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Differentiating normal and problem gambling: A grounded theory approach.

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ABSTRACT

A previous study Ricketts & Macaskill (2003) delineated a theory of problem gambling based on the experiences of treatment seeking male gamblers and allowed predictions to be made regarding the processes that differentiate between normal and problem gamblers. These predictions are the focus of the present study, which also utilised a grounded theory approach, but with a sample of male high frequency normal gamblers. The findings suggest that there are common aspects of gambling associated with arousal and a sense of achievement. The use of gambling to manage negative emotional states differentiated normal and problem gambling. Perceived self-efficacy, emotion management skills and perceived likelihood of winning money back were intervening variables differentiating problem and normal gamblers.

INTRODUCTION

The National Gambling Review has proposed a significant deregulation of gambling for adults, with stimulation of demand for many forms of gambling being allowed (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2001, 2002). Overall involvement in gambling is anticipated to rise as a result of deregulation. Problems associated with gambling increase as overall involvement with gambling increases (Grun and McKeigue, 2000). In this context the National Gambling Review (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2001) recommended that studies into features that differentiate normal and problem gambling are undertaken. This study addresses this issue by contrasting the experiences of normal gamblers with those of problem gamblers, utilising a grounded theory approach.

Ricketts and Macaskill (2003) addressed the nature of problem gambling through an analysis of the reported experiences of self-defined problem gamblers who were seeking treatment. The resulting grounded theory identified three main categories as emotion, control and the costs of gambling. Within selective coding the Core Category (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was identified as that of gambling as emotion management. This concept enabled the reported experiences of the problem gamblers to be understood as resulting from gambling becoming their main emotion management strategy.

Figure 1 about here

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the postulated links between gambling as emotion management, costs and control.

Regular gambling (A) involved the contrasting of the emotion management effects with the costs of the behaviour. In the context of highly effective emotion management, the costs of gambling need to be high to engender concern in the regular gambler, resulting in a decision to control their behaviour.

Following the decision to control gambling (B), the regular gambler is faced with the experience of repeated contact with internal and external triggers to emotional disturbance that they have commonly dealt with previously by gambling (C). Contact with these triggers requires efforts at control (D) to be undertaken repeatedly. If successful, these efforts result in reduced emotional and other costs (E), an enhanced range of emotion management strategies

(F), and an enhanced perception of control (G). The triggers will gradually lose their emotionally disturbing nature.

If efforts at control are unsuccessful (H), the emotion management properties of gambling behaviour are strengthened (I). In addition, the individual develops a changed perception of their ability to deal with triggers to gambling-related emotional disturbance, a weaker perception of control (J). Both these effects were identified as increasing the costs of gambling (K). Subsequent cycles of failure to control behaviour will further strengthen these links. A further result of the weakened perception of control will be a weakening of efforts at control (D) in the face of triggers to gambling related emotional disturbance.

In the face of the repeated failure of efforts at control, the effectiveness of gambling as emotion management, and increased costs of gambling, the individual is unlikely to sustain efforts at self-managed control. They may abandon those efforts, and return to regular gambling (L), which will result in a reduced focus on failure, reduced emotional costs and a higher tolerance of financial and relationship costs. Alternatively they may seek assistance to manage their difficulties in the form of treatment (M).

From this grounded theory of problem gambling, it is possible to make predictions about the processes that differentiate normal gamblers from problematic ones. These predictions, outlined below, are the focus of the current study.

- 1) The emotion altering effects of gambling will be reported by all regular gamblers, but normal gamblers will use a wider range of other emotion management strategies than do problem gamblers.
- 2) The financial, relationship and specifically emotional costs of gambling will be viewed as balanced by the emotion management benefits of gambling. However, it is proposed that the experience of increasing emotional costs will be associated with a reported ability to control subsequent gambling amongst the normal gamblers. This will contrast with the reported tolerance of high levels of emotional costs amongst problem gamblers.

- 3) Ceasing gambling will require efforts at control on the part of all gamblers in the face of prior triggers to gambling. However, normal gamblers would be expected to experience less emotional disturbance as a result of not gambling in response to those triggers, and to be able to deal with that disturbance using a range of emotion management strategies. As a result unlike the problem gamblers, perception of control will be experienced as strong and stable, with the normal gamblers reporting themselves to be self-reliant in controlling their behaviour.

METHOD

Design

A grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was utilised within a post-positivist perspective (Pidgeon and Henwood, 1997; Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

Participants

Seven informants were recruited within a British off-course bookmakers. All were male gamblers who reported high frequency gambling, but no problems with loss of control. They were assessed against DSM IV criteria (APA, 1994) and completed the South Oaks Gambling Screen (Lesieur and Blume, 1987). All gambled in off-course bookmakers at least weekly, with three also gambling on slot machines. See table 1 for summary demographic and gambling behaviour details.

Table 1 about here

Procedures

All the informants were interviewed. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The focus was on the informant's recent experience of gambling and specifically on the emotional aspects of gambling, the experience of control and loss of control, and the positive and negative aspects of gambling, in line with the predictions above. In addition, informants were asked to identify a situation in the recent past that had put them under stress, and how they had dealt with that stress. This enabled an analysis of the extent to which the individuals concerned utilised gambling as a stress management strategy. All informants were asked whether they considered that their control of gambling behaviour had been lost or weakened

at any point in their gambling history. Where this was identified they were asked to explain how they regained control.

Analysis

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Ethnograph data analysis software (Qualis Research, 1998) was used to assist in the analysis. Coding overlapped with the selection of informants for interview. A process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding was undertaken (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The final product of selective coding was the contrast of the reported experiences of the normal gamblers with those reported by the problem gamblers.

RESULTS

Emotion management

As with the problem gambling sample the three aspects of arousal, shutting off and achievement were reported by at least some of the normal gamblers. In addition the category of gambling as entertainment was reported consistently. A continuum of experiences was noted among the sample, with one individual (Joe) contrasted with the others in this sample. His reports often placed him closer to the problem gambling population than the normal gambling sample.

Arousal

A similar range of arousal related experiences were reported by both the normal and problem gamblers. Various described as the buzz, excitement, or an adrenaline rush, all individuals reported arousal as a feature of their experiences. Arousal was generally linked to the experience of winning or the prospect of winning. A continuum of intensity of arousal, from mild to strong, was reported which was relatively consistent for each individual.

...if it wins like, I'm up for a few seconds and that's it, I'm back to normal again.

No real differences were evident with regard to this aspect of the emotional impacts of gambling between the normal and problematic gamblers.

Shutting off

This aspect was only reported by one individual. In common with problem gamblers, who reported shutting off, this informant was a slot-machine gambler. However he reported this feature as an aspect of all his gambling, not just that related to slot machines.

It relieves my stress, even if I lose. ... I'm gutted that I've lost the money but it's released the stress.

One other informant reported previously using slot-machine gambling to manage emotional disturbance. With problem gamblers, this was an aspect most commonly reported when attempting to cease gambling. None of the sample of normal gamblers were attempting to cease gambling at the time of interview and this may partially explain the absence of reporting of this feature. However, even when asked about problems of control of gambling, shutting off was not reported for the remaining normal gamblers.

I don't think I would ever have a bet just to cheer myself up. I'd sooner go for a pint to cheer myself up really.

In fact, three of the informants specifically suggested that it would be a bad idea to gamble when upset, as it would affect their skill.

Achievement

Six of the seven normal gamblers reported a focus on the skill and achievement aspect of gambling. Skill was evidenced by studying the form and picking out horses. Expertise was confirmed by winning. Expertise was reported to be important for all the normal gamblers and was associated with enjoyment.

..you then actually pick the winner, you feel a lot better because you have studied it and you have picked it out.

This focus on expertise was very similar to that of problem gamblers but was not associated with the same extent of persistence in the face of losses. A vicious circle of borrowing money to try to win back previous losses was reported by only one of the normal gamblers, Joe. Amongst the others there was variability in the extent of persistence of gambling reported within a session.

Entertainment

Six of the seven normal gamblers reported gambling as an entertainment, interest or hobby. They justified the amount spent on gambling by contrasting the amount spent on other leisure pursuits.

Like some people go fishing.....and that costs a lot more than what it does with gambling. ...So that's the way I see it, really, you pay for your hobbies.

Joe was again the exception in reporting fascination with gambling, but not viewing the behaviour as entertainment. He reported arousal and gambling being a set part of his routine, rather than finding the action of gambling entertaining.

No matter if I'm away, or no matter where I am, I like a bet on a Saturday. Just Saturdays, at the weekend.

In contrast, the problem gamblers did not report a willingness to pay for gambling as a leisure pursuit. The focus for them was more on the aspects of arousal, shutting off and achievement.

Emotion management strategies and control

The normal sample exhibited a range of emotion management strategies but all were able to deal with negative emotional states in a number of different ways. This contrasted with the reported use of gambling as the main means of dealing with problems among the problem gamblers. Gambling was reported by only one individual to be used as a means of coping with negative emotional states, although he also possessed other coping mechanisms.

Costs associated with gambling

The problem gambling model categorised the costs of gambling as financial, relationship and emotional. For some of the normal gamblers these same costs were identifiable. Whereas with problem gamblers there were evident links between the identified costs, for the normal gamblers there was a reported lack of a relationship between the financial and other costs. The exception again was Joe, who identified a level of relationship and emotional costs similar to those of problem gamblers.

Financial costs

Financial costs were expected and seen as the price of gambling. They were not reported to currently result in emotional disturbance for the majority of the sample.

...the way I justify it to myself is I have lost £20, somebody's gone out tonight and spent £20 on beer. What's the difference?

The normal gamblers consistently reported the simple financial management strategy of paying for bills, food and other essential outgoings prior to determining the amount available for gambling and/or a predetermined bet limit for each race. This financial cost limiting strategy was contrasted with periods of loss of control by two of the individuals, where problematic gambling was defined as betting in every race, and using monies for rent and bills to gamble. Only one of the sample of normal gamblers reported borrowing money to bet.

Making money from gambling was viewed as desirable, but not a credible outcome by the normal gamblers. Periods of believing that money could be made from gambling were reported to be associated with increased losses by several of the sample. Similarly, gambling in response to needing money was reported to be associated with problematic gambling both from their own and their friends' past experiences.

You never think that you are going to lose, but deep, at the back of your mind, you know that the chance that you are winning every time you go to the betting shop is almost nil.

This perspective contrasts strongly with the strategy of trying to win money back reported by many of the problem gamblers.

Relationship costs

Only Joe reported a current negative impact on relationships associated with gambling. The others reported no effects on relationships currently. Apart from Joe, those informants who reported that relationships had been threatened by gambling had responded by changing their gambling behaviour.

Emotional costs

Current emotional disturbance associated with gambling was reported by just two of the normal gamblers. Joe reported some lowered mood and guilt regarding gambling at times, together with some anger if he missed out on a winning bet. No strategies for dealing with this were reported by him.

...there was a horse that won last night and I backed it the other week and I told them in pub yesterday, this will win. And I forgot to put a bet on and it won at eight to one, first race.And I was playing hell, playing hell.

One other individual also reported some emotional impact from losing and anger when perceiving he had missed out on betting on a winner. In contrast to the problem gamblers, this informant used social support rather than gambling as a means to deal with the emotional impact of 'missing out'.

An increase in emotional costs was identified as a reason to change gambling behaviour by a number of the informants.

I think if it did start to upset me, I would seriously consider stopping, like. I know it's easy enough to say that now, but I think if it did get me that upset, I think my mates would put me wise to it anyway. It's only a horse race...

Control

Control issues for normal gamblers related to the perception of their ability to restrict gambling, and applying strategies to achieve that end. Compared with the problem gamblers' experiences of limited control, it was clear that six of the seven normal gamblers considered themselves to have strong, stable control of the behaviour of gambling, which they were able to apply independently.

Triggers

Triggers to gambling similar to problem gamblers were reported and their emotional force varied across the sample. External triggers included the racing pages in newspapers, the vicinity of a bookmakers and televised racing. Internal triggers involved urges to continue gambling beyond previously determined limits whilst within a bookmakers. Control in response to excessive gambling involved the avoidance of triggers for five of the seven normal gamblers.

Control strategies

The requirement to apply control strategies increased as the individual became more embroiled in gambling. This appeared to relate to the extent of daily gambling rather than the frequency of gambling, in that some individuals were gambling six times a week, but did not report the need to apply strategies.

The extent of daily gambling increased for some individuals following a larger than usual win, providing more funds for continued gambling. In the context of perceived excessive gambling several informants identified the need to increase gambling discipline. This entailed the restriction of gambling within predetermined limits, the careful selection of bets and not gambling on every race.

It's, it's very hard to go into a betting shop, right, ...and lose money. This is where chasing comes into it. And even if you do win sometime, you just begin to think that your luck is in. Discipline is the key.When he wins he goes home.

Gambling was reported to be within limits, with the emotional benefits being valued, and gambling perceived as not a problem. Self-managed change, if necessary, was reported to be quite manageable.

When asked directly how they would cope if they found it necessary to restrict gambling the sample of normal gamblers were able to identify a range of strategies, most commonly related to avoidance, social support and alternative activities. Joe was the exception among the sample in reporting a perceived inability to stop gambling, with perception of control being weak, unstable and dependent on others. In common with the problem gamblers, Joe reported the use of no control strategies and regular gambling beyond pre-determined limits.

Three individuals reported previous, but not current problems with gambling excessively. They had utilised a range of strategies, such as avoidance, stopping and thinking before acting and accessing social support to manage those difficulties. In addition, the use of willpower to manage the transition from uncontrolled to controlled gambling was reported.

Well I had to stop gambling..... and I did stop, like see. I tell you the wife took over the finances for that period of time, and that was it. (*laughs*)

...I used to walk opposite side from the bookies. Used to feel like I'd fall in if I was on the same side. I kept that up for a week, two week. And then you can do it.

In addition to the approaches above one individual also reported the use of gradually reintroducing contact with the gambling environment to increase his perceived control of gambling behaviour.

...when I knew I'd still got the problem... I'd write a bet out, and I would not have any money on me. I'd just write a bet knowing, and watch it, the race. But after so long I just gradually took a bit of money in my hand and I would not spend it. And then I just progressively built it up

DISCUSSION

The grounded theory analysis identified many similarities between the reported experiences of normal and problem gamblers. However, several of the proposed differences between the two groups were supported. There was, as anticipated, a clear differentiation between the reported strength and stability of control of gambling behaviour between the two groups. Only one of the normal gambling informants overlapped with the problem gamblers with regard to the issue of control. This would indicate that differences between the samples could be related to the experience and perception of control of gambling behaviour (Dickerson and Baron, 2000).

Two aspects of gambling as emotion management were comparable across the two samples. The extent of arousal varied for the normal gamblers, but was reported by all of them. This is in line with the literature on arousal (Anderson and Brown, 1984; Coventry and Norman, 1997). Similarly, the reported experience of achievement through the perceived skill associated with gambling was reported by six of the seven informants. This aspect was more evident among the normal sample than the problem sample. However, the extent of persistence reported by the problem sample was not matched by the normal sample. This appeared to be mediated by differences with regard to the perceived likelihood of “winning money back” reported. This can be understood to provide further support for the cognitive model of Ladouceur and Walker (1996). Similarly, the normal sample commonly reported gambling as entertainment, the price of which was the losses sustained. Whilst there was a clearly stated desire to win money, there was also recognition that this was not a common occurrence. This may provide some direction for cognitive correction strategies (Sylvain, Ladouceur and Boisvert, 1997).

There were differences between the normal and problem gamblers' reports regarding gambling to manage negative emotional states, with less emphasis on the use of gambling to moderate emotional discomfort among the normal sample. There was a degree of overlap reported regarding the range of other emotion management strategies used by the two samples but the normal gamblers used alternative strategies more frequently and effectively. This is in line with Jacobs (1985) and others (McConaghy, Blaszczynski and Frankova, 1991;

Griffiths, 1995) regarding the importance of the use of gambling to moderate negative emotional states among problem gamblers. It also supports the importance of problem-solving skills deficits among problem gamblers proposed by Sharpe and Tarrier (1993).

There were differences between the normal and problem gamblers regarding the tolerance of emotional and other costs. Whilst the normal gamblers expected financial costs, relationship and emotional costs had resulted in successful moderation of gambling in all but one of the informants who reported them. This contrasted with the high level of reported relationship and emotional costs amongst the problem gamblers. This is similar to the findings of Hodgins and el-Guebaly (2000) that negative emotions were the most commonly spontaneously cited reasons for attempts at gambling behaviour change among their sample of resolved problem gamblers.

A further difference was the extent to which gambling was reported to be a form of entertainment by the normal sample. Where the gambling behaviour was reported to have been excessive, the normal gamblers were able to identify the strategies they had used to bring the behaviour back within acceptable limits. This enabled them, in the main, to retain a perception of themselves as able to exercise strong and stable control of the behaviour of gambling. This then restricted the costs of gambling whilst maximising the emotional benefits, and thereby the entertainment value of the behaviour. Thus there appeared to be a direct relationship between perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and the extent of enjoyment of gambling which was absent for the problem gamblers. This has significant implications for treatment.

Overall, the analysis of data from this sample has confirmed many elements of the grounded theory produced in the earlier study. There was clear support for the identification of perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), emotion management skills and perceived likelihood of winning money back as intervening variables that differentiate problem from normal gambling experiences.

Methodological issues

In selecting a postpositivist approach to the grounded theory method (Pidgeon and Henwood, 1997; Lincoln and Guba, 2000), the assumption was made that the common

aspects of the experience of problem gambling identified within the earlier grounded theory study provide at least a partial representation of the common nature of such experiences, and therefore could be subjected to further testing. Although there are examples of programmes of grounded theory studies building on previous studies (Olshansky, 1996), Miller and Fredericks (1999) identify an apparent reluctance among researchers undertaking grounded theory studies to move beyond an accommodationist position to one that makes and tests predictions. This can be understood in the context of the apparent, if rarely explicit constructivist approach of many published studies (Pidgeon and Henwood, 1997). In contrast Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that the constant comparative method and theoretical sampling provide a means by which earlier theoretical propositions can be open to falsification by subsequent data and this perspective was adopted here. Further testing of the grounded theory with a larger sample is indicated by the results of this study.

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