either explicitly or implicitly expressed as a minority. On the other hand, some academics and researchers have long pointed to broader systemic factors in the aetiology of problem or pathological gambling (e.g., Doughney, 2002; Livingstone, Woolley, Borrell, Bakacs, & Jordan [Australian Institute for Primary Care, La Trobe University], 2006). While psychological and experimentally oriented researchers have, in the main, tended to individualise problem/pathological gambling constructions, other psychologists and researchers have integrated broader social and systemic factors and contextualisations into their theorisations (e.g., Griffiths & Delfabbro, 2001).

In general, the aim here is for plausibility and coherence of analysis in the context of shared and common experiences and understandings relating to the subject matter, i.e., the site and nature of agency in (problem) gambling as presented and constructed in the public domain by corporations and academic researchers. My findings are intended to be part of an ongoing conversation with gambling researchers, policy analysts, community organisations, and problem gambling activists.

Research questions

As noted, my focus for thematic analysis was on agency in the presentation and construction of (problem) gambling, specifically at what systemic sites (problematic) gambling was deemed to occur. As my analysis progressed, I expanded my focus to a related category—the *nature* (or qualitative aspects) of agency associated with (problematic) gambling activity. Thus my key question "Where is agency in (problem) gambling situated in the public discourses of gambling corporations and gambling research academics as evident in selected key documents?" was augmented with "What is the nature of agency in (problem) gambling as constructed and presented in the public discourses of gambling corporations and gambling researchers as evident in selected key documents?" This is consistent with the idea that thematic analysis is both *thoughtful* and *recursive*. Referring once more to Braun and Clarke:

> …analysis is not a *linear* process of simply moving from one phase to the next. Instead, it is (a) more *recursive* process, where movement is back and forth as needed, throughout the phases. (2006, p. 86)

Procedure

I thus closely examined the texts of the nominated documents, noting carefully every instance where the idea of agency was indicated in relation to both gambling and problem gambling, with a description of where such agency was conceptually situated and a brief description of the proposed quality or nature of the agency.

Documents studied

Lists and descriptions of the documents that were examined are given in the tables below.

Table 1
Company documents and presentations for analysis

Company	Document studied
Ainsworth Game Technology Limited	(December 2003) Half Year Report
Aristocrat Technologies Australia Pty Ltd	(June 2004) Half Year Report
Australian Gaming Machine Manufacturer's Association	(retrieved 2004) *Australian gaming machines. Do you know the whole story?*
International Game Technology (IGT)	(2000) Securities Report
Stanley Leisure	(2003) Annual Report
Stargames Ltd	(2003) Annual Report
Tabcorp Holdings Ltd	(2004) Concise Annual Report
Oral evidence from American Gaming Association to UK Joint Committee on Draft Gambling Bill	(2004) Uncorrected transcript of oral evidence

Table 2
Research documents for analysis

Authors (with research and academic bases in the US and Australia)	Document Studied
Blaszczynski, Ladouceur, & Shaffer	(2004) A science-based framework for responsible gambling: The Reno model
Blaszczynski, Ladouceur, & Nower for the Australian Gaming Council	(2004) *Self exclusion: A gateway to treatment*

Exploration and discussion of findings

Industry discourses: Corporate agency in measures of achievement, gambling consumption, and problematic gambling

The lists in the table below present a brief outline of the foci and concepts of agency as presented in the gambling industry documents and reports. In large part, industries were portrayed as entrepreneurs delivering profit to shareholders while at the same time serving the needs and wishes of customers. Gamblers were presented as individually operating, freely choosing purchasers—that is, those who are "normal". Otherwise, excessive, uncontrolled gamblers were presented as exceptional—failing somehow in moral responsibility and/or mental health.

Table 3
Discourses of agency: A thematic analysis of industry documents

Main Focus of Agency
• Corporation as profit yielding and entrepreneurial
• Corporation as service provider ("enriching" customers and satisfying needs)
• Corporation as civil libertarian in providing choices to customers
• Individual agent as gambler

Explicit/Implicit Concept of *Gambler* Agency (when indicated)
• Gambler as customer
• Gambler as voluntary free agent
• Gambler as purchaser citizen
• Problem gambler as exceptional (minority)
• Problem gambler as ill or pathological (with comorbidities)
• Problem gambler as morally aberrant (irresponsible)

These findings are elaborated on in the following discussion.

In examining gambling industry reports, I initially focussed on Annual and Half Year Reports, including those by gambling technology suppliers (International Game Technology (IGT), Aristocrat Technologies Australia Pty Ltd, Ainsworth Game Technology Ltd, and Stargames Ltd); a casino, gaming, and wagering provider (Tabcorp Holdings Ltd); and a UK casino operator (Stanley Leisure).

As might have been expected, each of the companies used measures of company profit and fiscal stability as primary yardsticks of success and progress, within the collapsing of operational and financial success that is normative for public corporate presentations (i.e., not only in annual reports and financial reports). Implicitly, company profit also

uncritically translates into corporate virtue, though Tabcorp did include an account of the responsible service of gambling in the Chairman's report (Tabcorp Holdings Ltd, 2004, p. 7; Stargames Ltd, 2003, inside cover and opposite page; Stanley Leisure, 2003, p. 1).

Typical was Aristocrat's Half Year Report, carrying a statement to the effect that its result "demonstrates management's focus on enhancing shareholder value through both bottom line results and balance sheet management" (2004, p. 6).

Consistent with this, company progress was routinely equated with profit yield as in Stanley Leisure's report: "We are now in a better position to move forward and meet the challenges of the future" (2003, p. 2).

In these reports, gambler purchasing behaviour is presented uncritically as evidence of customer enjoyment and satisfaction; that is, they are indicating their consumption preferences and "voting with their dollars". Although this epistemological construction is routinely used in free-market econometric models, it should also be noted that government-commissioned research, at least in Victoria (Australia), indicates the opposite, i.e., that many electronic gaming machine (EGM) gamblers are *not* enjoying their gambling. In a study commissioned by the Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority (VCGA), a majority of respondents disagreed with the statement: "I derive entertainment and pleasure from the money I spend on gambling" (Marketing Science Centre, University of South Australia, 2000, p. 41). In an earlier VCGA study, respondents were asked: "Do you find playing EGMs to be an appealing leisure activity?" and even amongst EGM gamblers, about 90 per cent did not find EGM gambling appealing (Deakin Human Services Australia, Deakin University, & the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne, 1997, p. 64). At the very least, it evidently cannot be assumed that purchasing behaviour translates unproblematically into indications of consumer satisfaction and enjoyment of a product or service—gambling or otherwise. Nevertheless, consumption is assumed to be a "good", perhaps with its unremarkable/unremarked presentation providing evidence of its socially entrenched "naturalness".

Corporate agency in generating problematic gambling

In contrast, we do know from research studies that a very high proportion of gaming machine profit derives from problematic gambling. According to the Australian Productivity Commission (PC), about one third of aggregate gambling losses are accounted for by problem gamblers. It found that the prevalence of problem gambling varies by mode of gambling, with the highest prevalence being for EGM gamblers; for example, nearly 23 per cent had significant problems (1999, pp. 6.1, 6.54). Furthermore, the PC found that while problem gamblers may make up a minority of the population, they account for a substantial share of expenditure overall due to their high levels of expenditure, with over 42 per cent of EGM expenditure being derived from problem/pathological gamblers who measure 5+ on the South Oaks Gambling Scale (1999, pp. 7.45, 7.46). Other studies have yielded similar findings (e.g., Rodda & Cowie, 2005, p. 81; Focal Research, 1998, p. 3; Williams & Wood, 2004, p. 6), providing

evidence that EGM corporations carry considerable agency in the generation of problematic gambling.

Government agency in regulating gambling as a barrier to corporate achievement

Consistent with the discursive practice of presenting corporate profit as a prime indicator of success, industry financial reports routinely cite government regulations to minimise gambling-related harm as barriers or impediments to success. This is apparent in the reports of Stargames Ltd (2003), Tabcorp Holdings Ltd (2004), and Aristocrat Technologies Australia Pty Ltd (2004), as evidenced in various ways in the extracts below:

> The New Zealand market is expected to remain a challenging one given the restrictions on gaming in clubs and hotels set out in the 2003 legislation and regulations. (Aristocrat Technologies Australia Pty Ltd, 2004, p. 5)

> (re: Japanese market) On 1 July 2004, new regulations (including Regulation 5) were introduced which impact the design of pachislo machines. These regulations may reduce the appeal of pachislo machines to players and as a result it is difficult to assess the likely impact on the market going forward. (Aristocrat Technologies Australia Pty Ltd, 2004, p. 5)

> In the various Australian markets, the introduction of shorter operating hours in gaming venues, smoking bans, proposed tax increases and other government policy initiatives intended to reduce problem gambling have all adversely affected the market. A new Gaming Act in New Zealand will also reduce growth prospects for gaming machine sales in that country. (Stargames Ltd, 2003, p. 3)

> In Victoria, venues are still experiencing the impact of the smoking restrictions introduced in August 2002. (Aristocrat Technologies Australia Pty Ltd, 2004, p. 3)

> Revenue from Victorian gaming was down 0.2% on the previous year, but the continuous improvement of the overall amenity at venues for all customers has reduced the impact of the smoking ban. Revenue for the second half was 5.6% above the prior corresponding period. (Tabcorp Holdings Ltd, 2004, p. 15)

While new regulatory requirements are thus evaluated for their impact on company profitability, such regulations are not similarly assessed for their efficacy in reducing harm to people and communities. For example, trends in the proportion of income derived from people with and without problematic gambling habits might fruitfully be analysed and presented alongside correlations with legislative changes and/or patterns in product design, supply, and marketing.

Conceptualisations of corporate and (problem) gambler agency

In general, these financial reports are presented against the backdrop of a "naturalised" world of consumer-purchasers and corporate sellers in a free-market economy. The underpinning econometric theorisations putatively provide the length and breadth of what it means to be a human being, within the framings of these reports. There is evidently no concept of human action outside the requirements and operations of a free-market economy—except in those cases where the personal fulfilment of consumers appears to coincide with the economic interests of profit-driven corporations. However, as highlighted by Gary Banks, Chairman of the Australian Productivity Commission, in arguing for more interventionist regulation over EGMs and venues, it is not a criticism to say that industries have little incentive to reduce problematic gambling when this translates into reduced profits. Rather, "it's a fact of commercial life" (2007, p. 24).

In Stanley Leisure's Annual Report (2003), the gambling industry is attributed agency in a large heading titled *Reeling Them In*, the implicit fish to be reeled in being a metaphor for casino patrons—with evident implications of sport and conquest by industry entrepreneurs and perhaps the later "consumption" of their customer "fish".

The more general themes, however, point to the provision of services to consequently satisfied customers; thus, while providing services for satisfied customers (with satisfaction measured by consumption), the needs of shareholders for healthy returns are also satisfied. Of course, the shareholder is the assumed audience of the report, whose main interest is assumed to be in corporate profits and dividends. In addition, the public presentation of financial reports is a legal requirement for companies, to demonstrate fiscal transparency and the probity of their business operations.

While gamblers are uncritically conceptualised in the industry reports as freely choosing purchasers of gambling products, problem/pathological gamblers, though rarely mentioned, are presented or implied as occurring only exceptionally and as errant in not taking due responsibility for their own actions.

In particular, the Tabcorp report frequently (though with apparent innocence as to the irony) states that it is *enriching* the lives of customers, e.g., "delivering *enriching* experiences through customer engagement"' [italics added] (2004, p. 9).

In apparent denial of supply or market-driven demand (i.e., whereby demand is generated rather than merely responded to as a mutually beneficial public service), it is also stated that customer preferences are being satisfied—even when such preferences do not exist in the present but are projected to exist in the future:

> It's far more than giving customers what they want, but about giving customers what they *will* want. That is real insight—knowing what gambling entertainment is going to *enrich* the lives of people six months, a year, or years from now. [italics added] (2004, p. 10)

While this Annual Report is primarily focussed on how shareholders (and also, incidentally, the company executives) are being financially enriched, the term is used as a metaphor only for what is happening to/for customers through company endeavours and enterprises. Of course, it must remain a metaphor, as it is well known that no-one who gambles regularly on EGMs over protracted periods of time becomes *financially* richer in the process.

In a similar vein, a booklet produced by the Australian Gaming Machine Manufacturers Association (AGMMA, n.d.), titled *Australian Machines. Do You Know the Whole Story?* also presents the gambler as consumer—a voluntary, freely choosing agent purchasing gambling products and services. To be human, thence, is to be a consuming individual in a free-market economy (even while gambling industries are very often highly protected from competition through government regulation, as evidenced by Victoria's EGM duopoly comprising Tabcorp Holdings Ltd and Tattersall's Ltd).

Within this conceptual framework, the person with gambling problems is, as already indicated, alternately exceptional (part of a minority), ill or pathological, morally aberrant, or irresponsible. In contrast, gambling industries supply a service to satisfy customer demand and bolster the economy. Interestingly, a morphing of the concepts of the individual as a *free citizen* and the individual as a *free consumer* occurs:

> Any basic economics text book will tell you that in a free market that expenditure represents a vote by the consumers spending that money on whatever the entertainment is that they choose…. (AGMMA, n.d., p. 11)

The contemporary democratic subject or citizen is thus presented as little more than a freely choosing consumer, incidentally enriching the coffers of gambling corporations and their shareholders.

(Problem/pathological) gambling agency and industry-researcher partnerships [H6]

Against this backdrop, some symbiotic relationships have evidently emerged between industries with an interest in marginalising the "problem gambling issue", through the appropriation of available individualising discourses (and thereby safeguarding and promoting profitability into the future) and researchers, who, through their work, uncover putative inner gambling pathology that exists independently of easy access to gaming machines and other gambling forms that offer rapid, continuous staking. This is not to comment on conscious intention as such, but rather to reflect on certain systemic collusions between industries and research institutions that seem to share convergent interests and benefits—whether related to social, institutional, and professional status or financial support.

An example of such a partnership is the industry-funded National Council for Responsible Gambling (NCRG) in the US, which has commissioned the Harvard Medical School's Division on Addiction to research gambling pathology (http://www.ncrg.org/) to the tune of millions of dollars. Importantly for this discussion, the *reason for being* of the

NCRG is to identify problem gambling as a *pathology*—or, more specifically, to fund "research that someday will identify the risk factors for gambling disorders and determine methods for not only treating the disorder but preventing it, much like physicians can identify patients at risk from cardiovascular disease long before a heart attack" (http://www.ncrg.org/)".

Thus, the problem of pathological gambling is conceptualised as an individual disorder, an a priori, with the task of research endeavours thence being to identify risk factors for the "disorder" and to congruently devise individualised methods of prevention.

A key player in this research-industry partnership is Frank Fahrenkopf Jr, president and CEO of the American Gaming Association and an active gambling industry advocate. In evidence to a UK Parliamentary Committee, the Joint Committee on Draft Gambling Bill in January 2004, he gave considerable weight to the marginal conceptualisation of gambling pathology and openly endorsed the role of the Harvard Medical School's Division on Addiction in uncovering this. His testimony is quoted in detail below, as it underscores a direct link between industry and research institutional discourses:

> … I think it is very, very clear that most experts in the United States believe today, on research done by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, and Harvard Medical School's Division on Addiction, that the rate of pathological gambling in the United States is about one per cent of the adult population. That is pretty consistent actually around the world with other studies that have been done. The important thing to realise is that research also shows that the majority of that one per cent are people who suffer from what is called co-morbidity; gambling is not their only difficulty. The majority either have problems with alcohol, drugs, depression and mental instability. There is some real research going on now particularly at Harvard as to whether or not pathological gambling is a distinct problem in and of itself and not linked with others….
>
> **Q 910 Viscount Falkland:** *Could you give us a view about problem gambling as opposed to pathological?*
>
> Mr Fahrenkopf: When Lord McIntosh visited us in the United States we suggested that the person they really should consult, and you should get the benefit of his wisdom, is Professor Howard Shaffer of the Division on Addictions of Harvard Medical School who has done more work in this area than anyone in the world, and I think it is recognised now by even the anti-gaming people that the work and research they have done is the best that there is. There may be another two to three per cent whom you would categorise as problem gambling. These are people who may have a number of traits that could possibly lead them to become pathological gamblers. Dr Shaffer and his research people of Harvard would tell you there is just as much likelihood that they will go the other way and will not have a problem. There has been some suggestion that we might get Dr Shaffer to do a paper in the area where he is

> clearly the world leader, and would be happy to assist in that request. (United Kingdom Joint Committee on Draft Gambling Bill, 2004)

Thus, while gambling industry representatives and lobbyists invoke a scientific research discourse to argue the case for minimum regulation of their industry, i.e., to address problematic gambling at an individual remedial level (rather than through more holistically conceived systemic changes, for example), it is interesting to also note the *cross-poaching* or *cross-pollinating* that occurs when researchers, in turn, invoke a free-market discourse in support of their own analyses. This is explored in the following section.

Supplementary case studies: (Problem/pathological) gambling agency in research discourses

A similarly methodical examination was made of recent gambling policy/research papers wherein the issue of agency was prominent. Again, note was made of every instance where the idea of agency was indicated in relation to both gambling and problem/pathological gambling. In each instance attention was paid to both the nominated site of agency and the nature of that agency. The lists in the tables below present a summary of some of the themes about agency that emerged, which are elaborated on in the following discussion.

Table 4
Discourses of agency—A thematic analysis of research reports

Main Focus of Agency
• Corporations as service providers
• Corporations as civil libertarians in providing choice to customers
• Corporations as key stakeholders in regulatory decision-making
• Scientists informing the reduction of gambling-related harm by assessing and counting cases of pathology
• Problem gamblers as prime agents for remedy

Explicit/Implicit Concept of Gambler Agency (when indicated)
• Gamblers as freely choosing customers
• Gamblers as generating demand to which corporations respond
• The majority of gamblers as responsible
• Problem gamblers as irresponsible
• Problem gamblers as ill/pathological
• Dichotomy of gamblers: (1) harm-free responsible recreational gamblers; (2) pathological and/or ill problem

gamblers

This was an interesting analytical exercise in conjunction with the same analysis as applied to industry discourses, as what emerged was almost a mirror image; the conceptualisations and *siting* of agency were almost identical. In both sets of reports, ideas about agency as expressed in gambling-related activity were underpinned by a clear neoliberal, free-market discourse. Even a cursory glance reveals the remarkably close similarity to those contained within industry publicity and documents.

One article studied, "A science-based framework for responsible gambling: The Reno model", encapsulates a worldview markedly consistent with that presented in gambling industry documents (Blaszczynski, Ladouceur and Shaffer, 2004),[1] the latter author being the Director of the Harvard Medical School's Division on Addiction, as noted above.

In an assumption of an untrammelled free market as the natural order, it is stated that *unjustified market intrusion* is not likely to be the right way to promote responsible gambling. Within this framework, industries are not seen as agentic in the aetiology of harm arising from any types of gambling—their profit-generating activities are part of the natural backdrop of our lives, the *world-taken-for-granted*, so to speak. On the other hand, those that would thwart natural market forces *are* agentic in their proposals for unjustified intrusion in the assumed natural order of free-market ascendancy and continuity.

Throughout the article, gambling corporations are presented as providers of a service to meet customer demands. What is left unsaid in this version of events is that contemporary forms of gambling that are most contentious in terms of their individual and community effect (e.g., EGMs) are primarily supply driven—and industries, far from being passive responders to demand, are eminently *active* agents in creating their consumer bases (Livingstone et al., 2006). This is what corporations *do*, their reason for being (gambling or otherwise), and what they explicitly document and publicise in their freely available public documents and reports, as highlighted in Banks (2007, p. 24).

With considerable slippage into commercial language and concepts, the researchers routinely refer to gamblers as *consumers in a competitive market environment*. One helpfully illustrative iteration states: "In a competitive market environment, industry operators provide a range of recreational products and opportunities to community members, applying economic and commercial business principles" (Blaszczynski et al., 2004, p. 303). Most notably, this endorsement of free-market commercial principles in conceptualising the subject forms a radical departure from the language of traditional (behavioural) scientific reports, even while the natural science paradigm is invoked to bolster authorial standing. Thus, a value-laden discursive overlay is introduced without explicit comment as the new language is thus woven into the old.

While a continuum of risk for gambling harm is presented later in the paper, much of the discussion, as I already suggested in a previous section of this report, rests on the substantially mythical assumption that there are two distinct sets of gamblers:

1. *recreational gamblers*, who enjoy their gambling and act responsibly; and
2. *problem gamblers*, who are of marginal status—the exception and abnormal; pathological and/or irresponsible.

Furthermore, there is once more an idiosyncratic merging of the language of democracy, civil liberties, human rights, and free-market imperatives—a sort of hybrid market humanism in which freedom to *buy* is of prime importance, echoing AGMMA's already-mentioned world view:

> Any responsible gambling program rests upon two fundamental principles: (1) the ultimate decision to gamble resides with the individual and represents a *choice*, and (2) to properly make this decision, individuals must have the opportunity to be informed. Within the context of *civil liberties*, external organisations cannot remove an individual's *right* to make decisions. This personal *freedom* balances against an institution's duty of care.…[italics added] (Blaszczynski et al., 2004, p. 311)

> In addition to viewing gambling as a *choice*, responsible gambling also rests upon the principle of informed *choice*. This concept is a fundamental principle of *human rights* policies. [italics added] (Blaszczynski et al., 2004, p. 312)

Putting aside the corrupted humanism that such excerpts represent, the idea of "choice" that underpins it is arguably problematic. What if the design of a product *diminishes* choice through the generation of compulsive and disassociated behaviour, as has been demonstrated in the case of EGM gambling? That this occurs has been established in a wide range of studies, utilising a variety of methodologies and approaches (e.g., Dickerson, Haw, and Shepherd, 2003; Horbay, 2004).

An associated problem with the free-choice argument as applied to gaming machines is in the nature of knowing; what does it mean to *know*? Do we conceive knowing as the storage of information in a metaphorical sense of having some sort of bank of information in our heads—or is knowing closer to Bourdieu's concept of habitus—a set of dispositions to act, think, feel, interact, and behave in certain ways? Is knowledge *embodied* and *habitual*—part of our socially acquired way of doing things and being with other people—our repertoire for being and orienting ourselves in this world? If this truly is knowledge in the most meaningful sense, understood as—at least—*impinging on patterns of gambling*, then this has clear implications for the efficacy of harm prevention strategies and policies—especially as the provision of information about the odds of winning, details of counselling services, warnings to be responsible, etc., would not be adequate when, at the same time, gambling industries are engendering a more damaging and insidious way of knowing through the social and bodily interaction of gamblers with machines. At the same time, information about the nature of the games would still have legitimate implications for consumer protection and conscionable conduct of business enterprises (see various explorations of such in Doughney, 2002; Horbay, 2004; Dickerson et al., 2003); i.e., it might be seen as necessary but not sufficient.

Nevertheless, the onus for corrective *action*, i.e., agency, in the Reno Model is very much placed on the person suffering from gambling problems, even while direction to appropriate therapeutic intervention is emphasised (Blaszczynski et al., 2004, p. 309). Needless to say, while inner pathology is *assumed* (as opposed to a "normal" individual responding to an inherently harmful product), little is ventured about the potential role of corporate agentic supply and promotion in problematic gambling aetiology or prevention.

The neoliberal discursive bent of this article, particularly in relation to the locus and nature of agency, is evident in a paper by Blaszczynski et al. (2004): "Self exclusion: A gateway to treatment", written for the Australian Gaming Council. With the central focus on self-exclusion programs as a remedy for gambling-related harm, the onus of detection and monitoring of problems is shifted from operators to individuals or third parties, with an emphasis on treatment. Once more, the ideas of individual pathology and "choice" are of central importance (while even the idea of inner pathology would seem to undermine the idea of free choice).

Apparently, while individuals are agentic and prominent in the generation and cessation of their own gambling problems—and therefore the main focus for responsibility—industry is once more positioned as part of the natural order of a free-market world.

In this context, the concept and expression *personal responsibility* has distinctly moralistic overtones, which tends to confound the issue of agency. Not many would wish to volunteer that they will not take responsibility for their actions, as this would seem to imply moral aberrance or immaturity. Arguably, the term is heavily socially laden (see Anon and Borrell, 2004). The term *agency*, on the other hand, would seem to circumvent the problem of judgement and identify this as an analytical, theoretical issue beforehand, whether or not it even becomes a moral one, as already discussed in the methodology section.

Furthermore, with the free-market model invoked and endorsed in the article by Blaszczynski et al. (2004), gambling industries only seem to be agentic or responsible for benefits, e.g., in serving customers by meeting their preferences and enhancing their array of choice (consistent with the partial inclusions and omissions in reports to shareholders):

> The gaming industry recognises that it plays a vital role in customer assistance and provides an important link with treatment providers. (2004, p. 2)

In fact, self-exclusion itself is presented as an industry service (2004, p. 3) (perhaps as it is reasoned that the industry thereby forgoes profits).

While criticism is made of prior self-exclusion programs for placing primary focus on external control of individual behaviour, it is interesting to note that the industry reports to shareholders present corporations as very much active agents in encouraging people to spend greater amounts more often on their gambling wares—not at all the passive, neutral backdrop to gambling activity as posited in this article. In the analysis presented by

Blaszczynski et al. (2004), however, the primary agent is the customer/gambler, with the proposed model seeking to address inadequacies of current programs, in part by "shifting from a punitive approach to an integrated individual-centred focus where the emphasis is directed toward a gateway for education and rehabilitation" (2004, p. 2) (even while product-induced "education" is focussed on the generation of increased consumption). At the same time, little is said of individuals at other key points of the system—namely those in key positions in industry and government bodies. One might well ask: "Should we also be offering remedial assistance or re-education to key figures in *harm-generating* industries toward ethical corporate practice?" (e.g., tobacco, mining, greenhouse gas emitting industries). At the very least, we might seek to invigorate the discipline of *business ethics*, which seems to have become somewhat marginalised in recent times. Such a move has been argued for convincingly by Sinclair (2000), who suggests that if management is discussed only within economic parameters, managers lose the ability to look beyond the "numbers" and understand salient issues within a different and, importantly, moral framework.

At any rate, it seems clear that sites of agency, power, and control are intricately connected to the very same sites that we might well look at for remedial prevention and intervention. Arguably, we need to at least refer to the full range of possible systemic domains, dimensions, and sites before we can form an understanding of phenomena such as problematic gambling.

Discourse of a consumer/(problem) gambler

A letter sent to me by someone who has experienced EGM gambling problems first-hand offers another dimension to the analysis so far. Selected extracts are included here to specifically interrogate the location of gambling pathology in the individual gambler from a consumer perspective:

> By singling out only the individuals (known) who have got themselves into bother and labelling their behaviour as pathological and reiterating that only the vulnerable have a problem, a great piece of manoeuvring has been done and has helped allow, over the years, the gaming industry's expansion.
>
> If the term "pathological" (or its equivalent) is going to be used to describe those having problems with poker machines (by implication, the problem residing in the individual), I will probably be mocked for what I say but it does occur to me very forcefully, the modern EGM itself, is based on principles that are fundamentally psychotic in nature and are inspired by corporate greed, meaning—markedly and dangerously "out of touch" with the customary and understood world of ordinary people, who really don't have a chance against them. Many of these ordinary people, who, by their frequent association with EGMs, may find themselves also responding in a different but nonetheless, "pathological" manner. (since published as Anon and Borrell, 2004, pp. 184, 185)

We might well ask: "Why do we focus almost exclusively on the pathology of people with gambling problems in research and policy?" Indeed, why don't we cast our gaze to those points where systemic power is most concentrated in thinking about the aetiology of problematic gambling, for example, at industry and government levels? Could it be that the values of individualistic consumerism (and responsibility) and the assessment of social success by material wealth have together become the normative backdrop for both our everyday orientation and dispositions (our habitus) and our theoretical analyses, thus perhaps falling off the radar while the major focus remains on the *exceptional* pathological gambler instead? Analysis of the above discourses would seem to present a strong case for such a proposition.

At a minimum, the public reports of gambling corporations may provide evidence of the psychoanalytic concepts of *denial*—the pathological inability to face unpalatable facts—and *rationalisation*—in the wily reasoning away of unpleasant information about the evidently harmful "games" that are being peddled and the consequent revenue harvesting from the poor, the compulsive, the lonely, and the desperate (at least in their current forms and frameworks of product design, placement, promotion, and delivery). It does seem that industry figures, at least, are merely operating within a field where success is mostly measured by profit, irrespective of how and from whom it is derived, and any signals of product-related harm are directed to the public relations department—hence, perhaps, the strategic involvement of universities and research institutions, as well as welfare organisations (see Adams, 2004, for discussion).

Conclusion: Enfolding and cross-pollinating of agency discourses across industry and research fields and the importance of broader analyses

As pointed out by Burr, discourses do not correlate simply with particular interest groups and population segments. Rather they may permeate different sections of society with a variety of implications, invariably overlapping in different ways even within interest groups and population segments (1995, pp. 75–80). This was certainly a central finding in the current study, with evidence of both individualistic and neoliberal discourses permeating and criss-crossing gambling industry and gambling research fields. This is not to lay claims about *explicit intentionality by parties* in either type of organisation; rather, Foucault's more circumspect ideas about the role of motivation in discourse, again as articulated by Burr, are commensurate with my argument:

> Powerful people do not, as it were, think up and then disseminate discourses that serve their purposes. Rather, the practical and social conditions of life are seen as providing a suitable culture for some representations rather than others, and the effects of these representations may not be immediately obvious or intended. Nevertheless, once a discourse becomes available culturally, it is then possible for it to be appropriated in the interests of the relatively powerful. (1995, p. 78)

It would probably be most useful at present to reclaim the legitimacy and practice of political-economic and institutional analyses, providing complementarity to current reflections on the nature of agency, wherever it is situated. This would undoubtedly help us to better understand the notion of *harm production*—in addition to our ongoing and necessary attempts at *harm reduction*, which currently primarily focus on possible "deficiencies" in the personal agency of gamblers.

At the very least, it is hoped that a preliminary framework has been provided for similar thematic analyses relating to problematic gambling and other "addictions", allowing for expansion to other types of documentation while focussing on the fundamental concept of agency.

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[1] Also see critiques of the Reno Model by Schellinck, T., & Schrans, T. (2005) and Raeburn (2005).