

How gaming venue staff use behavioural indicators to assess problem gambling in patrons

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Abstract

Staff in gaming venues are increasingly expected to identify people with possible gambling problems based on observable behaviour. We report on interviews with 48 venue staff in Queensland, Australia with the goal of assessing whether they feel they can detect patrons with possible gambling problems, and what indicators they use to assess this and to decide whether to intervene. Results showed wide variation in the indicators used by these staff members with only one indicator, aggressive behaviour, reported by the majority. Most contemplated intervening only if patron behaviour is seen as a threat to themselves or others. Venue staff would benefit from clearer direction on indicators of problem gambling behaviour and when to intervene.

Résumé

De plus en plus souvent, le personnel des établissements de jeux doit être capable d'identifier les personnes qui ont un problème de jeu potentiel en fonction d'indicateurs comportementaux observables. On a fait passer des entretiens à 48 employés d'établissements de jeux au Queensland (Australie), puis on a étudié s'ils pensaient être en mesure de déceler les clients présentant des problèmes de jeu compulsif, ainsi que les critères qu'ils utilisaient pour faire cette évaluation et décider d'intervenir. Les résultats ont montré une variation considérable dans les critères qu'ils utilisaient et un seul de ces critères – un comportement agressif – a été rapporté par la majorité des employés. La plupart d'entre eux envisageaient d'intervenir seulement dans le cas où le comportement d'un client représentait une menace pour eux ou pour les autres. Il en ressort que le personnel des établissements de jeux bénéficierait d'une formation adéquate axée sur les critères leur permettant de reconnaître un comportement de jeu problématique et le moment où ils devraient intervenir.

Introduction

Problem gambling has been defined as “difficulties in limiting money and/or time spent on gambling which leads to adverse consequences for the gambler, others, or for the community” (Neal, Delfabbro & O’Neil 2005, p. 125). These defining characteristics of problem gambling suggest that people with gambling problems are not necessarily easily identifiable by gambling venue staff because there may be no overt signs of their struggle to control the money and time they spend on gambling, and because the negative consequences of their gambling on themselves, others, and the community are often hidden from public view (Saisan, Segal, Cutter & Smith, 2009). Nevertheless, one measure often promoted as a harm minimisation tool is for venue staff to identify possible signs of problem gambling behaviour on the gaming floor and initiate an intervention with patrons whom are of concern.

Different jurisdictions and gambling industry operators have divergent approaches to identifying problem gamblers in gaming venues. These approaches vary according to whether they are mandatory or voluntary, what information is gathered and used, reporting structures, and venue policies and practices. For example, Holland Casino’s system, facilitated by its monopoly casino licence in the Netherlands, is based on a national visitor registration system that monitors frequency of patron visits, is supported by an incidents register, and by CCTV surveillance. These systems are linked to a stepped intervention scheme which allows staff to escalate involvement based on a patron’s visitation frequency and observed gambling behaviours. These responses commence with providing a patron of concern with an information brochure, and can escalate to an interview with casino personnel, visit restrictions, admission ban, and assessment interviews before any restrictions are lifted (Remmers, 2008).

Proactive systems also operate in New Zealand where legislation requires gambling venues to have a policy for identifying problem gamblers (as per the Gambling Act 2003 NZ, section 308). For example, Skycity’s Auckland’s Problem Gambler Identification Policy (SkyCity Auckland, 2007) contains four “strong indicators” which used individually or together are usually sufficient to identify a problem gambler. The indicators comprise requests to self-exclude, self-identified problem gambler/forthright disclosure, third party disclosure, and severe emotional distress. The policy also includes numerous “general indicators” which become indicative when observed together or over time. General indicators relate to intensity and frequency of play, visible emotional disturbance, dysfunction in social behaviour, and excessive access to money. Depending on urgency or severity, the casino provides graduated responses ranging from immediate intervention, advice and discussion, to ongoing monitoring, with the response based on analyses of the incident register, loyalty, and security databases, and other internal information (SkyCity Auckland, 2007).

Legislation also requires Swiss casinos to proactively identify and intervene with problem gamblers. Level ‘A’ signs of problem gambling include emotional breakdown, forgetting to use the restroom, and shouting at staff, while level ‘B’ signs include deteriorating physical grooming, looking around suspiciously, changing speed of play and increasing bets in unusual ways (Thompson, 2012). A reported level ‘A’ sign prompts a discussion between the supervisor and player. A level ‘B’ sign prompts the supervisor to advise staff to continue observing the player for eight weeks, when either further observations are deemed unnecessary or the supervisor initiates a discussion with the patron. Supervisor-patron discussions may result in limits on play, or voluntary, or mandatory exclusion (Thompson, 2012).

In Australia, only venues in the Australian Capital Territory are legally required to act on observed problem gambling behaviours by providing counselling information to a patron who is the subject of a problem gambling incident report. Other Australian jurisdictions have either mandatory or voluntary codes, with some requiring staff training in indicators of problem gambling. However, none prescribe that staff intervene with patrons of concern (Productivity Commission, 2010).

Given the less stringent requirements in Australia compared to other jurisdictions, research appears to be needed to ascertain whether and how current problem gambler identification measures are operationalised in Australian gambling venues as a harm minimisation tool. This article presents a study conducted in Queensland Australia where a voluntary responsible gambling code operates, along with an accompanying training manual for use by venue staff that lists indicators of problem gambling. However, it is not known whether staff utilise these indicators, whether they use alternative indicators, or whether they use none at all. Thus, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Do frontline venue staff think they can recognise whether a patron has a possible gambling problem?
2. If so, what signs do they look for?
3. What signs would prompt an intervention with a patron?

This article focuses only on staff members’ use of observable indicators of gambling problems as a vital precursor to an intervention to assist the patron to minimise harm from gambling. The article does not address the equally challenging issue of how to intervene, nor the efficacy of doing so. The challenges of staff interventions have been previously analysed (Delfabbro, Osborn, McMillen, Nevile, & Skelt, 2007; Hancock, 2011; Hing & Nuske, 2012) and are outside the scope of the present article.

Background Literature

There is broad support for identifying and intervening with people with gambling problems in gaming venues as a potential harm minimisation tool. Harm mini-

minimisation is a key element of a public health approach to gambling and is directed towards minimising its adverse consequences for individuals, families, and communities (Korn & Shaffer, 1999; McMillen, 1997, 2007, 2009; Shaffer & Korn, 2002). Following the emergence of problem gambling as a social issue in Australia and its reconceptualisation from a mental disorder to a public health problem (Hing, 2002, 2009, 2010; McMillen, 2007), Australian states and territories have now adopted a public health perspective on gambling, with harm minimisation and responsible gambling as central policy principles (McMillen, 2009). This perspective sees problem gambling as requiring a multi-pronged, epidemiological approach involving fundamental changes to policy and industry practices and an integrated program of prevention strategies, as well as individual counseling and treatment (McMillen, 2007, 2009). Early intervention before gambling problems escalate is particularly important because problem reduction in moderate-risk groups can do more to lower the overall social costs of gambling than greater changes in high-risk groups; this is because the population of moderate risk gamblers is larger than the population of high-risk gamblers (Shaffer & Korn, 2002). However, little evidence exists to indicate which harm minimisation strategies are effective in reducing gambling problems and which are not (McMillen, 2009), including early intervention to identify and approach problem gamblers in gambling venues.

People experiencing difficulties with gambling typically spend considerable time in gambling venues, presenting opportunities for staff to observe their behaviours and initiate an intervention, if considered appropriate. People with gambling problems also contribute disproportionately to gambling revenue, especially in venues with electronic gaming machines (EGMs). In Australia, EGM venues are where “the biggest single slice of overall gambling expenditure” occurs, with EGMs estimated to “account for” around 75–80% of problem gamblers (Productivity Commission, 2010, p.13). A national inquiry into gambling (Productivity Commission, 2010) estimated that 15% of regular Australian EGM gamblers are problem gamblers with a further 15% at moderate risk of being problem gamblers. Thus, identifying people with gambling problems in EGM venues provides a significant opportunity for harm minimisation if it can be done accurately and if identification is then followed by an effective intervention. Such early interventions could enhance other harm minimisation measures such as exclusion schemes or patron referral to gambling counselling services (Delfabbro et al., 2007).

That people with gambling problems display distinctive behaviours that are potentially observable in gambling venues has been described in a few studies. An early study in Nova Scotia comparing 327 infrequent, 267 frequent and 117 problem video lottery terminal players aimed to “develop a list of indicators that can be used for the identification, prevention and treatment of problem video lottery players” (Focal Research, 1998, p. 2).¹ The study identified several ways that problem players

¹Video lottery terminals (VLTs) are a type of EGM common in Canada.

can be distinguished from regular players, including longer playing sessions, betting at higher levels, obtaining additional funds to play, and yelling or cursing while playing. Schellinck and Schrans (2004) later reanalysed these data using association analysis and derived several highly predictive cue combinations that they estimated would accurately identify 86% of problem gamblers, with false positives estimated at 6 per cent.

Hafeli and Schneider (2005) interviewed 28 people with gambling problems, 3 casino employees and 7 regular gamblers to develop criteria to describe the behavioural characteristics of problem gamblers. The resulting criteria, used in Swiss casino training programs, relate to frequency and duration of gambling, raising funds for gambling, betting behaviour, social behaviour, personal appearance, and reactions and behaviours while gambling. However, these indicators have not been validated and it is unclear whether these criteria can be generalised to non-Swiss environments (Delfabbro, Borgas & King, 2012).

In Australia, the Australasian Gaming Council compiled expert opinions on how to identify and handle people with gambling problems in gaming venues (Allcock et al., 2002). These experts did not reach a consensus, but agreed that some behaviours most likely indicate patron distress and that in all probability relates to harm from gambling. The report suggested these behaviours “be used compassionately and sensibly to assist observers to be alert to potential problems, and be ready to assist” (Allcock et al., 2002, p. 4).

Gambling Research Australia later commissioned research to establish whether reliable indicators could be used to distinguish problem gamblers from other players and to examine key challenges associated with policy implementation (Delfabbro et al., 2007). Empirical components comprised surveys of gambling counsellors (n=15) and regular gamblers (n=680), surveys and interviews with venue staff (n=120), and 140 hours of observing gamblers in venues. The venue staff and counsellors assessed a checklist of possible indicators, indicating whether each item is a valid indicator of problem gambling. After testing whether these indicators could be detected through observation in venues, the study concluded that a number of visible indicators can differentiate problem players in venues from other players and recommended staff training in problem gambling indicators and how to approach patrons.

However, a later study highlighted the difficulties of accurately identifying problem gamblers in gaming venues by using a methodology that compared Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) scores of patrons with venue staff ratings of the same patrons’ gambling behaviours (Delfabbro et al., 2012). Although the patrons whom staff rated as more at risk scored significantly higher on the PGSI, the staff’s point-in-time ratings lacked sufficient accuracy to enable effective identification of problem gamblers. The authors therefore advocated using

accumulated information over multiple sessions, as well as technological monitoring of gambling behaviour.

A recent Australian national gambling inquiry (Productivity Commission, 2010, p. 57) recommended that governments should enhance existing training requirements by:

- preparing guidelines, including a short list of commonly agreed indicators of problem gambling, to help venue staff identify and, where appropriate, respond to problematic player behaviours
- requiring gambling venues to provide staff training on these guidelines and on the process for lodging complaints about a venue.

However, this recommendation has not been implemented, and Australian venue staff must therefore rely on their own judgement, on venue policies, and their industry code of conduct for direction.

The relevant code for Queensland venue staff is the Queensland Responsible Gambling Code of Conduct (Queensland Treasury, 2004). While adherence has improved over time, several studies have noted the inconsistency of the code's application across Queensland venues (Breen, Buultjens, & Hing, 2003; Queensland Government, 2004, 2007), probably due to its voluntary nature and the different resources and commitment of venues to responsible gambling.

The accompanying Queensland Responsible Gambling Code of Practice Industry Training Kit (Queensland Government, 2005) identifies behaviours that may signal that a patron has a gambling problem (Table 1). However, the Training Kit (Queensland Government, 2005:35–37) cautions that “indicators of possible gambling problems are not always obvious” and that “displaying one risk indicator may not mean the person is a problem gambler”, but “a person displaying several risk indicators should alert you to a potential problem that you could refer to your customer liaison officer (CLO) for advice and guidance”. The tentative nature of this advice reflects the difficulties surrounding this issue and the lack of clear direction for staff. Thus, there is potential for wide variation in the indicators that staff actually use to identify problem gamblers in the venue. It is therefore instructive to examine whether venue staff think that they can recognise whether a patron has a gambling problem, the indicators they use to make this assessment, and patron behaviours that would prompt them to initiate an intervention.

Table 1
Problem gambling indicators in the Queensland Responsible Gambling Code of Practice Industry Training Kit

Risk factors	Examples of risk factors
Faulty cognition	Player reports having a perception of chances of winning which is apparently unrealistic.
Loss of control	Player reports: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • having a problem with gambling; • having tried unsuccessfully to stop gambling; or • spending too much time gambling. Player is observed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • threatening or causing physical harm to others or self; • selling valuables to gamble; or • behaving in an aggressive manner towards property.
Negative impacts of gambling	Player reports: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • having lost a significant relationship due to gambling; • having lied to others to hide their gambling; or • having lost a job due to gambling. Third party (e.g., a family member or another patron) reports: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the patron is gambling instead of fulfilling family responsibilities (e.g., picking children up after school); or • trying to borrow or “scam” money for gambling from others (e.g., other patrons).
Use of alcohol or drugs while gambling	Player is observed as being unduly intoxicated or under the influence of drugs while gambling.
Depression or thoughts of suicide	Player reports they are suffering from depression and/or have thoughts of suicide due to gambling.
Simultaneous play of multiple games	Player is observed to be participating in three or more gambling activities simultaneously (e.g., playing three or more gaming machines at a time).
Personal remorse	Player reports: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • losing household money on gambling (e.g., money that was to be used to buy groceries, pay the rent, or pay rates or electricity bill); • selling valuables to gamble; • borrowing money to live due to gambling; • being unable to meet loan repayments due to gambling; • depending on others to repay their gambling debts; or • having committed illegal acts due to gambling (e.g., stealing or fraud or domestic violence).

Source: Queensland Government (2005, p. 36)

Methods

Procedure

The human research ethics committee of the authors' university granted approval for this research. Qualitative methods were utilised because the research was considered exploratory, with the researchers wanting to capture the detail and nuances likely associated with staff identification of people with gambling problems. Thus, face-to-face interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth data. Frontline staff employed in hotels and clubs with EGMs were sampled from venues in four areas of Queensland to give representation to metropolitan, regional, and remote areas. Venues were selected from lists provided by gaming industry associations of the 771 hotels and 581 clubs operating EGMs in Queensland in 2006–07. Of these venues, the researchers contacted 92 hotels and 51 clubs to request participation. The selection of contacted venues was based on being located in one of the nominated geographic areas and included representation of large and small venues, independent and chain hotels, clubs of different types, and venues in different socio-economic areas in the larger cities.

Each venue was telephoned to request an interview with the CLO and a frontline staff member.² If they agreed, they were sent the interview schedule. A follow-up phone call ensured these documents had been received, answered any questions and scheduled one or more interviews. The interviews were conducted on-site in each venue, typically lasted 20 to 35 minutes, and were digitally recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Participants

The target population of participants comprised all frontline staff in Queensland hotels and clubs. Because this was exploratory, qualitative research, a limited sample

Table 2
Summary of locations of interview participants

Location	Hotel staff	Club staff	Total
Brisbane	6	6	12
Cairns	6	10	16
Mount Isa	2	3	5
Toowoomba/Dalby	11	4	15
Total	25	23	48

²Please note that only responses from frontline staff are included in this article.

was interviewed. At least one frontline staff member from each venue where the CLO agreed to be interviewed was requested to participate, for a target of around 50 frontline staff interviews. Reasons for refusal by the CLOs included being too busy, understaffed, venue renovations or that the venue had no EGMs. The choice of staff member to interview in each venue depended on the CLO or venue manager, and which staff were on duty at the time of the researchers' visit and whether staff could be released from their duties. Forty-eight frontline staff interviewees were recruited from 25 hotels and 23 clubs, with Table 2 showing their locations.

Measures

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on several areas relating to how the staff and venue identify and respond to people displaying problem gambling behaviours. This article focuses on only a sub-set of the interview results with these questions asked of staff:

- Do you think you can recognise if someone has a problem with gambling or is at risk?
- If so, how? What signs would you look for?
- Of the indicators you have identified, which would prompt you to initiate an intervention?

Prompts such as “Any other signs?” and “Can you provide an example?” were used to elicit maximum detail and explanation.

Analysis

Interview transcriptions were thematically analysed; this is a method of identifying, analysing, and reporting on thematic patterns in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were generated inductively through repeated reading of the interviews and the use of interpretative coding (Boyatzis, 1998). Across the interviews, key themes emerged as the analysis deepened to generate a list of all of the indicators used by staff in detecting problem gamblers in the venue.

Results

Results from the interview analysis will be presented for the three research questions.

Research Question 1: Do Frontline Venue Staff Think They Can Recognise if a Patron Has a Possible Gambling Problem?

The vast majority of both the hotel and club employees considered they could recognise if a patron has a possible gambling problem. However, six staff were not

at all confident, mainly because they did not know what patrons could afford to spend, as reflected in the following quotes:

Gambling is a very hard thing to observe if someone is spending too much money because unless we know them personally, we don't know how much money they earn.

Every person has their own budget in mind of what they can afford so you can't stereotype the one person if they can afford where the other one can't. ... But I think there probably are people who do have issues.

Probably not. Depends it's one of those things. I used to have a mate, his dad wore stobbies [informal heavy-fabric shorts] all the time and thongs [flip-flop rubber sandals] and went to the race track every day and he's got singlets [sleeveless athletic shirt (also described as an A-shirt)] on and he's a multi-millionaire. But you'd look at him and think, he's got a problem. Spending \$50,000 a week on gambling, but he steps out in his Porsche.

A few employees raised issues they thought made identification of problem gamblers difficult. Two interviewees noted the difficulties of observing patrons, saying: "we're not actually out there watching them all the time" and:

... we can't really see where they are in there. We've got our ... window just near our gaming rooms around the corner so we can't actually keep an eye on how much they're putting in or what they're betting. Unless you're actually in there with them, you can't see what they're doing or how much they've put through.

For another two interviewees, ease of observing signs of problem gambling depended on how well they knew the patrons:

I think the situation we're in at the moment having 10 machines and knowing basically all the customers that come in here, I think it would be fairly easy to know if they were in here from seven in the morning 'til we closed. You'd notice that being such a small place, but I think it would be harder in a bigger club.

No, I don't think so. The only reason I would know is if I knew them personally or I've known them for over a long period of time and knew their mannerisms and knew exactly how they behaved.

One participant pointed out the difference between observing signs of a possible gambling problem and being sure the person had a gambling problem: "I could identify the signs. I don't honestly know if I could say that they have a gambling problem or not." One further interviewee gave an example of how potential signs of a gambling problem could be misinterpreted:

It's hard to say by watching them. You can watch how they act when they are playing the machines. Some people get aggressive but that's just a frustration thing, they'll hit the buttons hard. You can't really tell if they're having problems unless they have said something to you.

Research Question 2: If You Feel You Can Recognize Someone Who is at Risk, What Signs Would You Look for?

The interviewees collectively identified several indicators of a possible gambling problem. Some mentioned just one indicator while others noted several. The responses are categorised into themes, and ordered from those most frequently raised by the 48 participants, to those with least endorsement.

Aggressive behaviour. About one-half of both the hotel and club staff identified aggressive behaviour as an indicator of a possible gambling problem. This manifested as “just becoming aggressive”, “abusing the machines”, “hitting the button and getting a little agitated”, and “swearing and hitting machines”. One interviewee described players who:

... hit them, kick them, punch them; and it's not just a tap, it's a full-on punch. They'll go for the machine. It's like they're personalising the machine ... and they're taking their aggression out.

Another recalled how:

A young fellow, he reckons that it didn't pay him what it should have paid him... And he said that he'll never play here again and he caused quite a kafuffle over it all, but of course he's back playing because he can't help himself... he's told me he doesn't have a gambling problem and I'm thinking, well the very fact that you've told me, it must be on your mind.

Aggressive behaviour is not restricted to EGM players. One interviewee commented:

In the TAB if they're waiting for the last minute to get a bet on, and if they don't get it on, you can tell the ones that get really, really annoyed at you... They start losing and you see them start throwing tickets.³

Gambling regularly for long sessions. Three hotel staff and one-quarter of club staff specifically noted regular gambling for long sessions as an indicator of a gambling problem, as reflected in these comments: “if they are here on a daily

³TAB is the acronym for Totalisator Agency Board which operates off-course betting facilities in hotels, clubs, casinos, stand-alone agencies, by Internet and telephone.

basis”, “if they were here all day every day”, and “when I’ve done an eight hour shift, nights shifts even, and they’re there the next day ... and they’re there more than I am”.

Change in usual behaviour. Six hotel staff, but no club staff, noted changes in patron behaviour as an indicator of a gambling problem. Related comments included: “if they start to get angry when they never get angry”, “if they’re going to the ATM more than usual”, “a change in the way that they react to people”, and “a really erratic change in behaviour”. Another staff member noted:

They shut themselves down a bit. You can’t talk to them. I go to say hello to some people and when they come up to the bar they’re all happy and then some days, no. You know they’ve had a punt.

Another behavioural change identified by one participant concerned changes to drinking behaviour and patrons isolating themselves: “when they stop having drinks and just banish themselves to the pokie room and don’t move.” These changes might also include changes in appearance, that “they’ll stop looking after themselves.”

Trying inappropriate means to obtain money for gambling. Four hotel and two club interviewees specifically mentioned trying to get extra money for gambling as a sign of problem gambling, noting this could entail: “people borrowing money,” “...digging around for a dollar. Somebody that’s trying to find some loose coins, fidgeting, maybe approaching other people,” “scrounging through their pocket for change,” and “those who change notes and then be back in three seconds with a handful of five cent pieces you imagine... they’ve just raided their car for.” Another referred to this as “church change,” while another asserted “they’re in here trying to borrow money, off staff, off other customers.”

Looking stressed or being upset or crying. Two hotel and three club staff felt that looking stressed, upset or crying while gambling was an indicator of a gambling problem. One explained “we can usually tell when people feel stressed about what they’re spending or if they don’t want to be changing money,” and another that “they’ll sit at the bar by themselves looking really worried about something.” Another noted: “I have heard stories of people leaving clubs and pubs in tears because they’ve lost money. I mean I’ve never come across that, fortunately, but signs like that.”

Changing a lot of money or changing money often. Changing a lot of money or changing money often was another indicator noted by three hotel and two club participants. Related comments included: “people who change money excessively,” “people who are always changing more money,” and “the amount of money that they change over would be a big thing.”

Being anti-social. Three hotel and two club employees thought “anti-social behaviour” could be an indicator: “when gamblers don’t want to talk to people,” “become insular,” “just focus on gambling,” and “are in a world of their own.” One participant explained, “they don’t like socialising, they are glued to their machine,” while another said “they don’t seem to have much personality.”

Erroneous and irrational verbalisations, talking to the machine. Three hotels and one club employee gave examples of patrons talking to or personalising EGMs as an indicator of a possible gambling problem: “people will name the machine” and “gamblers might say ; I think I’m hitting the buttons wrong.” A third staff member spoke about a patron who was:

...talking to the machines...she said today, why do people who play pokies talk to themselves? And she was saying it to herself while she was playing. And she called all of her machines her boyfriend.

Another staff member considered an indicator to be:

... when they’re talking to it and carrying on and oh! I only need this one more and I would have got this, and they know exactly what it should be and shouldn’t be to get a win.

Being secretive or lying about their gambling. Four hotel employees, but no club staff, considered that patrons lying or being secretive about their gambling indicated a possible gambling problem: “lying to other people about when she’s been here,” “being secretive about their spending, hiding it from people that they’re in with,” and “making comments that they have to go home before someone notices that they’re missing.” Another interviewee recounted this situation:

There’s one fellow who comes in all the time and puts a lot through and he’ll tell you all about when he wins, but you never hear when he loses. He’ll sneak out the back.

Gambling for longer than intended/and or chasing losses. Four interviewees, three from hotels and one from a club, considered gambling for longer than intended as indicating a gambling problem. Related examples were: “patrons saying that they’ll go soon but putting another few hundred dollars through,” saying “I’ve got to get more out [from the ATM], I’ve got to chase my losses,” “those who don’t know when to stop, they just keep on going,” and playing until “they’ve lost all their money.”

Another interviewee described chasing behaviour as an indicator:

People that are really relying on winning, they get a bit desperate...if they're not winning and they keep putting money in there, you can usually tell when they're getting pretty desperate about not winning.

Making multiple ATM withdrawals. Four staff members, three from hotels and one from a club, noted making multiple ATM withdrawals a sign of possible problem gambling. Comments included: "when they keep going backwards and forwards from the ATM," and "when you see that person go to the poker machine and do those four or five trips to the ATM." One respondent described:

Someone going to the ATM constantly, every hour or every half hour, and withdrawing money and then going back to the machine and coming back and getting more money out.

Gambling with money put aside for something else. Two hotel and one club interviewee gave examples of patrons spending money they had allocated for something else and saw this as an indicator of problem gambling:

I actually had an old lady take money out of a birthday card and I actually had to tell her I wasn't going to let her gamble that money. So she said I shouldn't be doing this and I said I don't think you should be either. And she goes, but I need the money. I asked what is that money for? And she said her grandchild.

The machine spent my bill money...Got no shopping money left now because I've just put it all through the pokies, that sort of thing. That would be a bit worrying to me.

Concerns are expressed by family or friends. One hotel and two club staff said they would consider a patron had a problem if family or friends had shown concern about a patron's gambling. Comments included: "if they've got friends telling them to get off the machines all the time," and "if their family started coming in and were quite angry and irate."

Putting big wins straight back into the EGM. Two hotel staff considered players who feed big wins straight back into EGMs as potentially having gambling problems. One said, "they might get \$400 but then, they don't actually get the payout." In Queensland, \$20 is the maximum denomination that can be inserted into an EGM. The participant explained:

When we do payouts...usually you give them enough 20s to get them by, but if I'm doing a \$400 payout I'll give them \$200 in 50s if I've got them in the drawer and \$200 in 20s and then they come back to do the 50s.

Another interviewee recalled:

...this guy yesterday who won who was sitting on the same machine for ages betting like the maximum amount and he finally ended up getting all these free spins and won about \$900 and I was like good for you, you should collect it now. And he's like, no. And I was, c'mon you should collect it, it's not going to get better than this, you're not going to win really any more than this unless you hit a jackpot but that's highly unlikely. And he was like, I'll just play down to \$850 ... so I just walked away and he was down to about \$700.

Being overly attached to a particular machine. Two employees, one each from a hotel and club, noted being attached to a particular machine as indicative of problem gambling: “people will sit down and watch one machine and wait till it comes free,” and “they go to one machine...and then if anyone's on their machine, they get a bit iffy.”

Gambling large sums of money. Interestingly, only two staff members, both from a club, identified high expenditure on EGMs as a possible sign of a gambling problem. For instance, one participant identified “people that are putting a great deal of money through the machines” as being an indicator.

Waiting for the venue to open. Waiting for the venue to open was acknowledged by one club employee as a sign of a possible gambling problem, commenting that a problem could be present “if a patron was here early in the morning, waiting for it [EGMs] to come on straight away.”

Complaining even when winning. One club interviewee mentioned someone not being happy with wins as a possible problem gambling indicator, and said, “if you had someone that had had a few wins but was still saying that it hadn't covered their losses.”

Research Question 3: Of the Indicators You Have Identified, Which Would Prompt You to Initiate an Intervention?

Three hotel and five club employees said they would not approach a patron about their gambling under any circumstances, commenting, “you can't,” and “I'm not too positive if we're allowed to go up and say anything.” Other comments included, “I'm not allowed to do that...there's nothing you can do unless they approach you,” “I just don't think it's my business,” “you've been told you don't really do that unless they approach you,” “I feel it's not my place to say, ‘I think you're spending too much money,’” and “even though I may know, what right have I got to tell that person they've got that problem?” Most other interviewees said they would only approach a patron under extreme circumstances, for example, where a patron was aggressive or very upset. Situations where staff reported they would initiate an intervention are described below.

Aggressive, abusive, and violent behaviour. The most common scenario under which both hotel and club staff would intervene was if the patron was being aggressive, abusive and or violent. One interviewee noted. “I think when they actually start getting physically violent and to me that’s a pretty major one, because then they’re becoming a danger to themselves and others.” Another had approached a patron who “seemed to be aggressive, talking to the machine...punching the machine and spending all his money.”

Evidence of gambling impacting on family. Two interviewees, one each from a club and a hotel, said an approach would be appropriate if a patron’s gambling was impacting the family, for example if a patron was:

... here all day every day and I had family members ringing for them and looking for them and I knew that they had children sitting somewhere hungry. Then I would probably look into that situation.

Another recalled how staff at the venue approached a patron after:

A daughter of a mother came up with a photo of her mother and said, ‘Have you seen my mum? We pay our school fees, we need our books for school’ and that was quite an upsetting scenario.

If a patron was crying and upset. Two hotel and one club staff member noted they would intervene if the patron was crying and upset. One explained “I probably wouldn’t approach unless I saw that sort of scenario where they were actually pretty upset and daunted by what they had just done.” Another noted, “they get annoyed with the machines, so unless I see a bit of disgust on their face or upset I would just leave them.”

Large sums of money being changed into smaller denominations. One hotel and one club staff member reported they would intervene if they saw a patron changing large sums of money:

The biggest thing that I would look at would be the money changeover and whether they were winning. If they had come in two or three times a week every week and given change over for \$2,000 each go, that would be big.

Being secretive about gambling. One hotel employee saw an indicator in patrons being secretive and would intervene if they were “saying something...like, ‘give me the money before she sees that I’ve won.’”

Regular and/or long gambling sessions. Two club staff reported they would intervene if people were gambling for very long or on regular gambling sessions. One employee said she would intervene if a patron was “here all day and especially not

going home for lunch or anything, that would be a bit sign. Sitting there just playing the machines would be the biggest one.”

Continued complaints about not winning. One club interviewee would intervene if a patron was continually complaining about not winning, “if they kept badgering you about not winning.”

Deterioration in personal appearance. One club participant would be prompted to approach a patron if they saw a decline in personal appearance:

...if they started coming in and everything looks fine but all of a sudden they’re starting to not bath, they’re looking reckless, maybe there’s too much drinking involved....if you can see the person deteriorating in front of you.

Table 3 summarises the research results according to the indicators and associated behaviours identified by the participants as signalling a possible gambling problem, along with the behaviours that would reportedly prompt an intervention with a patron.

Discussion

Frontline staff in gaming venues are often the first point of contact for people who actively seek help with gambling problems, and policies encouraging advocacy by staff have been strengthened, thus requiring staff to play a more interventionist role in detecting problem gambling (Delfabbro et al., 2007; Delfabbro, 2009; Productivity Commission, 2010). While studies have attempted to isolate behaviours that distinguish problem gambling behaviour and that can be theoretically observed in gaming venues, a validated list of indicators is not yet incorporated into staff training or responsible gambling codes in Australia.

Nonetheless, the majority of frontline staff interviewed for this study were confident that they can recognise signs of possible gambling problems in a patron and identified several potential indicators. The set of indicators they identified did not differ markedly between the hotel and club staff samples. However, there was substantial variation among individual staff from both industry sectors, with only one indicator (aggressive behaviour) being nominated by more than half the interviewees. Some interviewees identified only one indicator while others looked for clusters of indicators, an approach advocated by Schellinck and Schrans (2004) and Delfabbro et al. (2007).

Similarly, the Queensland Responsible Gambling Code of Practice Industry Training Kit (Queensland Government, 2005, p. 35–37) advises venue staff that exhibiting only one indicator may not mean the person is a problem gambler, whereas a person demonstrating several indicators should alert staff to a possible problem. However, there was no consistency in the clusters of indicators nominated

Table 3
Indicators of a possible gambling problem as identified by frontline gaming venue staff

Indicators	Indicative behaviours	Would prompt an intervention?
Aggressive behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hitting/punching/kicking and verbally abusing/swearing at machines. • Aggressive behaviour towards staff. 	Yes, by most staff, but only if aggressive, abusive or violent behaviour.
Gambling regularly for long sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gambling on a daily basis. • Gambling for extended hours. • Gambling across changes of shifts. 	Yes, by a small minority of staff.
Change from usual behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deterioration in appearance. • Change in reactions to others. 	Yes, but mentioned only by one staff and only if marked deterioration in hygiene and appearance.
Trying inappropriate means to obtain, borrow money to gamble	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking to borrow money from staff and patrons. • Looking for loose change. 	No
Looking stressed or being upset or crying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking worried, stressed. • Looking sad, crying. 	Yes, by a small minority of staff, but only if visibly very upset.
Changing a lot of money or changing money often	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing a lot of money. • Changing money often. 	Yes, by a small minority of staff, but only for large amounts, e.g., \$2,000.
Being anti-social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not wanting to talk to others. • Gambling alone. 	No
Erroneous and irrational verbalisations, talking to the machine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking to the machine. • Personalising the machine. 	No
Being secretive or lying about their gambling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being secretive about the amount lost or won. • Lying about whereabouts. 	Yes, but mentioned only by one staff, and only if patron asks staff to also be secretive about patron's gambling.
Gambling for longer than intended and or chasing losses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to gamble after mentioning they are about to stop. • Gambling until all money is lost. 	No
Making multiple ATM withdrawals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated visits to the ATM. 	No

Table 3
Continued

Indicators	Indicative behaviours	Would prompt an intervention?
Gambling with money put aside for something else	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Telling staff the money intended for essential items (e.g. for bills, food etc.) has been gambled. 	No
Concerns are expressed by family or friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family or friends telling patron to get off the EGMs. Family or friends becoming angry with the patron. 	Yes, by a minority of staff, but only if evidence of gambling impacting negatively on the family.
Putting big wins straight back into the EGM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not getting a payout from a large win. Gambling big wins away. 	No
Being overly attached to a particular machine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Waiting for a favourite machine to become available. Becoming annoyed if someone is on 'their' machine. 	No
Gambling large sums of money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People putting a great deal of money through the gaming machines. 	No
Waiting for the venue to open	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patron is at the venue before opening. 	No
Complaining even when winning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not being happy with a win. Complaining a win has not covered their losses. 	Yes, but mentioned only by one staff and only if faced with constant badgering.

by staff in the current study; this is in contrast to research findings that specific cue combinations can with reliability be used to detect problem gamblers (Delfabbro et al., 2007; Schellinck & Schrans, 2004).

In addition, there was a significant mismatch between what venue staff perceive to be valid indicators of a possible gambling problem and those outlined in the Industry Training Kit (Queensland Government, 2005) (Table 2). For example, no interviewees nominated behaviours cited in the Training Kit as associated with faulty cognition, use of alcohol or drugs while gambling, depression or thoughts of suicide, and involvement in multiple simultaneous gambling activities. However, they did nominate other behaviours cited in the Training Kit, including those signalling loss of control (spending too much time gambling, behaving in an aggressive manner towards property), negative impacts of gambling (lying to others to hide their gambling, trying to borrow money for gambling, third party concerns)

and personal remorse (e.g., which may be felt after losing household money by gambling).

Nevertheless, participants' responses more closely matched Delfabbro et al.'s (2007) list of indicators in relation to: frequency, duration, and intensity of gambling (e.g., putting wins straight back into a machine, gambling regularly, and or gambling for long sessions); impaired control (e.g., being attached to a particular machine, waiting for the venue to open); social behaviours (e.g., anti-social behaviour such as becoming irritable); raising funds, chasing behaviours (e.g., multiple ATM withdrawals, borrowing money); and emotional responses (e.g., becoming upset and or aggressive). Additionally, some indicators found in other previous studies (Allcock et al., 2002; Focal Research, 1998; Hafeli & Schneider, 2005) align well with those found in the current study. Of particular note are: behavioural changes (such as anti-social behaviour and isolation from other patrons); gambling regularly and for long periods of time; repeated ATM withdrawals and trying to inappropriately obtain or borrow money; and emotional behaviour (such as aggressive behaviour and signs of distress).

However, very few indicators or combinations of indicators would prompt staff in the current study to initiate a patron intervention. Most employees would intervene only if the patron displayed aggressive, abusive, or violent behaviour. Other behaviours that would prompt an intervention were mentioned by very few interviewees. This finding aligns with Delfabbro et al.'s contention that "interventions only tend to occur when the people actively seek help, or if the person's behaviour is clearly causing discomfort or distress to other patrons" (2007, p. 273).

Implications for Management

This study has highlighted several challenges for gaming venues around early detection by frontline staff of problem gambling in patrons. One is the variability in staff perceptions of indicators of possible gambling problems, and their apparent reliance on their own subjective judgement. Another is that the indicators contained in industry codes do not necessarily align with those shown to be most valid through empirical research, or with indicators used by staff. Further, some interviewees alluded to the difficulty of being able to sufficiently observe patrons in venues due to busy work schedules, large gaming rooms and the layout of some venues.

Additionally, most staff appear willing to initiate an intervention only when a patron's behaviour is a threat to themselves or others. Other authors have also identified difficulties associated with interventions (Delfabbro et al. 2007; Delfabbro et al., 2012; Hancock, 2011; Hancock, Schellinck & Schrans, 2008; Hing, 2007; Hing & Nuske, 2012). The Productivity Commission (2010) noted that staff may find interventions too confrontational or fear the reactions of patrons, and that even well trained staff may occasionally cause offence through a wrong assessment. Further, people approached by venue staff may simply choose to gamble elsewhere. Looking

at legal accountability aspects, venues may be exposed to litigation if a person loses money and then claims the venue failed to intervene when they had shown clear problem gambling indicators (Productivity Commission, 2010).

Given the considerable challenges associated with identifying and intervening with problem gamblers in venues, a more promising avenue may be utilising actual player data to detect and advise patrons with gambling problems. For example, the Playscan system used in Sweden, France, and Finland uses smart cards and, based on information collected on individual gambler behaviour and on known risky gambling patterns of players (e.g. chasing losses, increasing average bet size over time), assesses individual players' risk and advises them if their gambling is under control, if their behaviour has changed in a negative way, or if their gambling is a problem. Advice is then given on what the person should do based on the level of risk (Svenska Spel, 2010). Similar systems have been developed in Canada (e.g., iCare) and the United Kingdom (e.g., GAMtrack), while account-based Internet gambling also offers potential for identification of problem gambling behaviour and automated interventions. However, these initiatives require systems that identify each patron and capture data on their gambling, and are most inclusive where all patrons must register in order to gamble. These conditions do not currently exist in Australian EGM venues.

Thus, proactive detection and intervention by Australian gaming venue staff remains reliant on observable indicators of problem gambling behaviours, even though this is far from an exact science, and the outward signs of problem gambling are sometimes "hidden" (Saisan et al., 2009). In the absence of player tracking systems, the results of this study suggest that frontline venue staff would benefit from clearer direction and boundaries around both the indicators of problem gambling and policies about when staff should initiate an intervention.

Conclusions

As with most exploratory qualitative research, this study was limited by the use of small, non-random and self-selecting samples. Nevertheless, the study has provided in-depth data on the visible indicators of gambling problems used by Queensland gaming venue staff, how they compare with those promoted in their industry code of conduct and those validated in prior research, and the challenges associated with identifying people with gambling problems in gaming venues. Even though additional training may better equip staff to meet these challenges, variations in venue patrons' outward display of problem gambling behaviours, and in how venue staff perceive and act on these indicators, mean that identifying patrons with gambling problems in the venue may never be accurate if based solely on observable behaviours.

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