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## **Ripples in a pond: the disclosure to, and management of, problem Internet gambling with/in the family**

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For every individual with a gambling problem it is estimated that somewhere between a further 5–17 other individuals are adversely affected by it. Yet, despite the fact that this claim is commonly circulated, Krishnan and Orford point out that research into effects of problem gambling on gamblers' families has been limited and has not explored family coping in detail. This paper addresses this lacunae by drawing on qualitative research with problem Internet gamblers and their significant others (partners, parents, children and siblings) to examine the processes through which problem gambling is first disclosed within, and then managed by 'families'. The paper concludes by arguing that because problem Internet gambling is commonly contained as a secret within families to whom it is disclosed, and is 'self-corrected' by many of them, the issue and extent of problem Internet gambling does not become visible in the wider public domain.

**Keywords:** family; intimacy; Internet; gambling; disclosure

Para cada persona que tiene un problema con el juego se estima que al menos afecta adversamente a entre 5 y 17 individuos indirectamente. Sin embargo a pesar de que estos datos se corroboran, Krishnan y Orford destacaron que investigaciones sobre los efectos del problema con el juego en las familias de los jugadores han sido limitadas y no se han estudiado en detalle la capacidad de la familia para enfrentarse. Este artículo es para investigar sobre ese vacío con investigaciones cualitativas acerca del problema de jugar en Internet y como afecta a otros (tales como pareja, padres, hijos y hermanos), para tratar de revelar los primeros síntomas que aparecen en el problema con el juego y luego ser tratados por las familias. El artículo concluye afirmando que el hecho y el alcance del problema con el juego en Internet es habitualmente mantenido en secreto por las familias que lo sufren y que suele ser corregido por ellas mismas por lo que no se llega a ser visible en el ámbito público.

**Palabras claves:** familia; intimidad; Internet; juego; revelacion

### **Introduction**

For every individual with a gambling problem it is estimated that somewhere between a further 5–17 other individuals are adversely affected by it (Lesieur, 1984; see also Kalischuk, Nowatzki, Cardwell, Klein, & Solowoniuk, 2006). Yet, despite the fact that this claim is commonly circulated, Krishnan and Orford (2002) point out that

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research into effects of problem gambling on gamblers' families has been limited and has not addressed family coping in detail. Indeed, much academic work on problem gambling adopts an individualistic model. This is both in terms of data collection – which normally employs surveys or interviews with individual gamblers alone, rather than seeking relational accounts from their significant others – and in terms of its analysis which commonly focuses on the gamblers' behaviour/experiences largely abstracted from the complexities of their wider social relations.

Where gambling research has focused on 'the family' it has commonly done so through the lens of the spousal relationship; in particular, the impact of male problem gamblers' behaviour on their wives. Spouses of problem gamblers often have to live with financial insecurity (e.g., inability to pay the mortgage, bills and even for food) and the threat of creditors (Bergh & Kuhlhorn, 1994; Gaudia, 1987; Lorenz & Yaffee, 1988). Not surprisingly, they report similar physical and emotional harms as gamblers themselves (cf. Lesieur & Rosenthal, 1991; Orford, 1994; Volberg, 1994) including: depressive symptoms (Bergh & Kuhlhorn, 1994); feelings of self-blame and emotional stress (Lorenz & Yaffee, 1988); and even physical symptoms such as headaches, and breathing difficulties (Lorenz & Yaffee, 1988). Indeed, suicide attempts by spouses and partners of problem gamblers are reported to be triple those of the general population (Gaudia, 1987; Lorenz & Yaffee, 1988). However, there is little evidence about how problem gambling is constituted through relationships with 'significant others' who are not in a marital relationship but whose lives may also be closely interwoven financially or emotionally with a problem gambler for example: partners who may be living either together or apart, children, siblings, adult parents, carers (e.g., of disabled people), or tenants/housemates. Indeed, such intimate relations would appear to be particularly pertinent in the context of the emergence of Internet gambling because it brings omni-present opportunities to gamble into the home. As such, Internet gambling is often embedded in day-to-day household life and the emotional functioning of the space of the home, and thus a range of significant others and their practices, are deeply implicated in the development, recognition, and management of Internet gambling as a problem.

A few studies (e.g., Darbyshire, Oster, & Carrig, 2001; Jacobs et al., 1989) have considered the implications of problem gambling for the children of adult gamblers. For example, qualitative research in Australia by Darbyshire et al. (2001) with 15 young people (aged 7–18) living in families where a parent/carer had a serious gambling problem, found that the respondents experienced a pervasive sense of loss (in both a physical and existential sense). This, they argued, presented a threat to children's well-being and should be regarded as health and social problem. Other studies have found that children are often caught up in the chaotic and unpredictable behaviour of parents who are problem gamblers (Lesieur, 1989). There is also some evidence that problem gamblers typically report elevated levels of problem gambling on the part of their parents (e.g., Abbott, Cramer, & Sherrets, 1995; Gupta & Derevensky, 1998; Ladouceur, Boisvert, Pepin, Loranger, & Sylvain, 1994; Moody, 1989; Winters, Stinchfield, & Fulkerson, 1993). This 'modelling' of gambling behaviour has been termed the 'intergenerational multiplier effect' (Abbott, 2001). It commonly follows gender lines: although having a father who is a problem gambler increases the risk that a son will follow suit, more than having a mother who is a problem gambler raises the likelihood that a daughter will do so (Walters, 2001).

However, there appears to be little evidence in relation to the reverse scenario – the impact of problem gambling by adult children on their parents – nor has there been much consideration of the ripple effect of problem gambling through extended family networks of siblings, in-laws, grandparents, and so on. This is perhaps surprising given that transitions from childhood to adulthood in western societies have become more extended and more complex in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). The expansion of higher/further education and reduction in benefits to which young people are entitled, as well as rising housing costs, mean that many young people live with, or are semi-dependent on, their parents for financial support into their mid-twenties and sometimes beyond (Jones, 2000). Moreover, even when adults leave the parental home the family is still the site through which many of our individual biographies and expectations are routed in adulthood. Consequently, families with their traditional ties of love and care, remain a crucial entity, continuing to play a key part in the intimate life of most individuals throughout their adult lives even when they are physically distant from each other (Gillies, Ribbens-McCarthy, & Holland, 2001; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards, & Gillies, 2003; Silva & Smart, 1999). Indeed, Finch and Mason (1993) claim that continued commitment to intimacy, sharing resources, and maintaining responsibilities for each other (in terms of material, practical, and emotional support) remain unremarkable features of everyday family life.

In this paper, we therefore adopt a relational approach, drawing on research not only with problem Internet gamblers but also their chosen significant others (who in this study included spouses/partners, children, parents, siblings and in one case a carer), to examine the processes through which problem gambling is first disclosed within, and then managed by, families. Here, we follow Stacey (1990) in using the term ‘family’ not just to refer to the traditional nuclear model but also to embrace the complex and diverse range of arrangements that characterise contemporary modern western societies. In doing so, we bring together insights from the social studies of childhood and family studies literatures to further inform research within gambling studies.

The project upon which this paper is based included both quantitative and qualitative elements. An online survey of 601 Internet gamblers explored: the social and demographic characteristics of Internet gamblers; when/where they access Internet gambling sites; types of Internet gambling they participate in; whether it is a sociable or solitary activity; and how much money they gamble. This served as a recruitment tool for the qualitative stage of the research with *problem* Internet gamblers. It is this second element of the project which this paper derives from. Two waves of life history interviews were completed with 26 self-identified problem Internet gamblers (20 men and 6 women), and a one-off, in-depth semi-structured interview with a ‘significant other’, nominated by the problem gambler. Participants were recruited from across the UK in both rural and urban areas, and with one exception, all the interviewees were white. They were aged from 19 to 55 years old, their occupations ranged from unemployed through to professional, and they engaged in a diverse array of Internet gambling activities including, for example: bingo, slots, poker and sports betting (including on football, rugby, cricket, tennis, golf, horse racing, dogs, etc.).

The interviews provided data as to why people gamble and continue to do so despite extreme losses, and the emotional and social benefits and harms they gain

from this activity. The time gap between the first and second interviews with the problem gamblers provided real-time accounts of individuals' experiences of Internet gambling, including in some cases individuals' efforts to reduce or stop this activity because of the effects it had, or they feared it may have, on their finances, family and work. This interview process produced 26 cases. A case included all data (including: notes and recordings of informal conversations where permission was granted, ethnographic field notes and in some cases online diary material) on every interaction involved in accessing the problem Internet gamblers. The sample of interviewees included people with a diversity of gambling histories. Some participants have been gambling for years and were still gambling at the end of the research process. Others had gambled intensively for short periods (e.g., 6 months), losing thousands and in some cases hundreds of thousands of pounds, but no longer gamble. Others still had lost significant amounts of money but this had not resulted in major financial difficulties for them. Nonetheless, they all self-identified as 'problem gamblers'. When the term gambler is employed to describe the interviewees it is used as shorthand for problem Internet gambler.<sup>1</sup>

### The process of disclosing a gambling problem

Each of the problem Internet gamblers who were interviewed had, in effect, a *debt horizon* – a form of shifting responsibility – in which they continued to gamble until stopped by banks or credit institutions. Most of the informants kept their problem gambling a secret (although a few were always open about it) from their significant others as their losses mounted until this point when they were no longer able to sustain 'normal' everyday patterns of behaviour (for example, pay bills). Many of them felt guilt and shame at the impact their gambling was having on their families and about not being the child, partner or parent that they feel they ought to be. In this sense, the interviewees also experienced a loss of self or spoiled identity. Fearful of the consequences of admitting their losses the gamblers often rationalised their failure to disclose their problems in terms of not being able to find the 'right' time and place to break the news in which excess closeness to, as well as distance from, significant others were mobilised as excuses.

Processes of disclosure were both *direct* – when the gambler took responsibility and deliberately told a significant other about their problem; and *indirect* – when either someone else informed a significant other(s) or the problem emerged accidentally (e.g., because a partner opened a credit card statement, the gambler was arrested for theft) forcing the gambler to disclose details of their problem. In many cases, significant others had been aware that something was wrong because of the gamblers' emotional mood swings and absence (existential and/or physical) but they commonly had no awareness that the cause was Internet gambling. Indeed, Internet gambling is often invisible to other household members because it commonly takes place when they are present in the house and so passes unnoticed because computer use is a banal, everyday household activity. Here Kay, the wife of a problem Internet gambler recalls the moment of her husband's disclosure:

Kay: How did I find out? Well it was by pure accident. Some post had come through the door . . . I just opened it cos I thought it was mine but it was his and he'd previously been taking, you know, taking the post . . . and it was a current account in [his

name removed] and saying loan repayments £500. I said 'oh gosh you are going to have to do something about it cos it looks like its an identity theft going on' . . . And he took the statement away and couple of minutes later came back downstairs and said 'No I'm to have to tell you', [he] said 'sit down I need to tell you' and then he told me that the loan was the £25,000 . . . and he said 'I've got a gambling problem'. (Wife of a problem Internet gambler)

Families are not homogenous or monolithic institutions but rather are formed through complex webs of differentiated relationships between individuals and are constituted in many different forms. As a result individuals commonly have closer relationships with some family members rather than others and are aware that disclosure of their problem gambling may have a differential impact on, or consequences for, others' individual roles and identities. As such, the interviewees had rarely disclosed their problem to the whole family simultaneously – even where then their gambling was about to be exposed in the national media. Rather, respondents used their understandings of differential family relationships into order to make informed, and individualised choices, about whom to tell in order to gain appropriate support (financial and emotional) while also containing the information about their problem.

Partners (who in this sample were mainly women) or mothers were usually the first to be told or to discover the gambling problem. This is not surprising given that other research has identified that much of the emotional work within families is done by women. Indeed, their power within households commonly derives from their domestic knowledge of, and control over, other members' activities and middle-class women often work hard to manage and suppress confrontations to produce an image of familial or domestic harmony (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). As Charles and Kerr (1988) have argued 'good' mothers are defined in terms of their willingness to prioritise their children's needs over their own. In one household, such love was manifest by a mother who lied to her son's wife in order to provide an alibi for him to continue his gambling. This Internet gambler describes the differential degrees of intimacy which characterise her relationships with other family members and the importance of her relationship with her mother:

Georgina: I mean I love my sister to bits, but I think the closest person I am who I can be more open with than anybody is my mother. I can tell her almost anything without her actually sitting and judging. I feel my sister judges me a lot more. And that has a lot to do with my confidence being knocked is my sister. Because I'm the baby, she wants to help me a lot and she's looking at me feel my way around it. And I know it sounds ungrateful, but in the same aspect, she helps me a lot, but she also knocks me a lot, without actually knowing it. So I wouldn't trade my sister in for anybody, I mean she's a darling, but I'm much more closer to my mother. And my brother and I don't talk. We'll talk every now and then if he wants something, that's about it. I don't think we've had a conversation . . . in about 15 years. (Woman, 20s, bingo)

Siblings were also commonly one of the first to be enrolled in the gamblers' secrets. This was because they usually had the resources to provide financial assistance, for example by paying off the gambler's debts or providing long-term or short-term loans, which was not always available from a parental generation now in retirement. In some cases, help was sought from a sibling by the gambler not for financial but rather emotional reasons, because the brother or sister themselves had experienced

personal problems (e.g., debts, relationship problems) and so it was assumed they would have a level of understanding (both about having a problem, and the difficulties of negotiating this within the family) not shared by others. Here, siblings often took on important mediatory roles in negotiating the disclosure and management of the Internet gambler's problem for them with other family members, including the gambler's own spouse. In this sense, addressing a gambling problem does not just involve a one-off leap of disclosure but can also become a continuous dialogue between members within the family, in which the responsibility for transmitting information about the problem is transferred from the gambler to others. This informant describes her brother's role in both taking on the responsibility to disclose her problem to others in their family, and in supporting her to confide in her mother:

Valerie: My brother came down and I said, I'm going on telly . . . He said, well what are you going on telly for then? I went online gambling. He said, what are you on about? I just said, well I've got to tell you I said because it's going to be on TV anyway. I said, I've got into online gambling and I've made a mess . . . So he contacted . . . I don't know what others said because he actually contacted them all. Only one that we did have to go and tell and that were my Mum, which he took me up. And he went in and he said, you want a cup of tea Ma, want a bit of whiskey in it?.... Our Val's got something to tell you. (Woman, 40s, instants)

While gamblers effectively transferred their problems onto those in whom they had confided, some forbade the person or people they had disclosed to from discussing the issue with others. This was to avoid their own identity being spoiled but also to protect others, particularly older relatives, or children from emotional harm. In other households, significant others chose of their own accord not to disclose the gambler's problem to other family members or wider social relations because of fears that this information would spoil their partner's identity in the eyes of others. This wife of a problem gambler explains:

Kay: I haven't told my parents because I don't want them to think badly of him. I don't really don't think they'll understand at all. But I have told my sister and, you know, she was, she was great. She kind of understands and although her husband doesn't have a gambling problem he, you know, she was able to share some things that he'd done that were perhaps a little bit irresponsible. You know, so I felt she knew to a certain extent, you know, how I felt anyway. So that was good. It was good to finally talk to people about it what had happened. (Wife of problem gambler)

The interconnectedness of family members' identities, notably the way that the reputation of an individual can be shared by the whole family, are often overlooked. Yet, the disclosure of a gambling problem does not just have consequences for the individual gambler; rather, it can equally spill over, having consequences for the collective identity of the family and those of other members within it. For example, Amanda, Valerie's teenage daughter described how her mother's problem gambling had caused her embarrassment in front of her teachers and her school friends. In addition, her mother's debts prevented her from being able to participate in costly leisure activities with friends, which further shamed her.

Through processes of disclosure gamblers not only created privatised family secrets that mediated members' relationships with wider social networks, but partial

disclosure within families – enrolling some members into the secret about the gambler's problem while excluding others – also reshaped the dynamics and power relations within families. In the quotation below Charles describes how he relies on the maturity of his young children to not 'tell tales' and disclose his gambling problem to his parents (the children's grandparents):

Charles: When we [him and his children] go and see them [his parents, the children's grandparents] it's always, what if something gets said? You know. What if when I'm not there, you know, they [his children and his parents] talk about something and it comes up in conversation? But . . . I think they're [his children] wise enough and mature enough about it to realise that I haven't said anything to them [the grandparents] and it's probably not their place, if you know what I mean, for them to say anything as well. But . . . the thought is always there that I have to tell them [his parents] at some stage, it's just finding the right time and opportunity to be able to tell them. (Man, 30s, black jack & casino)

Despite disclosing an Internet gambling problem to significant others several interviewees described how those they told appeared to go into a state of denial, carrying on as if nothing had been said. Such responses were read either as a positive sign of trust and lack of interference; or a negative sign of a failure to communicate with or understand the gambler.

Georgina: My mother doesn't say a word. My husband doesn't say anything. I mean he does, I suppose, trust me to an extent. My sister brings it up every now and then, like: 'what are you doing on the internet?' (Woman, 20s, bingo)

In such ways, how individuals mobilised differentiated family relationships to either disclose their problem gambling or conceal it; and the complex responses of individual family members to disclosure shed light on the emotional functioning of families.

A further consequence of the tendency for problem gambling to become contained as a shameful secret within families was that significant others who were enrolled in the confidence were therefore isolated from accessing emotional support for themselves from their wider social networks. Most were also unaware of the existence of support agencies such as GamAnon which provides support for families and friends of problem gamblers. Rather, they described feeling frustrated that while the problem gambler was able to access external help from prevention and treatment agencies, as close relatives they were not aware of access to a similar level of appropriate advice and support.

In this section we have focused on families' initial responses to the disclosure of a gambling problem. In the following sections we consider how families adapt to the news after the crisis of disclosure and develop strategies to support the problem gambler.

### **The effects of problem gambling on significant others**

The initial effect experienced by most families was financial. The disclosure of an Internet gambling problem was commonly accompanied by the disclosure of debts. These ranged for the interviewees from £2000 sterling to £144,000 sterling. In the majority of cases, one or more family members stepped into bear some or all of the losses. Here, Caitlin describes her decisions first to lend her sister money and then to

take out a loan on her sister's behalf to pay off her gambling debts, potentially putting her own family's financial security at risk, because of concerns for her niece's welfare:

Caitlin: She said that she'd run up some debts on the gambling on the Internet that she had to pay off... I lent her some money to pay off her debts and she promised that she wouldn't do it again [edit] but obviously she couldn't keep that promise... It would have been about six weeks... She said she'd had some debts; she was sorry she'd gone on the gambling again. She needed so much to bail herself out... would I be willing to do it? [edit] So I spoke to my mother, I spoke to my husband and we all came to the conclusion that she needed a loan. I'd get her the loan but it had to be, you know, there had to be certain regulations or conditions to getting the loan. And I made her wait for about a week before I told her. And then another condition was she had to tell her husband because her husband had no idea what she'd been doing... I took a loan out from my bank and made sure it was a secured loan for £5000 [edit].

Interviewer: How do you feel about having to take... taking a loan out for her?

Caitlin: I'm not best pleased because I've got my own house which obviously I can't pay if she doesn't pay the loan I'm going to have to pay it and so that would affect my family so I'm not that pleased about doing it but I'll do it [edit]. It was more because of her family because she's got a young daughter, so I took the loan out because I thought it's not fair on her daughter to have to suffer and go without. (Sister of problem gambler)

Money was commonly transferred in this way, horizontally between partners/siblings, and intergenerationally, i.e., vertically from parent to adult child. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. 105) have argued that in the context of contemporary individualised family life 'identity struggles' can break out as members pursue their own right to a personal lifestyle in ways that impact on the wider family. Within the context of this research there were tensions running across families about how financial support was weighted towards individuals who had got into financial difficulty through the perceived selfish act of gambling rather than those who had demonstrated responsibility with money.

In a previous study of offline problem gamblers respondents reported engaging in illegal activities including fraud, embezzlement and theft to finance their gambling (Ladouceur et al., 1994). This study of problem Internet gambling found similar evidence that informants had resorted to fraud and the theft of money from employers or other family members to sustain their gambling or to stave off creditors. For example, one participant had pawned his mother's jewellery and electrical items from his parents' home, others had stolen money from partners/spouses/parents, embezzled a legal payment made to a sister and made fraudulent benefit claims; and several interviewees had stolen from their workplaces. In these cases, family members commonly replaced the stolen money before it was discovered, or supported the gambler in their continued deception at work or with family members from whom they had committed theft. In these ways, significant others effectively became accessories in criminal activities, bearing an associated emotional burden of anxiety and guilt. Yet, these cover ups were not undertaken with any intent to deceive but rather out of pure love and an associated ill-conceived sense of obligation to protect their significant other. In these quotations, a wife of a problem gambler and the carer for a disabled problem gambler describe their emotions and moral reasonings:

Tally: I thought he's stolen off me really, you know, I probably should have reported it but I was like, you know, how could you do it, how could you do it? ... [B]ut then that shows me how desperate you [referring to her husband in the room] must have been. (Wife of problem gambler)

Pauline: I'm frightened that he's going to lose everything. It's alright at the moment he's got credit cards ... but it can come to a point where he starts having to sell things to pay debts off. I mean that happens doesn't it, people have lost their houses haven't they? [edit]. He doesn't seem to feel any guilt whatsoever about fiddling his [accounts]. And I think, well it's stealing isn't it? [edit] I'm in cahoots with him, aren't I? I know what's going on, so I do feel ... anxious about that. (Significant other of problem gambler)

As debts came under control 'problem migration' often occurred. In other words, the gambling was reframed by significant others from a financial problem to an emotional one. For example, money spent on gambling was reframed as evidence of the gambler's lack of responsibility, wasted opportunity for other members of the family, and a lack of shared values between the gambler and their significant others. In these cases, it was not always clear what sources of help were required for the gambler or their families. Often, 'the problem' became a problem of time – the time the gambler had spent on the Internet, and therefore away from their families (Hughes, Valentine, & Kenten, 2008). This time spent away from families was seen as a lack of involvement and integration in family activities, and signified a lack of emotional commitment to children and/or partners.

The gamblers' significant others also described emotional losses: including the loss of trust and the loss of the imagined honest relationship they thought they had. Notably, disclosure of a gambling problem also necessitated the unravelling of webs of lies that gamblers had told (about where they were, what they were doing) or strategies that they had used (e.g., shredding bank statements, or erasing traces of Internet gambling from household computers) to conceal their problem gambling from their significant other(s). This woman describes the strategies she used to conceal her gambling:

Clare: I'm self employed, he [husband] works in finance, he does my books, which actually means that I can spend nothing without him knowing about it ... when ... he thought I'd stopped [gambling] I kind of went onto using my daughter's card and what I would do is give her cash to feed her account and then I would play through my daughter's card. Not playing on her money, just using her card...I have to say it pissed my daughter off no end and I can't imagine ... I think she was really hacked off. because even it got to the stage where I didn't even bother asking her because I had her banking details ... I mean it wasn't a very nice thing to do to anybody really was it?..[I] hid the fact that I was still gambling so I'd download a site and then when I knew my hubby was coming home I would delete it from my computer and erase the history you know. (Woman, 50s, poker)

The ability of the gamblers to sustain participation in Internet gambling was, in many cases, facilitated by contemporary individualised ways of organising family or household life. While the majority of those interviewed shared their home with others (e.g., partners, children, parents) most described leading disassociated lives as a result of different time-space activity schedules and the increasingly specialised use

of space in the home (as a result of changing home sizes, standards of privacy, and entitlements to use space within the home by particular family members for individual rather than communal pursuits) which allowed them to compartmentalise their gambling (Valentine & Hughes, 2010). These processes are compounded by the separation of finances. Pahl (2005) for example, has examined changing patterns of money management in the UK and elsewhere, and drawing on quantitative and qualitative evidence, has argued that couples are becoming more individualised in their financial arrangements (i.e., maintaining individual accounts to which their partner does not have access and using credit cards to conceal spending from each other and to borrow without collateral).

Indeed, many of the interviewees purposefully shaped relational practices to create the possibility of Internet gambling, carving out time/spaces away from the family to gamble in secret within home. These included for example: gambling online while a partner watched television in the same space or while babysitting the children who were playing in the same room; deliberately starting an argument as an excuse to leave a meal table or go to a separate room or claiming the need to work undisturbed in a different room where they could gamble unseen; staying up after other household members had gone to bed specifically to gamble in secret and so on. While the interviewees found it relatively easy to create a few minutes of privacy to place bets in secret within the confines of everyday family life, most sociable forms of gambling that required sustained interaction online – such as online poker – were played in the evenings while other household members were occupied for sustained periods of time (asleep or watching television). In such ways, how the participants engaged in Internet gambling changed and constrained how they engaged in their intimate relationships; reshaping these intimate relations overtime. For example, although some of the problem Internet gamblers were very visible in online forums to other gamblers their gambling often resulted in them becoming withdrawn from family relationships and offline social networks as this girl explains in describing her mother's behaviour:

Amanda: I'd get home from school, I'd watch TV and my Mum would be upstairs on the computer. She's just be on the computer like all the time and then she'd make my tea and then she'd probably go back up again. Then she'd probably watch some TV and then before she went to bed I think she went on it. And then, it just went like that. (Teenage daughter of problem Internet gambler)

Many of these emotional consequences were not necessarily immediate, when the gamblers' problems were disclosed, but rather surfaced overtime as familial relationships were renegotiated. Indeed, there is some evidence that gambling can contribute to family breakdown (e.g., Griffiths, 2004), with one the informants claiming that problem Internet gambling has the potential to be as destructive of family life as drugs such as heroin. In the following extract Toby describes the emotional impact of his gambling on his family:

Toby: The pain my demise has caused my Mum and brothers, they'll still be hurt long after I've recovered. You know they'll have wounds for a long time... you never lose people's love but you lose their trust [edit] I feel particularly bad, like my brother's having work done on his house but you know he lent me thousands to bail me out and that's slowed down the progress of his house as well as causing

him worry. But my Mum's in her 60s and I've probably . . . stolen years off her life, you know, in terms of anxiety and worry . . . you know for every addict, you know, you then look at all the people closest to them and then you see how the problems becomes a much bigger problems. It's like ripples in pond isn't it? (Man, 40s, poker)

In trying to explain and justify their problem gambling, a common public narrative the interviewees drew on was that of *addiction*. This narrative enabled individuals to represent themselves as 'victims', and, as this informant explains to abdicate responsibility for their problem:

Noel: I'm a gambling addict . . . it's not my fault . . . it gave me reasons that I wanted to apply . . . why would I gamble all my money knowing I was going to lose all my money, and work hard to gamble all my money? You know, it makes no sense but I did it, so it was nice to have a kind of reason for why I was who I was. And then they told me that you know, if you live your life to these step principles that they do in AA then, you know, you can have a normal life. So I actually felt pretty good about getting these labels. (Man, 30s, sports betting and games)

Narratives of addiction were used in different ways. Private narratives of addiction were used in intimate and family relations to make sense of the gamblers' behaviour in a way that did not solely lay blame on the gambler and avoided having to see gambling as deliberate damage to the gambler's family. Problem gamblers explained that they needed to understand why they gambled in order to stop. By drawing on ideas of addiction, they changed the problem from being something that they *did* to something that they *have*, and therefore need treatment for. This also enabled problem Internet gamblers to abdicate responsibility for the pain and damage they had caused to others (i.e., 'it wasn't me who did this, it was because of my addiction').

Narratives of addiction contained therapeutic ideas about troubled emotional histories giving rise to problem gambling behaviour. Some also looked for reasons for developing the addiction within their relationships (i.e., family of origin or marital relationships); treating their addiction therefore also became a question of sorting out the relationship. The rationale was that if something was done about the addiction, then everything else about the gambler's/significant others' relationship would be resolved along the way.

This idea of identity was crucial in understanding what the gamblers needed to do in order to stop problem gambling. Not only did they need to *become* somebody else in their own minds, but also they needed to *recover* who they were, their 'spoiled' identity, for their significant other.

### **Pathways out of gambling families' self-correcting strategies**

Abbott, Williams, and Volberg (2004) have pointed out that little is known about the nature and extent and of 'self' recovery by problem gamblers, nor about the return of problem gamblers to non-problematic gambling. Although, research in related fields of drugs and alcohol suggest that family members respond to stress through 'coping' actions (e.g., Orford, 1994). The evidence of this study is that family support was crucial in forging pathways out of problem gambling. As definitions of 'the problem' were shaped within the family, so too, were strategies for recovery. These 'self-correcting' strategies reflected on the capacities and capabilities of families to come

to the rescue, both financially and emotionally, of the Internet gambler. These often took the form of loans or outright payments of debts. Partners returned to work. In one case a gambler's parents even returned to work in order to provide financial help (although, clearly, it was not in the capacity of many families to provide this sort of help).

A frequent consequence of the disclosure of debt was that there was a relocation of control over accounts and other forms of money control, such as bankruptcy, signing over power of attorney, and handing over credit cards. Financial control was commonly taken over by the problem gambler's partner but for those who were single it was either a parent or an adult child who took on this responsibility. Financial support usually worked as boundary setting for the Internet gambler. As others took on financial responsibility they also set the boundaries for opportunities to gamble. Peter describes the way his father assumed financial control of his affairs:

Peter: [W]hen I went home [to his parents' home following a gambling related suicide attempt], within five days all my debts were consolidated into one payment to my Dad per month, no interest. It's just a massive weight off and all my cards were cut up, all my accounts were closed. The only account I have is the current account with the same bank of which my Dad dines with the manager, you know [laughs] . . . I told him [his father] the Monday and on the Tuesday morning we were straight down to the solicitors . . . who he uses all the time and sat in the front of the bloke who he works with all the time, you know, it must have been embarrassing for him. And then my bank manager and then to the doctors, you know. (Man, 30s, slots/instant)

Family members also commonly took on added responsibility for control of Internet access; changing passwords, removing modems, being present when the gambler was online to check what sites they were accessing, that share many parallels with the way parents monitor young children's online activities (Holloway & Valentine, 2003). Significant others were usually the first to research also initiate any contact with doctors, counselors, or support groups.

Gamblers described periods of intense preoccupation with thoughts of gambling when they first stopped. There was a need to replace this lost preoccupation with something else. 'Recovery' therefore involved working on, and within, relationships with significant others, to be more engaged and more visible in the family, often summarised as *being there* (Hughes et al., 2008). To recover spoiled identities (as partner/parent) gamblers reengaged in family practices such as doing the housework; spending more time with their children/partner; being at mealtimes, etc. In this way, they addressed the problem of unoccupied time, boredom and desire for escape. In turn, significant others began to shift back certain responsibilities, such as providing cash or giving online access. Additionally, through joint activities a sense of revived togetherness, and improved relationship was experienced. Gamblers also reinvigorated previous friendships and took up new hobbies, employment, or opportunities to study in order to overcome the loss of gambling, and to develop a *non-gambler* identity:

Simon: One of things that I do, which obviously pleases [name of wife] is I do the ironing so, she used to do it before and didn't really like it that much, so I do that now, so that makes a help, it also keeps me busy. I actually quite enjoy it to be honest with you. But, I just really don't have time to do any gambling . . . I'm

just doing more things with the kids and that. Obviously I'm going to the GA, I managed to go there sort of once a fortnight or something so. I've obviously got things to do... different things all the time. (Man, 20s, poker)

Networks of control/surveillance were established in extended families. For example, different family members (including partners, parents and siblings) would monitor the problem Internet gamblers, alert for 'signs' such as moodiness, secrecy or unexplained absence, that gambling may have restarted, communicating their observations to each other. In this way, significant others took on responsibility for 'diagnosing' resurfacing problem gambling. Understandings of how this surveillance worked are informed by insights from Michel Foucault, a French philosopher whose work has been particularly influential in shaping understandings of how the body has historically been disciplined and subdued. He focused on the example of a prison design known as Bentham's Panopticon, this prison had a circular design to ensure that all the cells were under potential constant surveillance from a central watch tower, although, the occupants of the cells could not tell if, or when, they were actually being watched. Foucault (1977, p. 177) argued that the fact of being able always to be seen meant that individuals would exercise *self-surveillance* and *self-discipline*. These ideas have been applied by social scientists beyond the realm of institutional settings such as prisons, to think about the ways 'normal' social life and activities takes place within a system of 'imperfect Panopticism'. The significant others' panopticon-style scrutiny of the gambler reshaped respective roles and responsibilities within the family; and often led to frustration and/or anger on behalf of family members with the gambler's history of gambling, even if they were no longer doing so. This gambler and then a wife of a problem gambler describe such strategies:

Tally: [I]f he knows that I'm checking, then he won't do anything, whereas if I check, you know, I might not even check it, but if he thinks I've got that ability to look, then maybe he'd think twice. (Wife of problem gambler)

Dale: My partner found out about 5 years ago... and she controlled all my cards. It was a bit demeaning in a way but it had to be done, you know. If I had a tenner to put some petrol in she wanted the receipt and I had a [few] pounds a day for the canteen for some tea and toast, but that's what had to be done [edit later] She's good with computers as well so kept a check on me basically, you know all outgoing phone calls were monitored on the phone bill, even though they'd been free phone numbers to ring off the internet bets. And she knew what she was doing and if I'd been on sites and basically kept a check on me. (Man, 40s, sports betting)

Nonetheless, despite such family strategies some gamblers recounted times, where they continued to engage in Internet gambling by subverting blocks or controls on their access. In such ways, the relational dynamic between partners shifted and entailed corresponding shifts in power relations:

Kay: I mean it's an awful lot of money... from a practical point of view, you know, I can kind of cope with that... It's the high end of emotional things that you go through, what a change you see in your relationship with your partner from one day to the next, you know, because... like I was going from being with a partner and [several] children to... the whole responsibility and much more debt than I thought we had and having one more child... I couldn't understand why anybody would do that. Why anybody from a non-gambler's point of view, it's

such a selfish thing to do to lock yourself away for hours . . . and, you know, spend thousands of pounds that you didn't have, which is taking money away from the family. And, you know, it just seemed so selfish and I was really after an answer to why would anyone do that. (Wife of a problem Internet gambler)

As this quotation illustrates, this woman redefined her relationship to her husband, and described him as becoming like another child. The point of disclosure for her was the point at which she lost her partner, and gained another 'child'-like responsibility. Here, gamblers' levels of responsibility resemble a child: they operate in relation to other people who have more power, more capacity and more access to resources than they do. Gamblers assigned responsibility to others, and expressed relief when they no longer had control. Furthermore, through shifting financial responsibility intergenerationally, adult gamblers' described themselves in relation to their parents as having very child-like dependency both for money and for approval. It is widely recognised within social studies of childhood that 'age' is a fluid category (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Childhood is defined as a period of freedom from responsibility in which young people are assumed to be vulnerable, incompetence and in need of protection. The transition to adulthood is essentially about young people moving from this state of dependence to one of independence by demonstrating the competence and maturity to manage their own lives. Subsequent adult parent/adult child relationships are essentially about the continued negotiation of this balance between dependence and independence. This gradually shifts overtime from the parent caring for the child, to the adult child caring for the older parent. The disclosure of a gambling problem however, can disrupt this balance of responsibilities and understandings of competency, such that the adult child 'shrinks' back to a position of vulnerability and dependency in their parents' eyes, becoming in effect, infantilised. While some gamblers' welcomed this escape from responsibility, for others it afforded them the possible to maintain their gambling and undermined their self-esteem and self-efficacy, reproducing their dependency in other relations too. Noel explains:

Interviewer: How do you feel about your parents always having paid off your debts or dealt with whatever problems that have arisen?

Noel: It's really annoying, cos I get weak and I want them to do it, and then it just takes away the problem, but then gives ten times the problems back. And it gives them an unhealthy hold on me. It means that they feel that they then deserve to contact me more, to make decisions for me, to you know, because it's just keeping the adult child relationship going, you know. Most people when they get older, then they develop a new relationship, but I'm still their five year old kid, and every time they pay off [his gambling debts], it means that I'm still their five year old kid, and that's just keeping it going. You know, so it's not . . . yeah, it might pay off the debt and it might give me an easier life, but emotionally it gives me a hellish one. So I think it's not worth it in the long-run to be honest. (Man, 30s, sports and online games)

Correspondingly, for the children of Internet gamblers their parent's 'problem' often meant that they effectively 'grew' in stature by taking on new responsibilities, such as keeping a parent's gambling problem a secret from others, monitoring their parent's use of the home computer or recognising the financial constraints on the family budget and choosing to forgo particular opportunities. In such ways, parent/child

roles were effectively reversed with the children demonstrating their maturity and competence by protecting their 'vulnerable' and 'irresponsible' parent from harm.

In coming to terms with 'the problem' created by Internet gamblers both the gamblers themselves and their families commonly sought to play down its significance in a process of *relative rationalisation*. Here, they reframed the problem in emotional rather than financial terms by drawing on accounts of other people whose lives had been hit by worse disasters – including gambling problems (e.g., losing larger sums of money, or their homes and families) and other unrelated problems (e.g., critical illness, the death of a family member) in order to redefine themselves as 'lucky'. Others stressed positive aspects of their family life which had not been harmed by the problem gambling. For example, one woman rationalised her husband's behaviour by highlighting how he had continued to be a good and responsible parent despite his gambling:

Kay: He'd never been deceitful enough to borrow in my name or anything like that, so we are a lot luckier than other people in the same [situation] . . . it's an awful lot of money but you'll know we'll settle, I'm sure we'll settle for less. And as I say from a practical point of view you know I can kind of cope with that [edit] at the same time as that something else happened in my life which was my grandmother was dying and then she died and my grandfather had been very ill . . . it kind of put things in perspective, cos I felt nobody's actually died, you know, it's not the end of the world . . . we're in a lucky position compared to a lot of other people. (Wife of problem gambler)

Despite, the harms of Internet gambling described above, many of the research participants described positive outcomes from having faced their gambling problems. For most, the process of coming out to their families about their problem and receiving support and encouragement from them had actually improved the quality of their relationships and led them to be self-reflexive about the direction their lives were taking and to reevaluate their family relationships in positive ways. Others felt that it had taught them, and their children, to be less individualistic and materialistic, and to appreciate time spent with family members and the value of non-monetary forms of entertainment. Simon explains:

Simon: I've just had meself tucked away for 2 years, you know, just sort of gambling and that. It's took something like this to sort of wake us up. I realised I wasn't really happy in the job I was at so, I've got meself a new job . . . I'm a lot happier, I feel as though I'm a lot more confident as well, because I haven't got anything I'm trying to hide or there's nothing I'm lying any more or anything. For the family, I think obviously, I'm not spending any time on the computer, I'm spending more time with them. I think it's made . . . the kids sort of like a lot better and more appreciative, when you do actually go out and buy them things. Although, it wasn't their fault in the first place, but I think it sort of needed to happen, for me to sort out, you know, the sort of value of money and not throw things at me kids and say well have that, have that. I think obviously, it's made them seem more appreciative, and they're becoming better because of it. (Man, 20s, poker)

## Conclusion

Internet gambling is one of the fastest growing forms of gambling. The numbers of people who gamble online is difficult to determine but it has been estimated that between 14 and 23 million people are doing so (about 3.3 million of whom are in

Europe, of whom a third live in the UK) (American Gaming Association, 2006; RseConsulting, 2006, cited in Wood & Williams, 2007), generating a revenue estimated at \$12 billion per annum (Wood & Williams, 2007).

Some studies have begun to suggest that Internet gamblers are more likely to develop problems than offline gamblers (e.g., Azmier, Kelley, & Todosichuk, 2005; Ladd & Petry, 2002; Wood & Williams, 2007). This it is argued is because the Internet combines a number of attractive features including: visual and aural qualities, speed, accessibility, convenience and anonymity (e.g., Griffiths & Wood, 2000; Schull, 2005). Yet, *The British Gambling Prevalence Survey 2007* (Wardle et al., 2007) suggests that rates of problem gambling in the UK population may be as low as half a per cent, and show no sign of increasing in line with the rise of Internet gambling. However, the evidence of this research is that problem Internet gambling is commonly contained as a secret within families to whom it is disclosed, and is 'self-corrected' (temporarily and in some cases permanently) by many of them, with the consequence that the issue or extent of problem Internet gambling does not become visible in the wider public domain. As such, those who seek formal help from support agencies or publicly acknowledge an online gambling problem (e.g., in responses to gambling surveys) may be only the tip of a more significant iceberg.

In exploring the response of significant others to the disclosure of problem Internet gambling this research has also complicated understandings of its implications for wider social relations. As we pointed out in the introduction, echoing Krishnan and Orford (2002), research on the effects of problem gambling on gamblers' families has been limited. Indeed, problem gambling is commonly represented as 'impacting' on families implying a uni-directional set of relationships with a predictable outcome or set of harmful effects. Rather, the evidence of this research is that problem gambling is embedded in the 'doing' of families. Problem gamblers and their significant others jointly construct 'the problem' through their relationships, and what is understood to be 'the problem' migrates and is redefined and reworked by families overtime, even to the point of being rationalised as having positive implications for 'the family' both in terms of the development of individual members and as a collectivity. By foregrounding these processes, negotiations and shared meanings in families rather than focusing on individuals within them or aggregate patterns of family behaviour we can understand more readily the dynamic and relational nature of problem gambling.

### **Note**

1. All the names included are pseudonyms; other information which could compromise the anonymity of the informants has been amended or removed to protect the disclosure of their identities. All the quotations used are verbatim. Three ellipsis dots indicates that a minor edit has been made to remove repetitions or verbal stumbles in order to enable the quotation to be more readable. Where a more substantive edit has been made this is marked in the text in square brackets.

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