How working in a gaming venue can lead to problem gambling: The experiences of six gaming venue staff

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Abstract

Arising from a larger study into workplace influences on gambling amongst employees who work in hotels, clubs, and casinos in Queensland, Australia, this paper presents six case studies of staff with gambling problems. All six developed their gambling problems while working in gaming venues. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed thematically to reveal several ways in which the work environment in gaming venues influences the gambling behaviour of these staff. For these employees, the attraction of gambling is reportedly enhanced by close interaction with gamblers, frequent exposure to gambling, the influence of fellow employees, the influence of management, workplace stress, hours of work, and frequent exposure to gambling marketing and promotions. Responsible gambling training and other venue-based responsible gambling measures did not protect these staff from gambling problems. An understanding of these workplace influences on problem gambling can inform identification of appropriate interventions.

Keywords: problem gambling, gaming venue staff, case studies, work environment, risk factors

Introduction

Although public health models of gambling recognise contextual influences on gambling, there has been minimal examination of how these influences vary for different sub-populations, particularly occupational groups. One occupational group with a distinctive work environment that could reasonably be expected to influence gambling behaviour is gaming venue employees. However, only three peer-reviewed studies have examined gambling by gaming venue staff (Collachi & Taber, 1987; Shaffer & Hall, 2002; Shaffer, Vander Bilt & Hall, 1999). Findings from these studies suggest that gaming venue employees may be an at-risk group for gambling problems. However, none of these studies conducted qualitative research to identify reasons behind this finding, nor did they examine particular aspects of working in gaming venues that might explain higher levels of problem gambling amongst staff.

This paper presents six case studies of gaming venue staff with gambling problems. Although subject to the usual limitations of case study research, these cases illuminate particular factors in the workplace that appear to have fuelled these gambling problems. As such, the cases highlight a number of issues not elsewhere reported and add to the general understanding of factors that can contribute to the development and maintenance of gambling problems. The paper first presents a brief contextual overview of gambling in the Australian state of Queensland where this research was conducted. The methodology is then explained, followed by narrations of each case. Thematic analysis of the cases is then presented. Gaming venue strategies to better discourage gambling problems amongst gaming venue employees, as recommended by the six interviewees, are then summarized and the limitations of the study outlined.

Background

In Queensland, 581 licensed clubs operated 21,102 gaming machines and 771 hotels operated 18,382 gaming machines at the end of June 2005 (Queensland Government, 2005). The state's four casinos operated 284 table games and 3,593 gaming machines (Australian Gaming Council, 2005). The casinos, along with many hotels and clubs, also operate keno and TAB outlets.[i] At June 30, 2004, there were estimated 31,000 staff positions in casinos, hotels, and clubs with gaming machines (Queensland Government, 2005). Along with gaming machines, casino games, keno and TABs, lotteries, on-course wagering, and sports betting are also widely available in Queensland.

Methodology

The six case studies were collected as part of a larger study into workplace influences on gambling amongst staff working in hotels, clubs, and casinos in Queensland, Australia. All six people had developed their gambling problems while working in gaming venues, and all were still working there at the time of the study.

Two were in counselling for their gambling problems and, as they had clearly self-assessed as problem gamblers and as their counsellors had confirmed this assessment, no instrument was used to re-test this diagnosis. These interviewees were recruited via notices placed in gambling counselling agencies.

The other four people were interviewed as part of the staff sample for the larger study. Recruiting this larger sample involved judgement sampling to select a reasonably representative sample of venues, which were then approached to request interviews with some staff. In total, 92 employees were interviewed, four of whom scored in the "problem gambler" category of the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI; Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2001), administered at the conclusion of employee interviews. Data from the 9-point scale constituting the CPGI were analysed to categorise respondents into the Classification of Gambler Sub-Types, as recommended by its developers (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2001). Cut-off scores were applied as recommended, where non-problem gamblers score 0, low risk gamblers score between 1 and 2.5, moderate risk gamblers score between 3 and 7.5, and problem gamblers score between 8 and 27 on a nine-item, 4-point Likert scale (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2001, p. 43). The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (2001) describes the problem gambler category as those who have experienced adverse consequences from their gambling and may have lost control of their gambling.

Of the two employees in counselling, Case 1 was interviewed in person in the presence of her counsellor, whereas Case 2 was interviewed by telephone. Cases 3 to 6 were interviewed on-site in their workplaces. All interviews were conducted by two members of the research team, lasted between 25 and 90 minutes, were taped with permission, and were later transcribed.

After asking each interviewee about his or her work experience in gaming venues, the interviewers sought their opinions and experiences about whether and how various aspects of working in gaming venues might influence employee gambling behaviour. The interviewees were encouraged to raise additional aspects that they felt were relevant, provide examples, and share their personal experiences. These aspects were close interaction with gamblers, frequent exposure to gambling, influence of fellow employees, influence of management, workplace stress, hours of work, frequent exposure to gambling marketing and promotions, responsible gambling training of staff, responsible gambling measures in the venue, and other aspects that interviewees considered as influential. This paper presents below a summary of each case before analysing the results according to prominent themes and sub-themes. Both authors analysed the data individually as a cross-check on the veracity of conclusions drawn.

Case One

This client, a female in her late 20s, had worked in four hotels and one club, had been playing gaming machines for 4 years, and had been in counselling for 6 months. She had worked as a bar attendant, in the TAB facility, as a workplace trainer, and as a maitre d' in a club restaurant. All her workplaces allowed staff to gamble there outside of working hours and while not in work uniform.

Before working in gaming venues, she "was never a gambler, not even a scratchie."[ii] She started while working in a club "because you see people win, and some people won't tell you how much they've lost ... that was what encouraged me. I know when I started at the RSL (club), I put $2 in a pokie one day, and I won $600 ... and it was ... wow! ... Yeah, that's exactly how it started." She started gambling more when promoted to a higher position to deal with the added stress of "dealing with staff and management, copping it from both sides. They expected 100% and I had no support; I had been given a 3-day training program … I was expected to do everything … it was pretty intense."

She often gambled with other employees, where "in all of the venues, if you finish work with someone at the same time, you'd grab a beer and put $10 in the pokies ... it was a wind down, before you went home." Alternatively, she "would go to another venue ... just be by myself for a while. Not speak to those people … you just want to go where there's no one that you really know. And my wind down was sitting at the pokies." She started gambling on days off, usually at her workplace, because friends were unavailable then. Her friends who work in hospitality are "the same, as me; they have their days off on Tuesday and Wednesday … the pub is … down the road, and it's just so handy … there's nothing else really to do on a Tuesday and Wednesday."

Constant exposure to gambling – being "constantly in your face" and "the whole illusion of the music and the free spins" – was a strong reinforcer of her gambling habit. Conversely, when working in the club restaurant, she "liked being away from the pokies. I wasn't tempted." Working around gamblers created an organisational culture where gambling was accepted. Playing gaming machines in her workplace was a comforting setting where her gambling problems were "normal," as "most of the patrons had a gambling problem, too … I felt like I wasn't a massive problem gambler, but I knew they were." Being familiar with some adverse consequences did not deter her. She related how one patron committed suicide and another was stabbed nine times by her husband in front of her young daughter because of gambling, with the husband then driving his car into the front of her workplace. She said, "I can't believe that I still gambled after I'd seen what families go through, what he went through." Her responsible gambling training did not change her gambling, as "it just makes you more aware of how to maybe approach people when they've lost money."

She related how staff in her current workplace watch jackpot levels, recalling how "we had a 5c machine, and the jackpot was up to $30,000 so all the staff when they finished work would ... have a go and see if they could jag it," even some who "had never played the pokies … and I'd be thinking, this might be the start of something." She also noted, "a lot of other staff would go in for the promotions" at their workplace.

Of the staff she works with at the club, "80% play the pokies or bet on the TAB ... and keno is really big ... the other 20% who don't (gamble) absolutely hate it." She estimated one-half of that 80% would have gambling problems, mainly with poker machines, but "one ... watches the keno all day and ... others would watch the TAB … When it's in your face all the time, and you have the punters telling you … it's going to be an issue." Staff working in gaming areas are "definitely" more likely to be gamblers and problem gamblers than staff working in non-gaming areas, she said. Many managers she has worked for are also heavy gamblers, as are friends who work in hospitality – "they will get their pay, will put all their money through the pokies and then get a $100 sub [advance on pay]." Finally, she contended that problem gambling amongst gaming venue staff is "one of the biggest issues in the state that needs to be dealt with, that hardly anyone knows about."

Case Two

This client, a female in her mid-40s, was married with adult children and grandchildren. She had worked as a chef for 7 years in a small regional club with seven gaming machines, typically working three shifts a week. She began receiving counselling 18 months earlier when "I got out of control. And I was actually going to clubs on my own, which I'd never done … I felt ashamed, I'd let my husband down." She had been playing gaming machines for about 3 years, and "used to be able to go out and put $5 or $10 in and take the losses and the wins." But "I've had quite a bit of drama in my life in the last few years ... when things got too heavy, it was, well, go and play the pokies … I am still gambling now, but trying to keep it in control a bit … But I have my moments." She explained, "it was mainly through big wins at another club that got me hooked."

She noted, "I see the same faces at the poker machines" at work and "they are pumping $20 after $20. I used to think, well, they have a major problem," but this did not deter her. Exposure to gambling poses a real temptation – "a bit like an alcoholic wanting a drink when you are sitting there, and I know these people by name, and I think, they're winning again, they're winning again." Although the counsellor "helped me come up with a few strategies, such as planning my day, or putting my mind somewhere else" to avoid going to other gaming venues, "it is only when I get to work … I walk in the door and they're there. I have 15 minutes (before starting work), and you can go through a lot in 15 minutes." If she does a split shift (lunch and dinner) "because I live 20 km from home, I will stay at the club and play the pokies … I might have about 2 hours in between." She noted that workplace stress is also an influence, where "if I've had a bad night, or are under a lot of pressure, then I will finish work and go and play the pokies, to unwind, lose myself I suppose." Having automated teller machines (ATMs) in her workplace means "on pay day I can just pull it all out and play the pokies."

The client had "never heard of" responsible gambling training, although she reads the problem gambling signs "every time I play them. And I know in myself that I had a problem." It "would probably help a lot," she said, if she was not allowed to gamble in her workplace. She has advised her boss of her gambling problem and "asked her to tell me to get off the machines if she sees me playing them … but then as my friend she doesn't feel it is her business." She has considered self-exclusion from the gaming area, "but I don't know whether it would be enforced," as "the friendship kind of gets in the way." She has sought alternative employment, but "in this town, the only place that doesn't have pokies is the restaurants, and I've tried getting work there and been told I am too old."

She considers that venue staff are an at-risk group for gambling problems, "that if they've only played them on a casual basis, and something has happened and they want to lose themselves, and they've only had one good win, I just feel that staff think, well I've had that good win, maybe next week I'll put a few more bucks through. And if staff have any worries … I tend to go to work to lose myself and get away from the day-to-day stuff anyway."

Case Three

This employee worked in a large hotel in north Queensland. She was in her mid-20s and employed on a full-time salary, working from 9.30 a.m. to 7 p.m. 5 days a week as TAB and bar supervisor, having been in the industry for about 4 years. She "was putting bets on Melbourne Cup for mum from age 12, and my brother was watching Sky racing from 14. And my grandfather was a big gambler." Her boyfriend also worked night shifts at the hotel. He "used to not play the pokies but when he started working here he did start" and then "was spending way too much money, starting to enjoy them." The interviewee and her boyfriend had just made a decision to stop gambling, or at least "not to gamble at work when I've finished work," and she reported abstaining now for 2 weeks.

Until this recent decision, "not a day goes past without me having a few bets" and she would "gamble all day – 3 or 4 hours on days off." She gambled at the TAB on a daily basis, played gaming machines about fortnightly, and keno, casino table games, and sports betting about monthly. Every few months, she would bet at the racetrack, engage in private gambling with friends, and enter a lottery-type game. Her typical reported session lengths were 5 hours at the racetrack, 4 hours for TAB betting, 2 hours at casino table games, 1 hour on gaming machines, 10 minutes on keno, and 5 minutes on sports betting. She reported her typical monthly expenditure to be $600 on the TAB, $100 on gaming machines, $50 on casino table games, $20 on keno, $10 on lottery-type games, and $5 on sports betting. Her score on the CPGI was 13.

Although staff were recently barred from gambling at the hotel, "I used to play after work every day," so being allowed to gamble in the workplace "definitely influenced me." She recalled how "most staff would, in their time out, put $10 to $12 through." She now goes "to the casino and pub with other staff. We go and play the pokies, maybe for an hour. I also go out with my partner" to gamble. She noted, "all our managers like to gamble as well. So there is 100% influence there."

As TAB supervisor, she has very close interaction with gamblers and "when you see people winning, it affects you. It's amazing that the losing doesn't." Many patrons say "I've got a hot tip," which is "100% tempting." But "it is my job to know what is going on. My gambling helps me in my job." She explained, "my staff are so much better if they know how to punt. I suggest to my staff that they sit down and learn – spend a day (learning). You need to know your product."

She described her gambling as "my way of dealing with stress" and enjoyed the "adrenaline rush putting a bet on." She commented, "when you work shift work there is not too much to do, no entertainment when you finish and need to unwind." Her boyfriend's night shifts in the venue also encouraged her to stay after she finished work at 7 p.m. She sees linked jackpots as "a draw card – we'd stay a bit longer. Yesterday I put $10 in the pokies and sat on the machines with the links. It does encourage you to have a go." She had done responsible gambling training and although "the training made me aware, made me self-identify as a problem gambler … it didn't make me change, although I am now."

When asked if hospitality staff are an at-risk group for gambling problems, she answered, "definitely, definitely … I agree that many staff have problems," and elaborated that "I don't think people realise that we have opportunity and exposure." She concluded, "I thought the only way for me to give up gambling was to leave the industry. I am so proud of myself, and know I am okay if I stick to my limits."

Case Four

This employee was a female in her late 20s, a bar attendant and TAB supervisor in a large north Queensland hotel. She had also held a gaming licence in the Northern Territory and had been working in gaming venues, all hotels, for around 3 years. She gambled on gaming machines, keno, casino table games, and lottery-type games between two and six times each per week, and a typical session for her was 4 to 5 hours on gaming machines and 3 to 4 hours at the casino tables. She reported her typical monthly expenditure to be about $200 on lottery-type games, $200 on keno, $600 on gaming machines, and $200 on casino table games. She scored 10 on the CPGI.

She felt that "a few years ago I may have had a little bit of a problem … when I was going to the casino … But I was up $400 every time I went there, so that was why I kept going … I started betting $1 instead of 40c bets. That was where it all sort of started for me. I had inside knowledge." When at work now, however, "I don't have that urge to gamble, so I don't think I have a problem." She tries to limit her machine gambling to $20 a session, although "sometimes I find myself putting an extra $10 in."

She explained, "I like the TAB, because I know the TAB, and because you are with your customers and they are putting bets on, and they are always giving you tips … You can see what is going on and you follow it." She was not allowed to gamble while working, "but I watch them, I watch them get up and say, 'Ooh! I picked that one!'" On "my days off, I find myself at the TAB. I think, my old mate told me about that horse to watch, I'd better put a bet on it." She commented, "I think that is why I'm a gung ho TAB operator, because I do take an interest in it." She also noted, "you never hear about the losses" from patrons, so this is a "temptation" to gamble. Frequent exposure to gambling was also tempting, as "you find yourself betting because everyone else around you is doing it." In fact, "I did a gaming shift a few weeks ago, and after my shift I found myself at the casino, so that should answer your question!" She said, "you are hearing the machine, you are doing the payouts, and you know they pay out." Although "you also know there is a lot more money that goes in than what goes out ... I guess that when you are paying out and paying out, at the end of it you want to sit down and have a go."

She disagreed that workplace stress encourages her gambling – instead, "when you walk out of there, it is like, give me a drink." But "alcohol and gambling don't go together," as "you seem to up the ante after you've been drinking." However, "for the majority of us, it is with the hours … all our friends are working when we have days off, so you find yourself at a pub or a club. And everywhere you go is gaming." When staff were allowed to gamble in the workplace, "you find yourself off duty, and you go down and have a bet. Because you know the regulars, and you don't get a chance to have a decent chat, to finish a conversation." When she was "working until 2 in the morning, and going home and everyone was asleep, I found myself at the casino to wind down, because you're still wired, and not in the mood for conversation and it is the only place open."

She related how staff go out together, that "last night me and one of the girls found ourselves at (another hotel). We went there for a drink, but we did find ourselves in the pokie room, probably because they've got new machines, and we were checking them out." Her colleague had "ended up finding herself at the casino. And I've done that, gone on my own. Because the pokie machines are unsociable, full stop. So if you want time out by yourself, it's better sitting at a poker machine rather than at the bar."

The interviewee felt management policies on staff gambling had a strong influence – "in one hotel I worked, we were allowed to gamble, and I gambled. And here we are not allowed … and I don't find myself gambling as much." At her previous workplace in the Northern Territory "there were a lot of girls that sat on a machine after their shift … getting a sub and gambling, so they were gambling on credit." She had left to work in a Queensland hotel with no gaming, "just to get away from the gaming side of it ... I've been known to have a gamble, so it was nice to not have it in my face." She also felt management can nurture a gambling culture in the workplace "if the publican is into it." She recalled how a former employer had "involved us (in gambling), which shouldn't have been allowed, because sometimes we were working at the time … but he still encouraged it." She noted, "we had our own punters' club at this hotel, and so every Saturday, if you had a Saturday off, you'd go down the pub."

Unlike other interviewees, this employee felt her responsible gambling training "actually helped me. I learnt a lot about my own issues. I found after doing that, it helped me to control it a little, like saying that $20 is my limit." However, she felt that the responsible gambling signs are ineffective, as "you don't look at it; it is part of the furniture." Finally, she noted hospitality staff are an at-risk group for gambling problems, "because they are around it a lot more … we're watching it for 7 hours" during each shift.

Case Five

This interviewee was a 29-year-old female and assistant manager of a large Brisbane hotel. She had been working there for 5 months and for a total of 10 years in gaming-related positions in hotels. Her score was 11 on the CPGI. When she started in the industry, the interviewee hardly gambled – "I probably only put $5 in every year" – and when she started in management "counting all the money, I'd think to myself, you're idiots. And I'd say to my mum, don't gamble, don't gamble." However, when interviewed, her gambling involved playing gaming machines and keno between two and six times each per week, private gambling amongst friends about weekly, betting on the TAB about monthly, and going to the racetrack and casino every few months. A typical gambling session would be 8 hours playing keno, 8 hours playing gaming machines, and 2 hours each on TAB betting, gambling at the racetrack, and casino table games. On a monthly basis, she would typically spend $1,000 on gaming machines, $400 on keno, $100 on casino table games, $20 at the TAB, and $10 on private gambling.

She commented that close interaction with gamblers "absolutely can influence staff." Although "some staff don't gamble at all, because they hear a lot of negative feedback from customers saying I've lost this amount or that amount, or can't feed my kids this week," there are "also the times they're giving people large payouts, and think to themselves, I can do that as well." She explained, "I think it is very tempting when people do get large payouts … It is such a big deal, such a big job to write out a cheque, the time concentrating on that amount, writing it out, concentrating. And it is there in black and white, and they think, 'lucky bastard.'"

Frequent exposure to gambling also "definitely influences, because you actually watch the game. So you quickly learn what pays … you are continuously watching, if someone gets a free game, all the staff look, see how much they win." This exposure leads to "insider knowledge"; "they know that higher turnover machines have a higher rate of pay. You have better odds, a better chance of winning something." She continued, "if you were to … watch someone pump a machine for 2 hours with $5, you'd be mad not to get on it and have a go. So they'll watch, watch, watch, and then jump on something that has been played."

The interviewee noted, "there are the two groups here, those girls that go to gamble and drink and the others that go to dance and drink." The interviewee has "taken staff out before … often they'll sit in gaming rooms, and gamble and talk at the same time. Often we don't even have to look at the machine, we know what it is doing by the sounds. So we just sit there and our money drips away." She noted that "staff from the pub across the road come here, and we go there. So we all know each other, and the managers will buy each other drinks." Staff go to each other's venues to get good service; they feel comfortable there on their own because "we understand each other to the extent that I'll talk to them and chat to them when I'm at the bar, and then when I'm sitting at a pokie, they don't talk to you, and they sort of do the same." Sometimes, staff give advice on which machines to play and which to avoid.

Workplace stress "influences me. If I've had a hard day, I'll … play the pokies … it is an elation feeling, a good feeling … to forget about work for however long the money lasts for and to escape … it is just zoning out." She also gambles in the hope of winning, thinking "I can put this 100 bucks in and make it a bit more, and life might be a bit easier." Boredom at work can encourage gambling – "staff giving their money to a customer to put bets on for them ... If they know ... it is going to be quiet, they'll go and put 100 (keno) games on and then watch it all day."

She also thought shift work is influential, because "if staff want to … go out after work, a lot of the time the gaming venues are the only ones open." She continued, "most hospitality workers do have Monday-Tuesday off, and there isn't much happening; there's no football matches, shows, nightclubs, nothing. You can't do anything … Your body clock is all messed up."

The interviewee noted, "I don't know anyone that works for me, or me, or any of my friends, who all work in hospitality … who bets under 25c, and they're all big bettors." Linked jackpots "suck you in. You do watch it, because ours is really loud up here; it is the car, that goes vroom, vroom. If you are a big bettor, you have a better opportunity to win the big jackpot. People are more inclined to spend a bit more money to play them, staff included." Watching jackpots in her workplace was a temptation for her to play linked machines at other venues.

She also discussed the role of alcohol, where "hospitality staff ... drink a lot and smoke a lot and gamble a lot. And they do all three together, and when they're doing too much drinking, that's when too much gambling comes in ... they start borrowing money off each other, and it goes full circle. I guarantee you three of them will owe each other money at the hotel … I hear it all the time, I went out and got pissed and now I've got no money." Access to cash at work also "is tempting. A lot of the time they've gambled all their money and are trying to get their rent. Keno and TAB are what I call the quiet achievers for that reason. A lot of staff do credit bet on them; I've caught staff doing it. It's easy."

Her responsible gambling training had some influence "in the beginning; when you get your job … I probably thought: what idiots." However, she said, "it is 5 years since I've done that course, and I don't think about that now," explaining "I don't think any gambler thinks that they have a problem." Even though she had "excluded a lady a few days ago ... it hasn't changed my behaviour" and she felt that "signage is just like a picture on the wall … it is just something we have to do." She also felt that managers do not influence staff gambling, apart from a no gambling policy, explaining "one girl who works for me right now … does have a gambling problem. But … it isn't really my business until it becomes a work problem."

She "definitely" thought hospitality staff are an at-risk group for gambling problems, commenting, "I think it is older staff that gamble. Most back-of-house people don't gamble, because they deal with the issues, the complaints, the money, the profit. I think that that deters people. But front of house … are continually talking to people who win … I find that staff that work in gaming rooms, if they are the gambling sort … will spend a lot of money gambling at the gaming machines." She contended that "most of my friends in hospitality gamble, half of the staff here gamble … mainly pokies and keno," and "I know girls up there who have paid their rent, and then gamble the rest." She admitted, "I'm a good subject, too" for having gambling problems.

Case Six

This employee was a 24-year-old male, a duty supervisor in a coastal club, although for most of his 4 years there he had been a gaming attendant, working 35 hours a week over five shifts. He had not worked in other venues. He reported playing gaming machines about weekly, and gambling on the TAB about fortnightly. He also gambled monthly on lottery-type games, keno, and sports betting, and gambled privately with friends once every few months. His CPGI score was 10.

He noted, "if you see someone else winning the big one, you always think your time might come." He continued, "it probably influences me in some way, either positive or negative. If you have an experience with someone that you know has probably spent too much, you don't want to go down that track, so you change your behaviour accordingly." However, frequent exposure to gambling "is bound to increase your willingness to try it," because "you are exposed to those environments for so long." He explained, "I have the occasional poke … you see machines, and chuck a few bucks through." He implied this exposure raises staff knowledge about particular machines, so if an employee "sees a machine that they like and they can't play them here, they'll go and play it somewhere else."

Although he said that fellow employees tended to discourage other staff from gambling, that they "remind you of how bad the effects can be, of what the odds are," he thought "some people might encourage other employees to chuck a couple of bucks through. People that are allowed to play, they might point them in the direction of a particular machine." He noted the influence of shift work – "I'll chuck a couple of bucks in on a night when I've got the night off, and some of my friends don't have the night off. It is something you can do by yourself." He also noted the influence of gambling promotions – "keno promotions are a real good one, because they do extensive in-house advertising. A good one is Keno Four out of Four, so people knock off and put a bet on that game, because they think it is good odds." He considered "in a way it affects me, but not so much as what I've seen in other people."

His responsible gambling training "influenced my gambling for a short period after." But, "hearing the odds would be a short-term discouragement, for a few weeks. Then you'd start chucking a few bucks through." However, responsible gambling signage "wouldn't do much, because you see them every day. They'd become part of the furniture. They haven't changed my own gambling behaviour."

He thought hospitality staff are an at-risk group for gambling problems, commenting, "if you see people winning, you think your chance is equal to theirs, especially when you don't see how much they put in, and it is a relative [low] wage as well."

Analysis and Discussion

These six case studies highlight numerous ways in which the work environment in gaming venues has influenced the gambling behaviour of these employees, and so confirm the role of contextual factors in the development and maintenance of gambling problems. Although these cases cannot be generalised, they highlight a number of influences on gambling involvement not reported previously. These influences are discussed below according to each aspect of working in a gaming venue raised in the interviews.

Close interaction with gamblers

For the five of the six problem gamblers who work in front-of-house positions, close interaction with gamblers while at work means that they often hear about and see gambling wins more than losses, give payouts to customers, constantly hear about gambling from patrons, are given gambling tips from punters, get caught up in the excitement of gambling, and build friendships with regular gamblers. These influences increase the allure of gambling, and for some people, feed erroneous beliefs and fuel hopes of winning and a desire for a piece of the action that they see gamblers enjoying. Such faulty cognitions about gambling are widely recognised as a correlate of problem gambling (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2001).

Frequent exposure and access to gambling

Also observed amongst the six cases is that frequent exposure to gambling normalises gambling and heavy gambling, making it easier for employees to downplay the extent of their own gambling. This exposure can also trigger gambling sessions, either at the workplace or another venue after work. Exposure also increases familiarity with gambling, which can lead to a belief in heightened insider knowledge to enhance chances of winning and a desire to try new machines. Working in a TAB outlet seems to particularly nurture an interest in punting, where this familiarity is deemed necessary for or is legitimised by effective job performance. As Perese, Bellringer, and Abbott (2005) note, attitudes to gambling are important, because they directly influence a person's behaviour. These employees' acceptance of, familiarity with, and knowledge about gambling seems to nurture their gambling habits. Additionally, some employees have ready access to gambling in their workplace, before and after work, and between split shifts. For others, the social accessibility of gambling is heightened because their work experience means they now find gaming venues familiar, comforting environments. As the Productivity Commission (1999) pointed out, there is "sufficient evidence from many different sources to suggest a significant connection to greater accessibility to gambling ... and the greater prevalence of gambling problems" (p. 8.31).

Influence of fellow employees

Five problem gamblers experienced some peer endorsement of gambling, where it is the "norm" to gamble with colleagues after work and on days off, to gamble while waiting for others to finish work, or to gamble at other venues where they know the staff. Because of other limitations on the social life of venue staff, strong social bonds can develop amongst them. Although there is a paucity of research into how social interaction influences gambling (Abbott & Volberg, 1999), significant others can be a key influence through increasing exposure to gambling and social learning (Perese et al., 2005). One study (Abbott, 2001) noted that problem gamblers commonly report that their spouse or partner and work colleagues have gambling problems.

Influence of management

This endorsement of gambling can also extend to management, where some of the problem gamblers reported that their past or present managers are also keen gamblers and so set a poor example for staff, nurture a gambling culture in the organisation, and allow staff to gamble in the workplace. The situation of one employee was exacerbated when her manager did not take her gambling problems seriously enough to encourage self-exclusion, while other interviewees in supervisory roles themselves take a passive, non-interventionist approach around gambling problems amongst their staff. Management can influence employee gambling in numerous ways – by reducing access, by setting a good example, by promoting a culture of responsible gambling, and by assisting individual staff with gambling problems.

Workplace stress

Although the development of gambling problems amongst these six staff may have been catalysed by outside factors (for example, personal problems, a big win), workplace stress plays a role in the maintenance of their gambling problems. Most staff reported a desire to unwind after work, to escape from workplace worries, and to "zone out." For some employees, their gambling increases in tandem with workplace stress; one gambled more when promoted to a more stressful position, and others reported gambling after very stressful shifts. Gaming machines seem a particularly attractive option to take time out from work and from interacting with others. Gaming venue employees elsewhere have reported high levels of stress, irritability, moodiness, and exhaustion after work, along with sleep and appetite problems (Keith et al., 2001). Further, numerous studies have found that gambling to relieve negative emotional states, such as depression, anxiety, boredom, and loneliness, may be a significant risk factor for problem gambling (Perese et al., 2005).

Hours of work

Shift work is also an influence on gambling by these staff. Having time off when family and friends are unavailable means that they can experience social isolation and need to find solitary leisure activities. For some staff, gaming machines are an attractive option, providing opportunities to go out and be around other people without having to interact. These machines are also a "comfortable" activity for single females. Amongst the six employees, one has 2 hours to fill in between split shifts, whereas others are drawn back to the workplace in their time off, as they know the staff and regular patrons. For those who finish work in the evenings, there are few other entertainment options away from gambling venues. Because of limits on their social life, some staff tend to socialise with work colleagues or other hospitality staff who are also active gamblers. Shift work can interfere with a worker's family, social and community life, leisure activities, and other obligations (Keith et al., 2001). Further, Perese et al. (2005) note it is probable that lack of social interaction influences the development and maintenance of gambling problems.

Frequent exposure to gambling marketing and promotions

Staff are frequently exposed to the venue's marketing and promotions. Some of the six problem gamblers noted their gambling is triggered by seeing linked jackpots at high levels; by certain keno promotions; by the lights, music, and atmosphere; and by just seeing and hearing the machines. It is widely recognised that the gambling environment, including lighting, colour, sound effects, and size of jackpots, may influence gambling behaviour (Griffiths & Parke, 2003), although the nature of any link between situational factors and problem gambling remains unclear (Perese et al., 2005).

Responsible gambling training and responsible gambling measures

It could be speculated that responsible gambling training of staff and measures such as signage and self-exclusion in venues would raise staff awareness of problem gambling, its indicators, its effects, and where to get help. Clearly, however, for these six people, these initiatives had had no lasting effect. Although the one back-of-house employee had received no training, the other employees reported that it did not prompt them to change their own behaviour, even though it might have initiated some passing self-reflection. Measures such as signage are also ineffective for these people. Although there is a paucity of research on the effectiveness of responsible gambling measures (Jackson, Thomas, & Ho, 2000), one survey of self-reported changes in gambling behaviour amongst patrons of clubs in Sydney, Australia, concluded that the measures cannot be considered as very effective for most problem or at-risk gamblers (Hing, 2003).

Other aspects of the workplace

Other aspects of the workplace were also identified amongst the six cases as influencing their gambling problems. These aspects comprised the opportunity to earn, access to gambling, and spending wages on gambling without leaving the workplace; lack of alternative employment opportunities away from gaming venues; the difficulties and embarrassment of self-excluding from gaming areas in the workplace; and drinking alcohol as a typical "wind-down" after work in venues where gambling is available. The link between alcohol consumption and gambling problems is well documented and is associated with increased risk taking during play (Perese et al., 2005).

Venue strategies to discourage problem gambling amongst staff

The interviewees were asked, "In your opinion, what are the most effective ways that gambling venues can help encourage responsible gambling and discourage problem gambling for their staff?"

All six employees endorsed a no gambling in the workplace policy. They felt this policy should apply to all staff and would reduce easy access to gambling and reduce temptations to gamble. Five employees commented about the need for more education and training for staff in responsible gambling. They felt that all staff should be trained and made more aware of the risks of developing gambling problems. The interviewees also advocated refresher courses and training to emphasise the effects of problem gambling and focus more on staff gambling. Two employees favoured measures to limit access to cash by staff by removing ATMs positioned near to gaming machines and not giving advances on pay. One suggestion was to further promote a culture of responsible gambling in the workplace, with managers to set a good example by not gambling in the workplace themselves. One person suggested promoting staff wellbeing by providing alternative social or leisure activities for staff, such as "area industry nights…that didn't involve gambling."

Limitations

A major limitation of this paper is that it relies on retrospective self-report by the participants. As Griffiths (2003) notes for this type of case study research, not only does the researcher have to accept participants' accounts as true, but self-reporting is also subject to the fallibility of human memory. Further, case studies such as these cannot be generalised. Nevertheless, it is hoped that these six accounts illuminate some experiences and risks that can be faced by gaming venue staff that influence their own gambling. In turn, an understanding of these experiences may allow further identification of appropriate interventions.

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Endnotes

[i] TAB is the acronym for Totalisator Agency Board. The Australian Gaming Council (2007) explains that totalisator wagering is where a player makes a unit wager (a unit being any multiple of 50 cents or $1, depending on the jurisdiction). Totalisator wagering is sometimes called parimutuel betting. The operator deducts a percentage of the total units wagered, and the rest is returned as dividends (winnings) to players in multiples of the unit wagered. This form of wagering is Australia wide and takes place at TAB outlets (other than those at race tracks). In Queensland, most TAB outlets are located in hotels, clubs, and casinos. Bets are most commonly taken on horse and greyhound races. Keno is a game where players wager that their chosen numbers match any of the 20 numbers randomly drawn from a group of 80 numbers via a computer system or a ball draw device. In Queensland, keno is linked to hotels, clubs, and casinos, enabling the operator to offer large jackpot prizes (Australian Gaming Council, 2005). A new keno game is run every few minutes by the centralised operator. Players can bet on each game and collect any winnings at the keno terminal in the linked venues, where there are specialised screens so that players can view the outcomes of each game. Players can bet on numerous games in advance and then wait for the results to be televised on these screens.

[ii] "Scratchie" refers to instant lottery, where a player scratches a coating off a ticket to identify if the ticket is a winner, often requiring three matching symbols. Prizes generally range from $2 to $100,000.