

Problematic Gambling Patterns: Approaching A Systemic View

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In this paper Family Therapy concepts are explored as a conceptual base from which to extend our understanding of problematic gambling patterns. Definitions of problematic gambling patterns vary considerably and are as often based on personal and cultural viewpoints as they are on clinical criteria. The two dominant descriptions of 'problem gambling' emphasise the individual. The older description is that 'problem gambling' results from personal immorality, weakness and self indulgence. The more contemporary and less vilifying description is that problem gamblers are in the grip of an 'illness'. This paper proposes a systemic model using universal themes noted more generally in Family Therapy, that seem to have relevance in this specific field. Bateson's theory of relationships and particularly his description of 'symmetrical systems' are pivotal to one of three formulations of problem gambling phenomena proposed in this paper.

GAMBLING'S POPULAR PLACE IN CULTURE

It is important in this discussion of problem gambling to appreciate how pervasive and accepted gambling is in many cultures and to avoid confusing problematic gambling patterns with gambling, per se. Gambling, with its risqué, but essentially playful persona, has always been an enjoyably diverting activity for many and is engaged in for a host of reasons. Gambling has value as an entertainment, performs a social function for people, and provides excitement and 'gameplay'. Ashley (1990) identifies themes in general discourse that illustrate gambling's place in culture. Gambling has associations with competitiveness, playfulness, corruption, luck, getting something for nothing, low-life and high-life cultures, with the excitement of risk taking, with self defeat and self destruction, with superstition, power play, conquest and eroticism, and with establishing a secure 'fraternity'. Problematic patterns of gambling have always coexisted with gambling itself (Lesieur and Rosenthal, 1991). The image of gambling, however, has now been 'sanitised' and promoted in the community as a risk-free, mainstream entertainment. Over the last decade or so, community participation in an increas-

ingly diverse range of gambling opportunities has widened dramatically.

DEFINING PROBLEMATIC GAMBLING PATTERNS

While Compulsive Gambling is the popular or layman's term, and the one used by Gamblers Anonymous, it is felt to be something of a misnomer, since the behavior is anything but dystonic ... Hence with its introduction into DSM III, the term Pathological Gambling was adopted. A third term which appears in the literature is Problem Gambling [denoting] all patterns of gambling behavior which may compromise, disrupt, or damage family, personal, or vocational pursuits ... Pathological gambling refers to a (diagnosable) chronic and progressive disorder (Lesieur & Rosenthal, 1991).

There are various means used to identify problematic gambling patterns but as yet no reliable, broadly accepted benchmarks (Walker, 1992). Some taxonomies assess spending patterns, self identification of gambling control issues and the impact of gambling on core relationships, family, and employment in an attempt to describe extreme gambling patterns (Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority, 1996). The illness or medical model discriminates 'pathological gamblers' from the broader population by using an adaptation of the diagnostic criteria for substance abuse (Walker, 1992). The South Oaks Gambling Screen is another diagnostic tool that attempts to discriminate the problematic from normal participation in gambling (Walker, 1994). Problem gambling is increasingly thought to be multi-factorial and multi-dimensional in etiology and to occur in the psychologically 'normal', neurotic and disturbed populations (Blaszczynski, 1993; 1996).

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The socio-political critique of modern gambling questions the pursuit of any paradigm that locates problematic patterns primarily in individual psychology or behaviour (Rose, 1994; Abt and McGurrin, 1991). Large-scale corporatised gambling is accused of exploiting relatively disadvantaged groups and so descriptions of 'problem gambling' that personalise the issues are arguably playing into the hands of various vested interests. Often on moral grounds, gambling of any kind at any level is regarded as detrimental to personal and societal wellbeing. Given that good research is still scarce and given that the recently elevated accessibility of legal gambling produces a markedly diverse client group, the course and eventual outcome of problematic gambling patterns remain unclear.

APPROACHING A SYSTEMIC DESCRIPTION OF PROBLEM GAMBLING

Some Key Issues Reflected in the Literature

There are indications that problematic gambling is highly influenced by contextual factors in problem development, maintenance, and eventual outcome and these factors are important to both arriving at a clear understanding of excessive gambling phenomena and constructing adequate treatment strategies. Research into treatments and their outcomes is lagging behind advances in practice (Custer and Milt, 1985). Family of origin and other early developmental factors are implicated as predisposing people to problematic gambling (Rugle and Rosenthal, 1994; Abbott, Cramer and Sherrets, 1995). Socio-demographic and economic factors in the community context can translate to a personal vulnerability to problematic gambling (Abbott et al., 1995). Problematic gambling occurs to a large degree within relatively stable family units and has considerable impact on the development and longer-term stability of core relationships (Custer and Milt, 1985; Lesieur and Rosenthal, 1991). Although it is little discussed, it is also the case that the value and belief systems of professionals coming into contact with problem gamblers impact on the course of the professional relationship (Abbott et al., 1995) and as a client group, problem gamblers are acknowledged as being a professional challenge (Rugle and Rosenthal, 1994).

Applying Family Therapy to Problem Gambling

It really seems that there will be no overarching theory of problem gambling. Contemporary trends in treatment approaches in the field are toward a kind of 'targeted eclecticism' where methods are tailored to suit the uniqueness of each case. Whilst systemic models are not among the dominant theories about problematic gambling, there is a convincing *prima facie* rationale for using them. Systemic modeling pays attention to contextual issues and has an inherently multi-dimensional

theoretical focus that sits well with a multi-modal treatment model. What works nicely is to take a combined contextual-developmental-behavioural approach in understanding longer-term, episodic and isolated manifestations of problem gambling phenomena. The systemic formulation of problem gambling presented here makes use of universal themes from family therapy that seem to have a relevance in this specific field. This frame establishes a normalising perspective on problem gambling and tempers the overly individualised response to gamblers' difficulties that less contextually based therapies can reinforce.

A Systemic Model of Problem Gambling

The model presented here attempts to be cognisant of influential issues in contexts that span the community's attitudinal and social environment, the client's social and familial network, the client's construction of reality, and finally the influence the therapist introduces as a participant in the client's world. The model needs to be thought about on three planes concurrently:

- A. The beliefs and assumptions about human problems and change that underpin the model.
- B. The three basic formulations: problem gambling patterns that arise from 'symmetry' in relationships that express a statement or protest that arise from an avoidance of pain and distress
- C. The qualifying concepts that are considered along with the formulations to give a depth of perspective relevant to the complex manifestations problem gambling assumes.

A. BELIEFS AND ASSUMPTIONS THAT UNDERPIN THE MODEL

This model emphasises inclusiveness and normalization of human experience and consequently the concept of aberrant behavior is not entertained. Nonetheless people do 'over-gamble' and get into difficulties. The aim of the model is to provide a framework for counselors to understand problematic gambling patterns and work effectively with a range of clients. Gambling behaviours are viewed as intentional and assumed to have a life enhancing meaning and significance at some level, a significance that becomes evident when the current and historical contextual factors are taken into account. Gender, ethical and power or dependency issues need to be considered in the therapeutic endeavour with clients. Many problem gambling cases comprise complex marital and familial relationship issues along with the problematic gambling patterns, and so considerations relevant to relationship work are included in hypothesising about cases.

B. THE FORMULATION OF PROBLEM GAMBLING PATTERNS

The following three categories represent three underlying dynamics that can be used to account for problem

gambling. Each is presented with some theoretical background and a case example as an illustration.

Problem Gambling Formulated as Arising from a Worldview that is Overly Competitive

The basis of this formulation of problem gambling comes from an adaptation of Bateson's theorem of alcoholism (Bateson, 1971). For some people a problematic gambling pattern is associated with an overly competitive (symmetrical) stance that arises from a particular worldview (epistemology). Such a person's identity and view of the world is reinforced through the challenge, excitement and 'drama' of the gambling lifestyle. These individuals show an inability to adapt their competitive approach by forming complementary relationships when competitiveness is not working for them. They have real difficulties in letting go of the 'positive' contribution their gambling lifestyle makes to their identity even when the negative outcomes seem to outweigh the positive. Their competitive identity can be so rigid that they remain proudly 'bloody, yet unbowed' (Bateson, 1971) throughout the struggles they perceive as heroic.

Tony is a 32-year-old Greek-born young man who has gambled since he was sixteen years old. He now lives in a boarding house and is on the pension and struggling with bouts of depression. He tells a story of how his life as a successful professional gambler has been ruined by the new casino in Melbourne. In his twenties he had a lifestyle built on his gambling success in the Greek cafes of Melbourne. He drove flash cars, had two houses, a beautiful wife, and a particular identity and status in the ethnic club networks that he relished. The cafe gambling scene dwindled with the licensing of the casino. The competition from the casino and the police crackdowns on the ethnic clubs virtually wiped out Tony's income and lifestyle over a two year period and Tony was bitterly angry at 'what the casino had done to him'. Recently he had borrowed \$20,000 and gone to 'take on' the casino to get his revenge. Of course he lost it all and now battles the depression he felt as the 'walls closed in'.

Relevant Theory: The Competitive Worldview and the 'Symmetrical' Stance

Gregory Bateson's view (1971) was that human relationship systems are conducted largely in either symmetrical or complementary forms. Symmetrical relationships are inherently competitive whilst complementary relationships are fundamentally accommodating. Bateson (1971) proposed a character type with a particular worldview that leads individuals to form predominantly symmetrical relationships in particular domains. This temperament is learnt from adaptations to life experiences but subsequently is not easily modified by further experiences. Such a person's way of understanding the world is sustained through competing and winning, losing, and fighting again. Bateson's systemic theorem has links with the cognitive-behavioral and psychodynamic

paradigms since the 'symmetrical epistemology' he describes is very much a learnt response.

Applying Bateson's Ideas to Problematic Gambling

Bateson's concepts of symmetry and complementarity in human relationships are quite promising as organising frameworks for understanding problematic gambling patterns. Whilst it is clear from clinical practice that not all problem gamblers' personalities are dominated by a rigidly held symmetrical 'epistemology', some indeed are, and many show it as a feature amongst other characteristics.

Competitiveness and Problem Gambling

Gambling sits well within the capitalist ethic of 'nothing ventured, nothing gained', where to compete and win is to achieve status as a success and to be showered with life's rewards. Such social and cultural values do not readily encourage a forgiving or adaptive attitude to 'losing' and can exacerbate a sense of alienation in an unsuccessful 'problem gambler'. Guilt and other self attacking feelings besiege problem gamblers and there may be little in such a person's worldview or the cultural context to support a complementary response to the perceived 'siege'. This suggests that longer-term strategies to manage 'problem gambling' need to impact more broadly than at the level of individuals (Abt and McGurrian, 1991). Community education and public debate about the implications of our cultural values and economic initiatives are intrinsic to a comprehensive systemic approach to patterns of problematic gambling.

Risk-Taking and 'Pride'

Bateson (1971) links *risk-taking* to pride and an identity bolstering testing of self. The success of attempts at abstinence can also be a source of 'pride' for a recovering addict. Self-esteem based on either indulging in or relinquishing gambling is inevitably a roller-coaster ride. We can often see these sequences in the person with a problematic gambling pattern. Interestingly, the more addictive types of gambling are observed to be those that give the quickest outcome to a chance taken and the opportunity to take a subsequent risk and test oneself again. Alternatively this 'habituation factor' apparent in gambling may have more to do with using gambling as a distraction from other painful or pressing concerns. Bateson's description helps to explain 'chasing losses': playing on in a bad losing streak to try and win back what has been lost. Truly repetitive problem gamblers continually return to their symmetrical constructions, even if circumstances force them, or they themselves manage, to entertain complementarity for a time.

The Difficulty of Re-appraising a Symmetrical Epistemology

The core element of the therapeutic work of change for persons prone to an overly competitive world view and to symmetry in their relationships is in investing their trust in others and allowing themselves to enter into

interdependent, complementary relationships. This is anathema for such a person. One of their fundamental organising assumptions is that they are always right when other people's opinions and perceptions do not coincide with their own. They have nothing to gain from listening to or trusting the knowledge others might have of an alternative world. They maintain their need to feel indomitable, or at least proud in defeat, in the face of the intrusive reality that they can't always win and that they, like all of us in the human condition, are at times reliant on others.

Complementarity: The 'Flip Side' of Symmetry

Some problem gamblers exhibit high levels of complementarity in domains other than their gambling. Problem gamblers sometimes are overly acquiescent in their relationships at work or home where they may feel they 'have to fit in'. They might, for example, make promises that they are highly unlikely to meet. This sort of behavior in relationships has been appreciated as a deviousness or 'slipperiness' ('stacking the odds' in a symmetrical fashion). The levels of complementarity in their dealings with their home or working worlds are perhaps not sustainable in the long-term and gambling provides a kind of balance.

Working in Symmetrical Systems

Bateson's ideas provide a relatively simple way of describing and understanding the way problem gamblers' construction of their world may contribute to the difficulties they experience in it. These ideas can inform therapeutic practice by explaining the patterns of interaction that can occur between problem gamblers and their family, workplace and social circles and indeed, between them and their professional helpers. One of the keys to providing effective assistance to problem gamblers is in achieving a balance between locating the responsibility for change with the gambler, and active exploration of the gambler's circumstances, including change options. These clients can often present an urgent helplessness that can be a powerful invitation to be overly interventive and 'useful'. This can lead to taking on a disproportionate and ultimately constraining responsibility for any change. This has been called 'codependency' (or 'counter-dependency' where it manifests as hostile, punishing responses in the worker when change is not forthcoming). The paradox inherent in therapy with symmetrical systems is that in providing or imposing *help*, the problem is recreated in the linearity of the relationship between therapist and client. The art of contemporary therapy is in the creation of circumstances that facilitate an epistemological change in the client or family without imposing it. Workers and/or agencies that are overly invested in 'change', or in seeing the results of their 'help', will struggle to work effectively in these symmetrical systems.

Gambling problems often correlate with relationship problems that are associated with the symmetrically overdetermined system. Therapeutic approaches in relationship work show promise in managing the inter-

personal dynamics that are quite demanding of the therapist. Interventions that assist clients to move towards appreciation and acceptance of the 'other', coupled with reflection on and change to 'self' (rather than 'other') will lessen the confrontation arising in a symmetrically organised system. The appropriate position of the therapist is peripheral to the 'natural' social networks of the client. The therapist works to uncover the client's actual dissatisfaction with the current, familiar arrangements and the client's own aspirations for change. The implications of any changes that might be entertained are explored from all perspectives, especially the 'downside'. This process in therapy can lead to realising the meaning the gambling pattern has in a person's life and open up other therapeutic work appropriate to that formulation.

Problem Gambling Formulated as a Statement or Protest

In many instances, problem gambling behavior can be viewed as an expression of the anger, sadness, powerlessness, hurt, or other feelings arising in response to life problems and events. The focus of the gambler's protest can include developments in interpersonal relationships, normal life stage transitions, unpredictable life events and tragedies, and an awakened sense of the injustice and trauma of past events.

A couple, Mary and Bob, presented for help with Bob's gambling. They are both teachers. They have three children now; the eldest is five years old and the youngest, two. Mary has looked after the children full-time since the first child's birth. Mary was angry and hurt, having very recently discovered that Bob had lost several thousand dollars over a six-month period by gambling secretly. Bob has always gambled at race meetings that the whole family had attended. It was in fact an important social outlet for the family and Mary took a small interest in betting herself. Betting was an important interest for Bob and he had consistently won relatively small amounts, that he would use to buy treats for the family. In the initial interview it became clear that Bob was not happy that the family was struggling on his sole salary and felt responsible for this situation. He had always wanted to take the family on an extended holiday using his long service leave but had recently used the leave to do maintenance on the home as there was no money for a trip.

About six months previously, his consistent, small, but significant wins at the races had stopped. He started to gamble secretly at this point, accumulated debt on credit cards and gambled more heavily in an attempt to recoup his increasing losses. The crisis came when Mary accidentally found out about the hidden credit card debts at the same time that Bob had lost \$500 that was borrowed from extended family for another purpose. The hypothesis guiding the interventions in the first session was that Bob was (unconsciously) using his failed gambling to register his frustration and disenchantment with the increasing sacrifices he was making for the family.

Intervention

The therapeutic interventions built on the strong bond between the couple and on their commitment to their children. The aim was to acknowledge Bob's frustration and disappointment with the family's finances and the sacrifices he had made to have Mary at home with the children, which was important to them both. The very significant pleasure that Bob had experienced in regularly bringing treats for the family through winning at betting was acknowledged and the question raised as to whether perhaps this contribution to the family could be made in other ways now that his 'luck' had changed. Bob was alerted to the fact that Mary's complete trust in him had been damaged and he was asked what he, in very practical ways, could do that would be likely to convince her that she had nothing to fear from his gambling again. Finally it was emphasised that their relationship was obviously very important to them and that their various commitments might be making it difficult to find the time and space to enjoy each other's company. They were asked to see if there were ways they might be able to organise, in spite of the constraints, to spend more time nurturing their relationships and each other.

Relevant Theory: Key Transitions in Family Life

Developmental frameworks (Steinglass, 1980; Brazelton, 1993) predict that families will be destabilised and vulnerable at points of life stage transition (such as births, deaths, partnering) which are often associated with the conflicting imperatives of complying with and differentiating from established intergenerational patterns. These are points at which problematic gambling as a way of expressing a statement or protest can be an issue, especially if other contextual factors are also contributing to raise vulnerability. There seems to be a correlation between what Erikson (1982) calls the crises of the 'generative' stage (middle adulthood) and the occurrence of problem gambling in the client group presenting for assistance in Victoria (Break Even—Western Problem Gambling Counseling Service, 1996). Likewise, unpredictable stresses such as employment changes, retrenchment, unexpected injury, illness or death in familial or social groups, create a context in which problem gambling can be an available method of giving 'voice' to responses to a life challenge.

Problem Gambling Formulated as a Way of Avoiding Pain and Distress

The repetitive and absorbing nature of gambling can be used by a person to deaden unpleasant feelings.

Sally was in her mid forties, living alone on benefits following a stress-related crisis in her work as a teacher seven years previously. She had been introduced to the 'pokies' by a friend at a social event eight months previously and had very quickly moved from a social to a solitary pattern of gambling. She was gambling far more than she could afford and had eaten into her savings but had managed to stay clear of debt. Sally would try to fill her life with other

more social activities but repeatedly would go to her local hotel on her way home and play the machines until the wee hours. In spite of her efforts to raise her mood, she felt increasingly desolate and unfulfilled. She had experienced multiple setbacks over the past year and in fact her life history seemed to have been difficult and at times, tragic. She was experiencing a complicated recovery from a minor operation. She was also distressed and angry about the way her father's estate was being settled. He had died four months previously and her stepmother was not complying with the spirit of her father's will. This was a source of much bitter disappointment.

Intervention

Interventions could include supportive psychotherapy whilst Sally adjusts to the losses and deprivations she has experienced and deepens her trust in her networks. The gambling issue could be approached with a combination of systemic and behavioural counselling assistance that acknowledges her distress and explores its context. Normalising and contextualising the need for relief from difficulties and exploring the consequences of this adaptation can be containing for clients. An exploration of alternative adaptations to their painful dilemma can be undertaken in supportive therapy if the client chooses to engage with what they have attempted to get respite from.

C. QUALIFYING HOW PROBLEM GAMBLING MANIFESTS

The following qualifications augment the formulations within the model and help arrive at a more complete picture of problem gambling.

The Meaning of Excessive Gambling Behaviour

Past and present contextual issues (e.g. relationship, fertility, and migration issues) are pivotal to an understanding of the meaning of problem gambling in people's lives. Hawkes (1995) wrote regarding addictions:

What purports to be compulsive behavior may often turn out on close analysis to be quite purposeful at a less admitted or conscious level. We may recall Haley's remark that symptoms which are described as 'involuntary' can be ... 'incompatible definitions of a relationship': a way of disclaiming responsibility for an action which cannot be openly advocated because of its apparent absurdity or unacceptability.

Therapy can make an important contribution in assisting clients by way of a sensitivity to and understanding of the impact and significance of the client's often unconscious concerns or losses and appropriately 'bearing witness' to the person's complaint or statement. Contextual factors can contribute to the maintenance of problematic gambling patterns and addressing these factors through cognitive-behavioral approaches is important.

The Model is Dynamic

The three underlying dynamics formulated in the model can operate simultaneously at different levels. In any person who presents with problem gambling there can be more than one underlying dynamic present at any time and these can change in relation to contextual factors. It is important to note that the reasons for commencing gambling in the first place, progressing to problematic behaviour and the factors favoring maintenance of problem gambling, are all dynamic and can all be quite different.

Exploring Intergenerational Patterns

Both social gambling and problem gambling patterns can be embedded in the traditions and prescribed 'missions' of intergenerational family life. The meaning of gambling patterns can become evident when the family of origin is explored. In some cases this will lead to notions of 'how social, intergenerational, and nuclear family dynamics contribute to the patterns that produce and maintain' a problematic pattern (Bernal, Rodriguez and Diamond, 1990). This framework for therapy is an application to the problem gambling field of more general family therapy concepts and approaches such as identification of needs and resources, establishing trust in relationships, and exploring intergenerational patterns.

Tracing Life Cycle and Patterns of Adjustment

In those instances where there has been a long term pattern of excessive gambling Steinglass' model for alcoholism has some relevance, again, largely because it deals with broadly applicable themes for families rather than with any biomedical understanding of the problem. 'The desire for long-term stability on the part of the family increases efforts to incorporate alcoholism into family in some fashion that the family can 'live with' (Steinglass, 1980: 216). In the case of a truly chronic problem gambler the behaviour will be influential in the developing family's patterns of interaction, and a useful point of exploration in therapy.

Distortions of the Picture

There are circumstances when community groups, family groups or individuals take a position that someone who gambles 'has a problem' when gamblers themselves see their behavior differently and are, in fact, exercising a reasonable control and restraint. In a minority of cases groups or individuals attempt to exert control over a person's gambling behaviour by appealing to descriptions of problem gambling where other issues are more prominent.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the nature of problematic gambling patterns from a systemic perspective, and has presented a systemic model of problem gambling phenomena. Cybernetic and ecological theory (Bateson, 1971) was utilised in understanding the problem gam-

bling phenomena that manifest in our communities in increasingly diverse ways as the broader cultural context encourages higher community participation and opportunities to gamble proliferate.

Case examples were used to illustrate each of three proposed formulations of how gambling problems arise. The first proposed formulation is one where a person's predominant worldview is competitive, and remains unaltered by experiences that would usually be a disincentive to further excessive gambling. Engaging with their world in a complementary and adaptive fashion can lessen the destructiveness of these individuals' relationship with gambling. Secondly, there are many cases where quite normal and unremarkable individuals in the community respond to their life circumstances by 'over-gambling'. These responses can represent statements or protests about their world, or alternatively, an attempt to distance themselves from painful experiences.

The approaches to therapy with 'problem gamblers' suggested here are adaptations of more general family therapy approaches that would seem to have a particular relevance to the problem gambling field.

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