

Gambling and the Multidimensionality of Accessibility: More Than Just Proximity to Venues

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Abstract Accessibility to gambling has been linked to gambling behaviour but remains poorly understood. This study used data from semi-structured focus groups and interviews with 38 participants (Median age 42 years) to explore wider aspects of accessibility. People preferred venues which were open long hours and located close to home, work or regular routes, i.e., geo-temporal accessibility. This was particularly influential for problem gamblers. Social and personal accessibility related to venues as safe, social, easy entertainment experiences, and as an accessible retreat from life issues. The attraction of an accessible retreat was restricted to problem gamblers. Finally, low outlay games and easy access to money increased financial accessibility. Accessibility should therefore be considered multidimensional. Further, results suggested that while gambling as safe, social entertainment may be relatively harmless, the attraction of geo-temporal accessibility and a retreat from problems may encourage excessive gambling in some individuals.

Keywords Gambling · Accessibility · Social · Escape · Environment

Introduction

Contemporary problem gambling theory conceptualises this behaviour as the product of a complex interaction between underlying biological, genetic or psychological characteristics, social and environmental circumstances, and characteristics of the activity itself (Abbott and Clarke 2007; Griffiths and Delfabbro 2001; Shaffer et al. 2004b). However, recent biopsychosocial models (e.g., Blaszczynski and Nower 2002; Sharpe 2002) focus most on personal physiological and psychological characteristics, paying less attention to the socio-environmental circumstances surrounding the individual (Abbott and Clarke) or how they relate to psychological characteristics. Accessibility is one such socio-environmental factor which has been included in recent models but which remains ill defined and poorly understood. This Australian study reports on a qualitative investigation which sought to examine the nature of accessibility.

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The availability and accessibility of gambling has increased substantially in recent decades and many western countries now have ready access to a wide variety of gambling products (Petry 2003; Productivity Commission 1999). Electronic gaming machine (EGM) gambling in particular has become very accessible in recent decades in countries such as Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. This form of gambling is now accessible in smaller venues spread throughout suburban and regional areas as well as in city-based casinos (KPMG Consulting 2000; Marshall 2005; Robitaille and Herjean 2008). More recently, concerns have been raised about the increased accessibility to gambling provided by new in-house gambling products available on the internet, mobile phones and television (Griffiths and Wood 2000).

Increased accessibility has been linked to both gambling popularity and gambling related harm (Breen and Zimmerman 2002; Griffiths and Delfabbro 2001; Productivity Commission 1999). However, most research exploring these relationships concentrates on geographical accessibility to gambling products and gambling venues. Studies in Australia and Canada, for example, have shown that people living in regions with higher concentrations of EGMs, as measured by number of EGMs per capita, are more likely to gamble, gamble more often, spend more money and have a higher prevalence of gambling problems than those in regions with lower concentrations (Cox et al. 2005; Marshall 2005). Canadian and US studies have similarly found positive relationships between proximity of major gambling venues and both gambling frequency and problems (Rush et al. 2007; Welte et al. 2007, 2004, 2006). Interestingly, Welte, Barnes et al. found the relationship to problem gambling related specifically to older males.

Not all evidence supports a positive relationship between geographical accessibility and gambling behaviour. Abbott and colleagues, for example, found that problem gambling prevalence in New Zealand fell from 1.2% in 1991 to 0.5% in 1999 despite an increase in gambling opportunities (Abbott and Volberg 1996; Abbott et al. 2004). Further, Jacques, Ladouceur and Ferland found that while there were significant increases in gambling and gambling problems a year after the opening of a city casino, two and four year follow ups showed these effects had disappeared (Jacques and Ladouceur 2006; Jacques et al. 2000). Indeed, it has recently been argued that the relationship between geographical accessibility and problem gambling may not be linear. Instead prevalence of gambling problems may plateau or drop over time as the community adapts to the risks of gambling and learns to gamble at safe levels (Abbott 2006; Shaffer et al. 2004a). These inconsistent results may be because measurement of accessibility has been too narrow. A report on gambling in Australia (Productivity Commission 1999) raised the possibility of a broader conceptualisation of accessibility which includes, but is not restricted to, proximity to the home.

Dimensions of Accessibility

The Productivity Commission (1999) considered a number of possible dimensions of accessibility which warrant further investigation. These can be grouped as dimensions of geo-temporal accessibility and social or personal accessibility.

Geo-temporal Accessibility

Geo-temporal accessibility includes the more objective elements of geographical and temporal accessibility. The Productivity Commission (1999) discussed the importance of *spatial* distribution, that is, the distribution of gambling opportunities within a geographical area. The spatial distribution of EGM venues is particularly high in countries such as

Australia and Canada, with people often travelling only a few kilometres to gamble (KPMG Consulting 2000; Marshall 2005; Robitaille and Herjean 2008).

Venues which have long *opening hours* can also be considered more accessible than those which offer gambling for only limited times or days (Productivity Commission 1999). Marshall (2005) has since considered the interaction between spatial accessibility and opening hours (space-time accessibility) such that gambling venues which are close to home and open long hours every day offer far greater accessibility than those which are equally close but not open daily. Gambling products available on the internet and mobile phones potentially offer almost limitless space-time accessibility (Griffiths and Wood 2000). The *number of opportunities to gamble in any given venue* can also impact accessibility (Productivity Commission). Thus, a casino open 24 h a day offering several floors dedicated to a variety of different gambling is very accessible in terms of gambling opportunities and opening hours, but low on spatial accessibility as the opportunities are clustered into a single geographical location.

Although these geo-temporal dimensions are fairly objective and so relatively easy to measure, they encompass more personal and subjective elements. Geographic accessibility, for example, relates to venues people pass en route to work, within the local shopping centre and in social or community hubs in addition to the venues located close to the home (Clarke et al. 2006; McMillen and Doran 2006). This may mean that an individual finds a venue located next to the local shopping centre to be as accessible as one five minutes drive from home.

Social and Personal Accessibility

Social and personal aspects of accessibility incorporate personal perception into judgements of accessibility and so are more subjective and difficult to measure. The Productivity Commission (1999) suggested that *Social Accessibility* involves the degree to which a gambling venue is perceived as attractive and non-threatening, in other words a nice place to visit. There are additional dimensions nominated by the Productivity Commission which can also be viewed under the umbrella of social accessibility.

Conditions of entry, for example, includes membership requirements and dress codes. This can influence impulsive decisions to gamble as well as the type of client who frequents a particular venue. *Ease of Use* of products such as the real or perceived skill requirements of a game is also relevant. Casino card games such as *Texas hold 'em poker* for instance, can appear complicated to the uninitiated gambler, in turn making the person feel unskilled and giving the venue an exclusive quality. Purchasing a raffle ticket on the other hand is a simple task. Further, gambling products with a *low initial outlay* (e.g., some EGMs) may afford greater economic accessibility than games with relatively high initial entry fees (e.g., certain card games), even though both forms may ultimately result in the same cost.

Dimensions of social accessibility may be differentially important to particular subgroups according to gender, culture or work arrangements. It has been reported that women can feel unwelcome in traditional male gambling domains such as off course betting agencies and hotels (Thomas 1995; Walker 1992), but comfortable visiting the more glamorous EGM venues, even when alone (Hing and Breen 2001; Thomas et al. 2009). Minority cultural groups may feel more welcome in large city-based casinos which are familiar with catering for people with a different first language than in smaller suburban venues (GAMECS Project 1999; Productivity Commission 1999; Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority 2000). In terms of employment, shift workers can find their leisure time fails to coincide with the rest of the community leaving them with a limited number of available entertainment outlets (KPMG Consulting 2000; Thomas et al. 2009).

Motivational Factors and Accessibility

Gambling can also function to meet individual and emotional needs which may be influenced by dimensions of accessibility. Research has shown that problem gamblers are often motivated to gamble to escape problems (e.g., New Focus Research 2003; Scannell et al. 2000; Shepherd and Dickerson 2001; Surgey 2000; Thomas and Moore 2003) and so are likely to be attracted to venues that afford a feeling of escape. Thomas et al. (2009) found geo-temporally accessible EGM gambling venues in Australia provided a welcoming and social space which was used by problem gamblers as a physical and cognitive retreat from loneliness, boredom, work stress and relationship conflict. Gambling venues which provide high accessibility along a number of dimensions may therefore prove to be particularly attractive to people whose motivations align with the attractions on offer.

The Present Study

The literature reviewed suggests considerable complexity in the concept of accessibility but these additional dimensions are yet to be examined in any depth. This study was conceived as an initial investigation of the multidimensional nature of accessibility. A qualitative approach was adopted to facilitate an open exploration of the meaning and intentionality behind behaviour. Three research questions guided this study: (a) What attracts people to gambling venues/products? (b) Does attraction relate to a multidimensional view of accessibility? (c) Do attractions related to accessibility differ among demographic groups?

Methodology

This study used a phenomenological framework to uncover the psychological meaning of accessibility regulation from the point of view of the gambler. Phenomenological analysis facilitates an in-depth investigation and analysis of the experience of gambling within the context of the participants' lives (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008).

Participants

Within the constraints of a self-selected sample, purposive sampling techniques were used to provide diversity in sampling with contributions being sought (a) from individuals representing groups whose contribution was likely to be relevant in terms of the central research question, and (b) where contributions were likely to provide a different perspective. On this basis participation was sought from people of different gender, age, gambler status (i.e., social gamblers, problem gamblers, ex-problem gamblers), ethnicity, and socio-economic group. Representation in these groups was not mutually exclusive.

The final sample included 19 women ranging in age from 18 to 69 years with a median age of 41 years ($Mean=39.79$ years, $SD=14.21$) and 19 men ranging in age from 18 to 65 years with a median age of 47 years ($Mean=39.89$ years, $SD=16.12$ years). Thirteen participants identified themselves as being from a cultural minority group, six participants were recruited from a regional area of Victoria with the remainder coming from metropolitan regions. One participant was a venue worker, and four people were identified by researchers as being from a low socio-economic group. Five known ex-problem gamblers (Ex-PG) were also recruited. A measure of gambling problems described below

showed 21 participants were no-low risk gamblers (LRG), 10 were moderate risk gamblers (MRG) and 11 scored over the threshold for gambling problems (PG).

To increase transparency, individual quotes were coded to reflect gambler status (e.g., Ex-PG or LRG) as well as gender (M or F) and age (in years). Where appropriate, specific group membership was identified (e.g., Regional Participant). Where the general group discussion precluded individual identification, participants were identified in terms of their gender and group membership.

Recruitment was via (a) community centres and dedicated gambling counselling services where designated worker(s) within the services advertised the study and helped organise specific focus groups of interested people, and (b) through electronic and paper based flyers advertising the study more generally and inviting individuals to contact the researchers directly. To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym during the group and confidentiality issues were discussed at the beginning of each group. Pseudonyms were later replaced with identification numbers. All discussions were audio taped and relevant sections were transcribed with participants' permission.

Data Collection

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the relevant university committee. The primary method of data collection was focus group interviews. Each focus group was made up of similar participants (e.g., a group of ex-problem gamblers, a cultural minority group). Focus groups were chosen with the dual purpose of increasing participant comfort and allowing the group facilitator to focus discussion according to the nature of the group. Where time and group constraints prohibited allocation to a focus group, individual interviews ($N=4$) were conducted by a key researcher.

The data reported on in this study formed part of a larger study. Focus groups and individual interviews were semi-structured with a broad list of questions used by the interviewer to ensure the core research topics were covered. The semi-structured nature meant that follow up questions could be initiated to explore additional topics when these arose (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Minichiello et al. 1995). Focus groups/interviews lasted between 23 and 75 min and all were conducted face-to-face.

The *Problem Gambling Severity Index* (PGSI), a component of the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (Ferris and Wynne 2001) measured presence and severity of gambling problems in two parts: (a) problem gambling behaviour (e.g., "How often have you bet more than you could really afford to lose?"), and (b) consequences of the behaviour for the individual and others (e.g., "How often have you felt guilty about the way you gamble or what happens when you gamble?"). Questions relate to the last 12 months with responses scored on a 4-point scale where 0 (*Never*) and 3 (*Almost always*). Scale scores range from 0–27 and are obtained by summing the items. Scores are interpreted as follows: 0=Non problem gambling, 1–2=Low risk gambling, 3–7=moderate risk gambling, 8+ =problem gambling. The scale has demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranging .84–.92; test-retest stability at 3–4 weeks .78), and validity with high correlations being found between the PGSI and other measures of problem gambling (Centre for Gambling Research 2004; Ferris and Wynne).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on the data using a phenomenological framework to identify and analyse patterns within the dataset. Within the overall constraints of the research question, an inductive approach was taken such that the data drove the

identification of individual themes rather than using prior theory or research to inform themes (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Specific strategies were drawn from a number of sources including grounded theory and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Charmaz 2006; Rennie 2006; Smith and Osborn 2008). Although the description of the analytic process given below may appear linear, the process itself was recursive as the analysis moved back and forth between strategies and phases of the research until no new themes, patterns or insights were uncovered (Braun and Clarke 2006; Cresswell 2009). The transcript data was initially read and re-read by one researcher (A.T.) to provide an in-depth familiarisation with the recorded material. This researcher conducted the majority of the data analysis having consulted with the researcher who facilitated the focus groups and interviews and conducted some initial data analysis on early groups (G.J.).

Initial coding of the complete dataset was undertaken with small sections of the text being analysed and coded according to its meaning (Braun and Clarke 2006; Charmaz 2006; Rennie 2006; Smith and Osborn 2008). These coded sections of text were compared to each other for similarities and differences and similar codes were clustered into potential themes. Each theme was then examined to ensure it was coherent and meaningful. This analysis included returning to examine the raw text related to each theme to ensure the theme remained grounded in the data. The initial list of themes was examined by four of the researchers (A.T., S.M., M.K., & G.B.) to understand the overall story the data was telling and to examine the relevance of the themes to the research questions. A reduced list of themes relevant to the research questions were then examined in more detail by two researchers (A.T. & G.B.) to refine understanding and consider relationships among themes. This examination resulted in the splitting of some themes into sub-themes and gathering together of other related themes into higher order categories (Braun & Clarke; Charmaz).

Results

The thematic analysis revealed that attraction to venues was clearly associated with accessibility, and that accessibility could be viewed as a multidimensional construct. Three separate dimensions emerged, two of which accorded roughly with our earlier delineation of accessibility: *Geo-temporal Accessibility*, *Social and Personal Accessibility*, and *Financial Accessibility*.

Geo-temporal Accessibility

This theme encompassed both geographical and temporal accessibility, with variability across specifics according to group membership. Geographic accessibility was clearly evident and matched previous work focussing on location. The proximity of venues made them an easy option. In some cases this could lead to impulsive gambling: “*It’s more circumstantial, like if I’m close to one then I might give it a go*” (P11, M, 21 years old, MRG). In addition, reflecting discussion by other researchers (Clarke et al. 2006; Marshall et al. 2004; McMillen and Doran 2006; Thomas et al. 2009), this dimension related to the relative location of venues to the work place, on commonly used routes and to community hubs such as shopping centres as well as to the home.

I go to the supermarket and I feel tired and I feel drained just fighting the urge to go [to gamble] and I get up near the supermarket to actually buy food and right across

the road will be a pokie venue and you [were] just going to get some money. You can't just go buy a few groceries. Go in to play the machines (F, Regional participant, PG).

The wide distribution of venues throughout suburbs as well as in the city centres meant that avoiding gambling venues was difficult for people with gambling problems: *"Before they were in Victoria I wasn't addicted to them because I wasn't looking at them in every street corner"* (P4, F, 35 years old, PG). The proximity of venues to home meant that restricting the amount of money taken to a venue may not prevent bingeing: *"I've tried leaving cash at home, taking my limited amount ... end up driving home and driving back and driving home and driving back \$20 at a time ... you'll get through \$120 going there each time"* (F, Regional participant, PG).

Venue opening hours were also clearly related to perceptions of accessibility. Twenty-four hour accessibility offered by newer online gambling products and the city-based casino was highlighted by some participants as an attraction. Some young participants said they would visit the city casino late in the evening (e.g., 3 am) because they knew it would be open, usually staying *"till morning"* (P28, M, 18 years old, Vietnamese participant, PG). People in this group were unlikely to visit the casino in the daytime, but others found early openings an incentive to gamble. A regional female problem gambler said that she was sometimes embarrassed to find she was the *"first one at the venue"* in the morning (F, Regional participant, PG). One participant noted that shift workers were particularly vulnerable to the comparatively high temporal accessibility of gambling venues due to their tendency to finish shifts at odd times when there were few alternative entertainment options available.

Social and Personal Accessibility

This was a very complex theme with several sub-themes evident. It related to more subjective elements of accessibility and was heavily influenced by personal perceptions. In line with contentions of the Productivity Commission (1999), this theme related to perceptions about the attractive and non-threatening nature of the environment. In addition, it related to the potential for social interaction, the availability of other entertainment options and the retreat from the world that venues could offer. Finally, it included facilitation of entry by venues, and the specific attractions of games for different individuals.

A Safe Option

It was important for a gambling venue to be seen as clean, trustworthy and reputable: *"A proper place that isn't going to rip you off"* (P12, M, 27 years old, LRG). Venues which were perceived to be *"run down, dingy, seedy"* (P11, M, 21 years MRG) were likely to be unfavourably compared to those which were newer, cleaner and well-run. Well run venues could be seen as a safe entertainment option for single women: *"A woman by herself can go nowadays ... it is very safe they have security there, they have door men, and if you (are) there late at night they escort you right up to the car"* (F, Regional PG).

A Social Place

Some people said their favourite venues made them feel like they were part of a club. Participants tended to enjoy venues which attracted similar people. For young people, it was important the venue attracted other young individuals: *"Cause [you] can like [sic]*

socialise with them rather than old people” (P27, M, 18 years old, Vietnamese participant, PG). The night time scene at the casino was preferred by the young Vietnamese participants for this reason: *“The young kids are out ... there are lights flashing at you, but during the day [the Casino’s] sad you know, old people”* (F, Vietnamese participant).

In contrast, older patrons were likely to avoid the large flashy venues frequented by the younger crowd:

You don’t want to go to a place where ... there’s a whole bunch of rebels and yahoos carrying on. You just want to go to a place where you can sit down and chill out and have a quiet beer, a little dabble on the pokies, just pass a couple of hours (P13, M, 47 years old, LRG).

Some problem gamblers said they had developed personal relationships with staff and other regular patrons over time: *“[In] all my preferred venues they [staff] all know me quite well”* (F, Regional Participant, PG). She knew the other regular patrons and would *“sit down and have coffee with them. I can have a joke with them. It’s become more a social outing than anything else.”* A regional male problem gambler said that staff recognition and offers of coffee made him feel familiar and comfortable in the venue. Although some problem gamblers clearly enjoyed this casual interaction, others preferred a more passive connection with other people: *“It’s a place where you can be amongst people and not necessarily have to interact with them... there’s somebody playing right beside you but you can be that [sic] into what you’re doing you don’t even interact with them”* (F, Regional participant, PG).

Part of a Wider Social Experience

Social accessibility was enhanced where the gambling was presented as part of a wider entertainment experience: *“Go for a few drinks and decide to have a bet”* (P17, M, 27 years old, LRG). Younger people in particular expected gambling to be provided within a range of activities: *“You want other attractions there besides pokies”* (P11, M, 21 years old, MRG). Interestingly, reports from two women who had been asked to leave a venue for socialising rather than gambling suggests that venue staff may have an expectation that visitors gamble. One woman said staff at her social club told her to *“go home or play the machines”* (F, Regional participant, PG).

An Accessible Retreat

For some problem gamblers the venue was a retreat from life issues. Venues could provide an *“escape from the reality of life and where no-one else could bug me”* (P4, F, 35 years old, PG). You could *“get lost in this virtual world”* (P16, F, 50+ years old, PG). The escape was temporary, with problems returning and even escalating on return to the real world: *“All your cares seem to stay outside the door. Course when you leave there you might have more and you’ve still got to go back out and face reality but it is, it’s an escape from reality and pressures ... you just dump them for a while”* (F, Regional participant, PG).

Venue Facilitated Entry

Venues with few entry conditions increased accessibility and could also lead to impulsive decisions to gamble: *“I’m driving past and I think ‘Oh, I’d love to, I’ve got an itchy palm,*

money coming in. I've got to stop and put a bet on'. Then I can just go into the casino, I don't have to be dressed up" (P8, M, 49 years old, LRG). Venue incentives or prizes were another way of attracting patrons to specific venues. "I go to one particular venue because it's like a day out for me, to have a little shopping game" (F, Regional participant, PG). Some venues used courtesy buses to provide door to door transportation for patrons. This could dramatically increase perceptions of accessibility for people without private transport as well as those with physical disabilities for whom access to other entertainment options is difficult.

The Attraction of Games

Specific games and game features attracted some people and added to perceptions of accessibility. Games with few skill requirements were seen as more accessible. EGMs, for example, did not require complex choices or decision making: "easy to use just press a button" (P4, F, 35 years old, PG). In contrast, football or horse race betting may be seen as more complex, requiring the gambler to make a series of decisions such as picking the race and reading the statistics. Machine features such as the "free spins" on EGMs could be an attraction: "When you're struggling...and you're low, you're regularly depressed, you get on this machine and get all these free spins...it gives you such a sensational feeling." (P5, M, 52 years old, PG).

Financial Accessibility

An additional factor that influenced perceptions of accessibility was the ease with which gambling money could be obtained, and the likely costs of gambling. Locating Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) close to gambling areas increased monetary accessibility and could lead to impulsive gambling or gambling more than intended: "What ATMs have they got there? How easy is it to get money if I have to go out for money? ... all those things are part of your decision of how quick can I gamble" (P4, F, 35 years old, PG). Financial accessibility was further enhanced by the small outlay required for some games, which made them appear to be an affordable recreational alternative: "Pokies betting is affordable for those on lower incomes compared to spending \$60 on a meal. Now we can go out and have a thrill for \$2" (Low socio-economic group participant).

Discussion

The key finding of this study was that accessibility should be conceptualised as a multidimensional construct. Asking general questions around what attracted individuals to gambling venues allowed this wider conceptualisation of accessibility to emerge more clearly than may have been possible had questions been restricted to a discussion of what constituted accessibility. In reflecting on what attracted them to venues, participants clearly linked attraction to accessibility, differentiating between gambling opportunities according to their geo-temporal, social/personal, and financial accessibility.

Geo-temporal accessibility related to the proximity of gambling venues to home, work, community hubs and regular routes, as well as their relative opening hours. This supported the discussions of other researchers that geographic accessibility needed to encompass more than just the proximity of venues to the home (Clarke et al. 2006; Marshall et al. 2004; McMillen and Doran 2006; Thomas et al. 2009). Further, the data supported Marshall's (2005) contention that the interaction between geographic and temporal accessibility is

important and revealed that geo-temporal accessibility of venues can encourage impulsive gambling. Problem gamblers in particular had difficulty avoiding venues and limiting the amount of money they spent. Geo-temporal accessibility may be particularly relevant to shift workers due to a lack of alternative options accessible during their leisure hours (KPMG Consulting 2000; Thomas et al. 2009).

Social accessibility proved to be a surprisingly important and complex theme with venues offering a social and safe atmosphere and which presented gambling as part of a wider entertainment experience being seen as more accessible. Young people liked venues which offered a big, active, “flashy” social event while older people preferred a quiet, relaxing environment. Some long term patrons had developed personal relationships with staff and other patrons. The findings extended prior research showing that men as well as women differentiate between gambling options based on perceptions of safety and trustworthiness (e.g., Surgey 2000; Walker 1992). There is still likely to be some gender differentiation, however. TAB betting shops, for example, are traditional male domains (Walker). EGM venues on the other hand have been designed to provide an attractive, acceptable and safe space for women to congregate (Surgey). Patronage of specific venues was also made more accessible by courtesy buses, relaxed conditions of entry, incentives and the provision of attractive and easy to play games.

Some problem gamblers were attracted to venues which provided a retreat from the problems of the outside world and the demands of others. Gambling as a cognitive escape is central to many explanations of problem gambling (Blaszczynski and Nower 2002; Dickerson and Baron 2000; Lightsey and Hulse 2002; Ricketts and Macaskill 2003; Rockloff and Dyer 2006; Wood and Griffiths 2007). Further, Surgey (2000) has discussed the “constructed environment” of EGM venues which provided a timeless refuge for women with gambling problems (p. 54), and Ladouceur et al. (2005) found that probable pathological gamblers preferred to gamble in isolated areas of venues. This research extends understanding showing that venues which can facilitate both a physical and cognitive retreat from worldly problems may be very attractive to people who desire a temporary escape (Thomas et al. 2009).

Problem gamblers tend to be lonelier than non-problem gamblers (Grant and Kim 2002; Porter et al. 2004; Thomas and Moore 2003; Trevorrow and Moore 1998). The social environment of venues may be a particular attraction to these lonely individuals. Interestingly, a few problem gamblers in this study appeared to be more attracted to the social background of venues than to actual social interactions. This has been seen in other research (Surgey 2000; Thomas et al. 2009) and may mean some problem gamblers are attracted to the social atmosphere of venues as a temporary escape from loneliness rather than a solution to the underlying problem.

Finally, gambling venues enhanced financial accessibility by offering low outlay games and ATM facilities. This may encourage more frequent visits as people do not have to consider money before making the decision to gamble. ATM facilities may also lead to longer sessions and higher spending patterns than were initially planned as additional funds are readily accessible (Blaszczynski et al. 2001). The location of ATMs within gambling venues is likely to have a much bigger impact on people with gambling problems. The Productivity Commission (1999) found that only a minority of non-problem gamblers withdrew money from ATMs in venues but that the majority of problem gamblers used them. In fact, the Productivity Commission found over 20% of problem gamblers claimed they *always* withdrew money from ATMs when they were playing EGMs at venues.

Spatial distribution and opening hours of gambling venues must be considered in light of these findings. In Australia, where this study was undertaken, this is most relevant to EGM

gambling venues which are located in small clubs and hotels throughout suburban and regional areas. Government policy which caps the overall number of EGMs but does not place restrictions on the number of venues or their opening hours, for example, will have little impact on accessibility as it is rare for all machines in a venue to be occupied (Abbott 2006; Delfabbro 2008). Reducing the number of venues rather than the number of machines may assist people to manage their gambling (SA Centre for Economic Studies 2005). This may be particularly useful in regions with few alternatives which are similarly accessible, such as outer-suburban or regional areas. A study of problem gambling in Canberra found that the social life of this somewhat isolated community revolved around the clubs (McMillen et al. 2004), which offered a place to meet friends and socialise. Problem gamblers in McMillen et al.'s study said that while they were not initially attracted by the gambling they began to gamble simply because they frequented venues for social entertainment.

Entertainment needs of specific groups within a community should also be taken into account. Women, for example, tend to have fewer options which feel safe or appropriate, and economically disadvantaged groups require free or cheaper alternatives. Socially isolated people and those experiencing stressful home situations may need social options which are activity based and geared towards attracting single individuals (McMillen et al. 2004).

Limitations and Future Directions

A strength of this research was that participants themselves raised these dimensions rather than having predetermined categories presented to them, increasing confidence in the findings. Qualitative studies such as this can provide a wealth of information regarding the phenomenology or meaning of an experience from the point of view of the participant. These findings, however, cannot be generalised to all gamblers or beyond this region. Efforts were made to include people from different cultural backgrounds, for example, but cultural minorities accounted for only a minority of the sample. It is possible that some aspects of accessibility are differentially important to different cultural groups but that these subtle differences were not captured in this research. Further, EGM gambling venues in Australia are located in social and sporting clubs and hotels throughout the suburbs and regional areas as well as in major cities. These venues account for over half the gambling expenditure in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). It is likely that the findings of this study were heavily influenced by these venues. Dimensions of accessibility may therefore be somewhat different in regions where EGM gambling is less prominent. It is important that future research explore the dimensionality of accessibility across different groups and in different regions to identify points of commonality and divergence.

In addition, the relative importance and potential for interaction between themes needs to be explored. This lends itself to quantitative research encompassing larger, more generalised samples of gamblers. Eltridge and Delfabbro (2006), for example, found that very regular patrons (gambling almost daily) and problem gamblers were more likely to select a venue based on its geographic accessibility, whereas less regular patrons were more likely to return to a venue with pleasant staff. In contrast, the present study found that both social and problem gamblers were drawn to the pleasant atmosphere and friendly staff. The findings of the present research could be used to inform the development of scales measuring different dimensions of accessibility. This would facilitate testing of group differences on accessibility as well as the form and strength of relationships between the various dimensions of accessibility and gambling behaviour.

Conclusions

The study extends understanding of the nature of accessibility and how it relates to gambling behaviour. It provides evidence to support the theoretical contention that accessibility is multidimensional, and shows that people are aware of this and will choose venues and products based on different aspects of accessibility. The findings also suggest that gambling as a form of social entertainment may be a relatively safe social activity, but that continued reliance on gambling because it is geographically and temporally accessible and provides a retreat from problems may lead to excessive and problematic gambling. Further, social elements may combine with other aspects to attract some people. Treatment for problem gamblers should therefore target idiosyncratic gambling-related motivations and explore how they may relate to different and multiple aspects of accessibility to assist individuals to manage accessibility of gambling in their day to day lives.

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