Workplace risk and protective factors for gambling problems among gambling industry employees

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A B S T R A C T

Having a stable healthy workforce is beneficial for the gambling industry, yet this workforce has comparatively high problem gambling rates. This study assesses the contribution of workplace risk and protective factors to gambling problems among gambling venue employees. Australian gambling industry employees (N = 551) completed a survey measuring gambling behavior, problem gambling, and factors that may influence gambling. The study identifies five risk factors relating to problem gambling development – workplace motivators, influence of colleagues, workplace triggers, limited social opportunities, and familiarity and interest in gambling. Two protective factors are identified – exposed to gambling losses and problems and influence of colleagues. In addressing gambling problems, one factor – discouragement to address a gambling problem – distinguishes the problem gambler group. One factor – encouragement to address a gambling problem – provides protection for the staff. This is the first empirical attempt to quantify workplace factors and their relationships with gambling problems. The identification of risk and protective factors in gambling venues may prompt healthier workplace practices and effective prevention and treatment programs.

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1. Introduction

The gambling industry is a major employer; which is promoted as a benefit of gambling to communities. A stable and healthy workforce is critical to effective management, operations, and customer service in licensed gambling venues such as casinos, hotels, and clubs. Gambling venue employees appear to gamble at a higher rate than the general population and are at greater risk of developing gambling-related problems (Dangerfield, 2004; Duquette, 2000; Guttentag, 2010; Hancock, 2011; Hing & Breen, 2008; Hing & Gainsbury, 2011; Lee, LaBrie, Rhee, & Shaffer, 2008; Shaffer & Hall, 2002; Shaffer, Vander Bilt, & Hall, 1999; Wu & Wong, 2008).

Thus, a key concern is how employment in a gambling venue influences employees' risks of problem gambling. If aspects of the workplace are identified that heighten the risk of problem gambling, then workplaces may be able to modify these or train employees to better manage the risks. Equally, if workplace factors protect against problem gambling, identifying these factors may inform appropriate workplace modifications.

An analysis of workplace risk and protective factors is fundamental to business research that seeks to improve the well-being of an occupational cohort, especially when employee well-being potentially affects the responsible service of gambling to customers. This research aims to assess the contribution of various workplace risk and protective factors to gambling problems among a cohort of gambling venue employees in Australia.

2. Literature review

Gambling is a public health issue (Korn & Shaffer, 1999; Shaffer & Korn, 2002). Some studies focus attention on the prevention of gambling problems and promotion of well-being generally, and the treatment of problem gamblers suffering severe harm (Productivity Commission, 2010). Problem gamblers have 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).

Public health frameworks recognize that a variety of factors relating to the gambler's personal characteristics, the gambling activities, and the broader context in which gambling occurs affect involvement in gambling including at problematic levels (Productivity Commission, 2010; Shaffer & Korn, 2002; Thomas & Jackson, 2004). Thus, influences on gambling involvement, including risk and protective factors, are likely multi-factorial. One probable influential contextual factor for gambling venue staff is the work environment. Shaffer, LaBrie, and LaPlante (2004) argue that higher rates of problem gambling found among casino staff reflect occupational exposure to gambling.

Adaptation theory proposes that symptoms diminish as individuals adapt to environmental toxins and acquire resistance (Shaffer et al., 2004). Exposure is argued to provide the opportunity for people to learn self-regulation (Shaffer, 2005). Understanding the drivers of problem gambling requires recognition of the complex nature of gambling

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exposure, including the role of individual and environmental risk and protective factors (Abbott, 2006). Although the elevated problem gambling rates found among gambling venue employees support an exposure effect through the workplace, minimal research is available on the specific aspects of the work environment that increase or lower risks.

Some evidence of the impact of workplace context on addictive behaviors comes from numerous U.S. studies, which have found higher heavy drinking rates among bar–restaurant workers than in any other occupation (SAMHSA, 2007). Socializing with co-workers is an identified risk factor, paralleling studies of how group norms influence drinking patterns among young adults (Weitzman, Nelson, & Wechsler, 2003). Research findings suggest that those at risk for heavy drinking may self-select into the restaurant–bar industry (Frone, 2003; Kjaerheim, Mykletun, & Haldorsen, 1996; Macdonald, Wells, & Wild, 1999). Furthermore, restaurant work environments may reinforce alcohol use through alcohol access and workplace norms and culture (Delaney & Ames, 1995; Parker & Harford, 1992).

Similar factors may play a role in gambling among gambling venue employees, where the generally young age of employees matches the age groups most susceptible to problem gambling (Perese, Bellringer, & Abbott, 2005), and where group norms and workplace cultures may encourage gambling. Problem and at-risk gamblers may also self-select into the gambling industry to satisfy their gambling interests (Dangerfield, 2004; Guttentag, 2010; Perese et al., 2005; Shaffer & Korn, 2002).

The veracity of the preceding speculations has been directly explored in only one previous study. Hing and Breen (2006) examined how the workplace influenced the gambling behavior of gambling venue staff in Australia. They report that some workplace factors appear to enhance employees' propensity to gamble. These include erroneous beliefs about winning, arising from close interaction with gamblers, frequent exposure to gambling and increased familiarity with gambling.

Hing and Breen (2006) also identify workplace factors that can discourage staff gambling. These included awareness of problem gambling which reduced the appeal of gambling, and the poor odds of winning, and greater knowledge of responsible gambling.

The current study aims to extend previous research through a quantitative analysis of risk and protective factors.

3. Research method

3.1. Sampling, recruitment and data collection

Three types of gambling venues with electronic gaming machines (EGMs) operate in Queensland Australia where this study was conducted: four casinos, 573 licensed clubs, and 770 hotels. These venues provide casino table games (casinos only), EGMs, off-course wagering, sports betting, and keno facilities.

A total of 511 staff from Queensland hotels, clubs, and casinos self-completed a questionnaire with ethics approval granted by the researchers' university. Survey completion was entirely voluntary.

All casino surveys were conducted on-site at the four casino properties. At the two larger casinos, the surveys were distributed to employees via their department head with completed surveys returned to the department heads in sealed envelopes. At the two smaller casinos, employees were released from duties to complete the survey.

Accessing a sample of hotel and club employees was more difficult due to inability to survey employees on-site in the large number of venues. Therefore, surveys were mailed to each hotel and club in Queensland and accompanied by articles and advertisements in industry and union newsletters encouraging participation and requests for assistance from hotel and club managers. A $20 shopping voucher was offered for completed surveys.

A total of 319 casino employees, 131 hotel employees, 59 club employees, and two respondents who did not indicate their type of

workplace completed surveys. The actual response rate is not known due to the wide distribution of surveys.

3.2. Measuring problem gambling

The Problem Gambling Severity Index of the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI) (Ferris & Wynne, 2001) comprises nine questions, with responses scored as 'never' = 0, 'sometimes' = 1, 'most of the time' = 2 and 'almost always' = 3. Scores are summed for a total score; cut-off scores are 0 = non-problem gambler, 1–2 = low risk gambler, 3–7 = moderate risk gambler, and 8 + = problem gambler (Ferris & Wynne, 2001). The CPGI has been used in all recent Australian and numerous overseas problem gambling prevalence studies (Abbott & Volberg, 2006).

3.3. Measuring risk factors for developing gambling problems

Items to measure potential risk factors for developing a gambling problem were derived from the 81 factors Hing and Breen (2006) report for why working in a gambling venue can encourage gambling. For parsimony, similar or overlapping reasons were combined. The remaining reasons were converted into 41 statements requiring responses on a 4-point Likert scale, coded as: 'strongly disagree' = 1, 'disagree' = 2, 'agree' = 3 or 'strongly agree' = 4.

3.4. Measuring protective factors for developing gambling problems

Hing and Breen (2006) report 37 reasons raised by their interviewees for why working in a gambling venue can discourage staff gambling. Factors were combined when very similar. The remaining reasons were converted into 18 statements requiring responses on a 4-point Likert scale as above.

3.5. Measuring risk and protective factors for addressing gambling problems

Drawing on the Hing and Breen (2006), the survey included five statements reflecting reasons why working in a gambling venue might encourage the staff to address a gambling problem, and six statements why the staff might be discouraged from addressing a gambling problem. These statements required responses on a 4-point Likert scale as above.

3.6. Analytical techniques

Data were analyzed to test three hypotheses. H_1: Risk factors for developing a gambling problem relates positively to problem gambling. H_2: Protective factors for developing a gambling problem relates positively problem gambling. H_3: Risk relates with protective factors for addressing a gambling problem and problem gambling.

After removing the 28 non-gamblers and accounting for the missing data, the retained samples comprised 293 non-problem gamblers, 80 low risk gamblers, 55 moderate risk gamblers and 22 problem gamblers.

Factor analysis was used to derive sets of risk and protective factors. A profile analysis then examined how the risk and protective factors differed among CPGI categories. The general linear model (repeated measures) tested for significant interactions between the four-category variable reflecting the CPGI groups of gamblers and each of the derived risk and protective factors. A multiple multinomial logistic regression tested how each risk and each protective factor, each set of risk and protective factors, and the combined set of both risk and protective factors relate to problem gambling.