

Children's Experiences of Living Within a Problem Gambling Family

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The effect of problem gambling on the gambler is well documented, and it is being increasingly recognised that problem gambling effects other individuals as well. A conceptualisation of problem gambling that incorporates the extended network of deleterious effects has been formulated by McMillen, who views problem gambling as “a social problem, affecting the individual, their family, friends and the wider community” (in Brown & Coventry, 1997, p. 7). In order to gain a deeper insight into the consequences of gambling, researchers need to study the experiences of *all* those who are affected by problem gambling. There is considerable community concern regarding the impact of parental problem gambling on Australian children. This concern is not, however, reflected in the research literature.

As Brown and Coventry (1997, p. 11) has noted, “children can sometimes be the unwitting sufferers of [parental] gambling behaviour (sic)”. In a study of the needs of women with gambling problems, Brown and Coventry (1997) interviewed Australian women about their gambling problem. These women indicated that their gambling resulted in mood swings, stress, guilt, a sense of isolation, and neglectful behaviour, which negatively affected their children. American research suggests a link between parental problem gamblers and behavioural, physical, psychosocial and psychological problems experienced by their children (Abbott, Cramer & Sherrets, 1995; Jacobs, 1989; Lesieur & Rothschild, 1989).

The research that has been conducted on the effects of parental problem gambling on children and young people indicates that these children may be severely and negatively effected by their parents' behaviour. As Lorenz (1987, p. 83) has noted, “children of the pathological gambler are probably the most victimized” by parental problem gambling. The family life of these children can be a roller-coaster ride from stability to chaos, mirroring the lives of children whose parents are abusers of drugs or alcohol. There is, however, a distinct gap in the research literature on gambling. No systematic attempt to understand the experiences of these children and young people from their *own* perspective appears to have been undertaken. As Lesieur has observed:

“some *basic* research is needed to find out *from the child's point of view* what it is like growing up with a compulsive gambler” (1989, p. 237, italics in original).

In the present study, we bridge this gap through systematic qualitative inquiry into children's and young people's experiences of being part of a family where gambling is a problem.

Aims and Purpose of the Study

The study aims to:

- gain a deeper understanding of the lives of children and young people who live within problem gambling families.
- explore the meanings, perceptions, understandings, and experiences of living in problem gambling families from the perspective of the children and young people themselves.
- gain an understanding of the ways in which these young people manage their lives and their growing up within such families.

The study participants

Fifteen children and young people, eleven males and four females aged between 7 and 18 years, were interviewed. The parents of the participants had been gambling for between two and fifteen years. Five of these gambling parents were the mothers of the participants, and four were the fathers. The gambling activity the parents were involved in was predominantly gambling on Gaming Machines, but some were also involved in betting on horseracing and casino gambling, such as roulette. One participant described her father as having a gambling lifestyle.

Analysis

The study is at present in the early stages of the analysis. Although the analysis is not yet finalised, the researchers have noticed a high level of consistency in the participants' experiences of living within a problem gambling family. This consistency is of particular interest when we consider the differences in these families; for example, the families cover a range of backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and the age range of the children.

Even at this early stage there is one theme that has struck the researchers as being particularly important in the experiences of these children and young people. The theme has been termed "Pervasive Loss", and will be outlined in the following section with reference to the words of the children and young people themselves.

The Experience of Pervasive Loss

There are a number of facets to these children's and young people's experience of pervasive loss. These include the loss of the gambling parent, the loss of the relationship with the gambling parent, the loss of security, as well as a more tangible loss, such as the family home.

The loss of gambling parent

a) Separation (physical loss)

b) 'Existential' loss

The experience of separation is common for the participants interviewed in the study, and in 6 out of the 8 families that participated in the study, the parents are separated. The children's and young people's experiences of separation can involve the parents getting a divorce, the gambling parent leaving but without a formal divorce, or the threat or fear of divorce. The link between separation and the child's experience of parental problem gambling appears to be quite clear, as can be seen in the following extracts from the interviews:

HC: You say that mum and dad have split up now. Did the gambling have anything to do with that?

P5: Umm, I think it did, I think because dad, dad keeps saying if you keep doing this I'm going to take us three kids with him and dad's gave her a good, like a chance to keep us kids by looking after us properly and just stuff like that. But I think, I'm not really sure though.

(Interview 5, p. 9; 13 year-old female, mother gambles)

HC: So what difference do you reckon dad's gambling makes to your lives?

A: Well it can't really make a difference because we were only little so we.

HC: If he wasn't to gamble what would it, what difference, how would you ...

B: Well we'd get to see him more and he'd live with us.

HC: Right. So that's the real reason mum and dad's marriage broke up?

A: Yeah.

(Interview 8, p. 12; A – 10 year-old male; B – 11 year-old brother; father gambles)

Perhaps the most poignant tale of separation was that of four brothers whose mother is a problem gambler. The three younger brothers were interviewed together and their experience of separation is described in the following extracts:

HC: And how long has she had a gambling problem that you know of?

B1: Three years.

B2: Oh she moved out of house, if she lived out of house over about heaps of times and she turned up home and she just went back to Adelaide again.

...

HC: And how's that for you?

B2: Sad.

(Interview 3, pp. 3-4; B1 – 11 year-old male; B2 – 7 year-old brother; mother gambles))

B1: And this is the first Christmas we've had without her.

(Interview 3, p. 5; B1 – 11 year-old male, mother gambles)

HC: Do you know ... how gambling, your mum's gambling works?

...

B1: Not really.

B2: She keeps on leaving, leaving, leaving.

B1: She's left over 8 times or something

...

HC: And is it because of her gambling that she's gone this time?

B2: Yeah, she's, um nags for, for money and if she, she doesn't get money then she just goes to Adelaide.

(Interview 3, pp. 5-6; B1 – 11 year-old male; B2 – 7 year-old brother; mother gambles)

PD: What happened then when mum was playing the pokies, what was she like then, was she different?

B1: She kept on leaving.

B2: Yeah she was actually happy, and she just run, she'd walk into the pokies and we didn't see her.

(Interview 3, p. 11; B1 – 11 year-old male; B2 – 7 year-old brother; mother gambles))

HC: Have any of you boys tried to help mum or tried to tell her not to gamble?

B1: Yeah. The first time mum tried to leave, mum was fighting B2 for the suitcase.

HC: Right.

B1: B2 had one end of it and she had the other and they were fighting and dad had to break them up.

HC: Right, right.

PD How did you used to talk to your mum about gambling, what did you used to say to her?

B2: Um, oh I had to block the door, don't let her get the suitcase and I was still doing it and she got past me.

B3: B2, we're talking about something different!

PD: No that's okay, he's getting there.

B2: And she got past me and I got one end and when she got the other end and I said "Don't leave" and I was keep on pulling.

PD: What about you B3, did you, did you talk to mum, did you try and, what did you say to her about gambling?

B3: Um, that it's a bad thing to do.

B1: We tried to stop her leaving and all that but she kept on leaving.

(Interview 3, pp. 18-19; B1 – 11 year-old male; B2 – 7 year-old brother; B3 – 9 year-old brother, mother gambles)

The incident with the fight over their mother's suitcase appears to be an important narrative for these children. In the extract outlined above, the youngest brother is determined to finish his story despite the interviewer having moved on to another topic. The oldest brother, who was interviewed separately, tells the same story in his interview. The theme of separation is an important one for these children, perhaps due to the frequency of their mother's leaving and returning. The oldest brother attributes his mother's recent leaving to the pokies, but he also notes that she has left before for other reasons. He also comments on the effect his mother's leaving has had on the extended family, resulting in them refusing to talk to her:

HC: What's it like for you, being in the family with a mum with a gambling problem and being the eldest kid?

P4: No it's, it's not that bad actually. 'Cause mum's done it [left] several times before now, 'cause like she used to do it when I was little, but it wasn't for gambling...

(Interview 4, p. 3)

HC: Your mum's not here at the moment?

P4: No, she's in Adelaide...

HC: Did she leave this time because of the pokies?

P4: Yep. She reckons it wasn't but it is.

HC: Mm. And how was that for you?

P4: Oh, I'm just fed up with her leaving.

HC: It must be really hard.

P4: No, not really. Just when she leaves you just, just hope it's for the last time and if she does come back she's on, she's got rid of the pokey addiction but it's usually, that's not the scenario.... And Nanna and Grandpa ... and Auntie K ... they're really peeved off

with her. Because she's on, she keeps on leaving and all that and they don't like it. So I'm, they won't talk to her any more, I don't blame them.

HC: You sound really pissed off.

P4: Yeah, really pissed off.

(Interview 4, pp. 4-5; 13 year-old male, mother gambles)

Participant 2 was interviewed twice, with approximately 6 months between interviews. In the first interview, this participant expressed a fear of her parents separating. This fear was based on her mother's threats to divorce her father, and her father's threat that should they separate he would never see his daughter again.

HC: How does [having a father with a gambling problem] impact on you?

P2: Well mum gets really upset and, I don't know what to do.

HC: So tell us a bit more about that....

P2: Like, mum, he, he keeps, doing it and mum gets upset about that and it's brought them further and further apart.

....

HC: When mum gets upset what happens?

P2: She wants, she tells dad that she wants a divorce and he just ignores her.

(Participant 2, interview 1; pp. 3-5)

HC: Why do you think your stomach is going, having butterflies?

P2: I don't know....

HC: Is it because you're scared?

P2: Scared that mum and dad will have, have a divorce but.

HC: Alright, that's scary. Yeah.

P2: Because if, because dad's sort of bad tempered person when he's in a bad mood, and, but if, they got a divorce I wouldn't see dad again.

...

HC: Would that be your choice?

...

P2: Dad's.

HC: It would be dad's choice. Mm. Why wouldn't he see you again?

P2: Well that's what he said.

HC: Has he? Has he said that to you?

P2: Yeah. He said if you divorce, if your mum divorces me then you won't see me again.

HC: How did you feel when he said that to you?

P2: Mad

(Participant 2, interview 1; p. 9-10)

HC: So there are lots of bits of your life that are okay.

P2: Hmm, mm.

HC: Right. And the bit that's worrying is will mum and dad divorce.

P2: And I think they will eventually.

(Participant 2, interview 1; p. 16)

11 year-old female, father gambles

Unfortunately Participant Two's fears turned out to be well founded. In the second interview she talks about the eventuation of her parents' separation:

PD: Okay, when did we come and talk to you last time, it must have been a few months ago.

P2: Last year.

PD: Was it as long ago as that, my gosh. I couldn't remember if it was like 6 months or so. So what kind of, anything been happening since then?

P2: Well at the moment a lot is. Mum and dad are splitting up because of it [dad's gambling].

PD: Oh. I didn't know that.

P2: We might have to sell the house. Well we will have to sell the house, but I don't want to move.

PD: When did this all start to happen?

P2: Umm, over the last few weeks.

PD: So it's quite recent?

P2: Mm.

PD: So what's the kind of, tell me the kind of story behind it.

P2: Well mum got like the bank statements and stuff today and it shows that dad's been taking like \$100 at a time out at hotels and stuff, sometimes three times a day and he, he apparently said to her that he wasn't gambling but he was. And she's not stupid.

PD: Wow, that's a lot of money. Did mum not know this was happening, was this like a shock?

P2: Not really because like he's done it before and he lies to her and stuff. But like she was just waiting for them to come in so she could be sure. Because when it did she's always crying, every day when I get home mum's going, oh God, not again.

(Participant 2, interview 2, pp. 1-2; 11 year-old female, father gambles)

The interview extracts outlined above indicate that separation was a significant issue for almost all of the children and young people we interviewed. An important aspect of separation is the less tangible 'existential' parental absence, and most of these parents can be described as not 'being there' for their children. For example:

PD: So had things been getting, I mean the last time we were talking obviously you were telling us your dad was gambling a lot. Has it got worse since then?

P2: I don't really know because I don't talk to him much. Like he comes around but every time he comes around mum gets upset again.

(Participant 2, interview 2, p. 3; 12 year-old female, father gambles)

HC: Do you reckon there was a noticeable like, fallout for you guys when she came home? You know like if.

P5: Um she, a lot of, most times whenever she's been out, she never leaves a note for me and she never tells me where she's going and I (crying) always get really scared. And if she does tell me where she's going and she um, she says that she'll be back sometimes, she might be 2, 3 hours late or maybe a little later. And then when she was going I want to talk to her and she'd just say 'well P5, I don't really give a stuff. This is my life not your life', and it was like, 'well you're my mum and I get worried' and so she doesn't seem to understand that (upset).

(Interview 5, p. 6; 11 year-old female, mother gambles)

The loss of the relationship with the gambling parent

- a) Development of a secretive environment
- b) Loss of interest / caring relationship
- c) Loss of trust
- d) Loss of dependability

Many of the participants we interviewed described a marked change in the gambling parent as a result of the gambling problem. For example, participants described the gambling parent as having undergone a personality change, and the parent is often described as secretive, deceptive, unreliable, irresponsible, irrational, disinterested and selfish. Some participants also noticed that the gambling parent started to smoke more or drink more coffee. These changes suggest a move away from a more 'ideal' parent, at least in the sense of our cultural understanding of the 'ideal parent'. These changes in the

gambling parent often resulted in the loss of the relationship the children had previously had with the gambling parent. For example, many participants noticed that an air of secrecy had developed as a result of the gambling problem. Some participants also spoke of their parent losing interest in their children and acting in a manner that suggested to them that their parent no longer cared about them. The participants also described a loss of dependability and trust in their parents.

PD: How quickly was, or how, did you start to notice changes in her? Were things happening that made you think, gosh some strange things going on here or?

P1: Oh, not really. I just sort of had a feeling that they were bad from the beginning, and I noticed a partial changes somewhere in the middle, I knew she'd changed, she was a lot more secretive, normally she'd tell me everything. Um, and then right at the end she just wasn't my mum that I knew.

(Interview 1, p. 5; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

PD: What would you say was, I mean if you were trying to explain this to somebody who'd never been in this situation and really didn't understand it, um, what would you say to them was the hardest thing about all, or the most painful thing about all?

P1: Probably mum changing the way she did, you know, like moving herself away from us as a family group, and then keeping all her secrets to herself and sort of not something that she did. Just a personality change I suppose from the person. For me it was really hard to come to terms with when you try to talk to your mum about something and she sort of fobs you off, whereas normally she'd listen to you.

HC: Mm. She stopped being interested in you?

P1: Well not interested in me, but in what I had to say. That sort of my opinion didn't sort of count, too much other stuff on her mind obviously.

(Interview 1, p. 15; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

HC: So when your mum had gambled and she'd lost and you were coming out of the pub what, what was her mood like then? ...

P1: Um, it would be like you were taking away her favourite toy. Um, she'd be sort of sitting in the car mumbling to herself or siphoning through her purse or whatever, trying to look for the last \$10 or something. Um, yeah. The other thing I noticed too was um, her smoking actually went up as well with the stress, and stuff like that I suppose.

(Interview 1, p. 25; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

PD: ... what was she like on the days when she wasn't in the pub? Like I mean was she able to just kind of get on with life or was she

P1: Edgy.

PD: Edgy and

P1: She want, she wanted to go type of thing. She couldn't really handle it. I mean she'd keep control, she wouldn't go off and belt people around or anything like that but um, she, she wasn't herself, but she wasn't as bad as what it was in the end.

(Interview 1, p. 27; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

P2: He [dad] tries to be secretive but it doesn't work.

(Interview 2, p. 11; 11 year-old female, father gambles)

PD: So do you think there's things about mum that you'll miss?

P4: Not really because when, when she, um, went to the pokies, all she's become is a selfish person, only thinks about herself. She um, she didn't care about us at all, she was just here to get money.

(Interview 4, p. 39; 13 year-old male, mother gambles)

HC: Do you reckon there was a noticeable like, fallout for you guys when she came home [after gambling]? You know like if

P5: Um she, a lot of, most times whenever she's been out, she never leaves a note for me and she never tells me where she's going and I (crying) always get really scared. And if she does tell me where she's going and she um, she says that she'll be back sometimes, she might be 2, 3 hours late or maybe a little later. And then when she was going I want to talk to her and she'd goes say well P5 I don't give a stuff. This is my life, not your life and it was like, well you're my mum and I get worried and she doesn't seem to understand that.

(Interview 5, p. 6; 13 year-old female, mother gambles)

PD: Would you say your mum's changed since she started gambling?

P5: I don't know because I don't, I don't know if it's me because I know that she gambles.

PD: Oh yeah.

P5: And because she, because I didn't know before, but it wasn't exactly the same.

PD: Hmm, mm. Do you think your mum knows how upset it makes you?

P5: Well I let her know all the time, but it seems like she doesn't care. But dad always says she does. But I don't know

(Interview 5, p. 7; 13 year-old female, mother gambles)

PD: ... is there anything else you would like to change, anything you'd like her to change?

P5: Have her keep her promises, like saying that she'd let me know where she's going because I wouldn't get so frightened if she'd told me where she'd going and said, and if she said I'd be back by 10.30, she'd be back by 10.30.

(Interview 5, p. 11; 13 year-old female, mother gambles)

PD: Tell me a bit about, maybe sort of start at the beginning and try and give me a sense of kind of you know, how you noticed there was something wrong. When did things start to happen. ...

P6: In 96, I would have been about 15 and yeah, dad was quite moody, he just, he wasn't himself, like he'd always have the races open or he'd always be down the pub more often and bet....

PD: Were you aware when you were 15 that there was something, something wrong was happening that, or did this just seem like the normal?

P6: Um, yeah. I'd noticed because his behaviour changed, like something, I knew that something was not right, that he'd changed.

PD: What kind of things about his behaviour changed?

P6: He was quiet, he'd go out for smokes more often, he'd drink more coffee. Um, around the time that he told us, like he actually confessed and said this is what I've done, I've lost my job, blah, blah, blah, and yeah, he was, he was a different person. He was depressed, you could, yeah. ... Um, but when he actually told us he was a lot better, he sort of, weight taken off his shoulders.

(Interview 6, p. 4; 17 year-old female, father gambles)

P6: ... I just noticed towards the end I think he really, he realised that um, he'd got himself in a bit of a hole and he couldn't get out of it.

PD: Yeah.

P6: And that's when he went down hill, whereas the whole time he was normal. It was more to the end that we actually, well I realised that, um, yeah, that he had a problem that something wasn't right.

(Interview 6, p. 6; 17 year-old female, father gambles)

HC: If it's dad's turn to see you, how soon would you know that it wasn't going to happen?

B: Well if he's about an hour late.

HC: Right so you don't really know until he doesn't come?

B: Yeah. Oh, unless sometimes he calls.

A: Sometimes he'll call us.

HC: Does that annoy you?

B: Yeah, a bit. Well, it's happened so many times I'm probably used to it now but, so.

HC: So you sort of not expect him to turn up until he arrives?

B: Yeah. Like I'm not sure if he's going to turn up or not.

(Interview 8, pp. 18-19; B – 11 year-old male; A – 10 year-old brother, father gambles)

Some participants noticed that the gambling parent was different when s/he was gambling to when s/he wasn't. For example:

PD: Was it good having mum at home when she wasn't playing the pokies and when she wasn't gambling?

B2: Yes.

PD: What was good about it, what were the good things?

B3: We had nice times.

B1: And this, never, this was, you know, wasn't happening all the time and we were having happy times and that together, going out as a family on Sundays and, yeah.

HC: And what was she like when she wasn't playing the pokies?

B1: Okay.

B3: Nice.

HC: Nice. So how was she different?

B2: Um, oh when she was going to leave um, she um, dad gave her.

B1: B2! (whisper)

HC: You're doing very well.

PD: Yeah, you're really, this is excellent.

HC: So we're wanting to know how she, what she was like when she wasn't playing the pokies and things were going okay.

B3: Nicer.

.....

HC: What did she do that was nicer, how was she different?

B3: Um, didn't leave as much, she didn't even leave.

B1: She didn't leave and she just, we just had a happy time and that..

(Interview 3, pp. 9-10; B1 – 11 year-old male; B2 – 7 year-old brother; B3 – 9 year-old brother; mother gambles)

PD: Was there anything else different about mum like when she was in the house, when she was playing? Was she sad, was she unhappy, was she angry?

B1: She didn't have a happy face on her for, on her head all the time.

B2: Yeah.

HC: Did she get cross with you guys more often or?

B3: Yeah.

(Interview 3, pp. 11; B1 – 11 year-old male; B2 – 7 year-old brother; B3 – 9 year-old brother; mother gambles)

HC: What was she like before she started gambling?

P4: Oh she still used to leave, a lot.

HC: Right, hmm, mm. Is she any different?

P4: What?

HC: Now to what she used to be?

P4: No. Just the pokies is the reason she leaves this time.

(Interview 4, p. 7; 13 year-old male, mother gambles)

HC: I'm wondering what she use to be like before she started playing, can you remember back that far?

P4: Oh she used to be actually quite a good mum, but not, not any more.

HC: So in the old days, pre-pokies, she was a good mum. Did she, you know, did she care about you kids then?

P4: Oh yeah sort of, but she used to leave a lot. Not because of the pokies though, she still used to leave a lot.

(Interview 4, pp. 39-40; 13 year-old male, mother gambles)

PD: Is she, does she seem to enjoy it, I mean is she happy when she goes out [and gambles]?

P5: Well whenever she comes home and she's done it, she's always upset for the next couple of days.

(Interview 5, p. 7; 13 year-old female, mother gambles)

P6: ... Dad's changed, he's more fun now, he's a lot more fun, don't you think, he's happy and laughs. He has his days but, um.

(Interview 6, p. 18; 17 year-old female, father gambles)

HC: ... if there are times when dad's not gambling or it's more under control, is he different then?

B: Yeah, he seems a lot more cheerful.

(Interview 8, p. 14; B – 11 year-old male, father gambles)

HC: Well perhaps put it another way. When things are going well for dad, how do you know?

A: Uh.

B: He's, happy.

HC: Mm. And how do you know he's happy?

B: He always smiles, and he's nice, like really nice.

HC: Hmm, mm. Yeah. And when he's not happy?

A: He's still really nice but, um.

B: He doesn't smile.

A: As much.

(Interview 8, p. 17; B – 11 year-old male; A – 10 year-old brother; father gambles)

CO: Is it the same now, do you find that, does she get cross so easily now?

P9: No, not really.

HC: So what's she doing now that she wasn't doing then? You know, if you and your brothers are fighting, when she's feeling okay about herself, how does she deal with you all?

P9: Oh she basically does the same as before but she doesn't get angry as quick and as much.

HC: Right.

CO: So it just takes a bit more time before she gets cross?

P9: Mm.

CO: Yeah.

HC: And do you put that down to her getting her gambling under control or do you think it's other things as well?

P9: No, it's getting the gambling under control mostly.

(Interview 9, pp. 15-16; 13 year-old male, mother gambled)

In the following extracts the participants describe feeling cheated by and distrustful of their parent, or even feeling unloved. For example:

PD: ... How would you describe the effect it had, especially on you and your sister? ...

P6: Oh, how can I say it. Basically just felt, well I felt cheated. I was angry and whatever, but I don't know. ...

PD: What kind of things were you ... cheated out of ...?

P6: Um, trust. Like you know, whether he said, whether or not, if he said, um, he was going down the street to get a drink or something, see old Martha which she lived down the road, whether or not he was actually going there or going to the pub to have a bet or yeah, just.

PD: So you didn't really believe dad any more?

P6: No. Or just the, you know daughter/father relationships, he'd done this to our family and you know, he'd lost his job through it and.

(Interview 6, p. 5; 17 year-old female, father gambles)

HC: So when mum was having the gambling problem and things were really lousy at home, you were noticing that things were different at Aunty X's place?

P9: Yeah.

(pause)

HC: And putting two and two together from what Aunty X was saying, you weren't too sure whether mum loved you at that time?

(pause)

P9: Don't know. Yeah.

HC: A bit?

P9: Yeah.

(Interview 9, p. 27; 13 year-old boy, mother gambled)

Tangible Loss

- a) Money.
- b) Home.

- c) School trip.
- d) Schooling.

The majority of the participants also experienced loss in a very tangible way. They lost money (the family's and their own), their homes, their holidays, and some lost their schooling. For most of the participants, the link between gambling and losing money could be seen in their everyday lives when they noticed that the family had less money than it should have had.

P1: ... I mean you could notice problems with the money in the home by Christmas time and birthdays and stuff like that, you know, there was just sort of nothing there for Christmas. I mean there'd be something there but not, not as much as there used to be. (Pause). Sort of cuts into everyone's pockets.

(Interview 1, p. 11; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

HC: If we waved a magic wand and dad's gambling problem's fixed, just like that, what difference, how would your family live differently? How would you view your family differently?

P7: We'd have more money. ... See what dad doesn't realise is that as much as he gambles and as much as he wastes all this bloody money, like thousands and thousands, not just a couple of hundred. ... If he just realised that if he invested that money in actual investments, like whether it be shares or lawn you know, whether it be absolutely anything, he doesn't realise how much better off he is.

(Interview 7, p. 23; 17 year-old female, father gambles)

For many there was less money for necessities or for extras:

HC: What do you think the impact was on [your brother]?

P1: I don't think he really understood exactly what was going on. ... you know, he'd ask for money for a school trip or something and it wouldn't be there so he wouldn't be able to do it, and stuff like that.

(Interview 1, p. 7; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

HC: Was the way your mum looked after you, did that change as the gambling problem got worse?

(Pause)

P1: Err, not really. There was always like food on the table and everything like that. It, I mean, the amount went down a little bit, but the way she shopped I mean, it was always the specials.

(Interview 1, pp. 7-8; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

HC: So what's the impact on your mum?

...

P7: ... you know she doesn't go out and buy other individual expenses which normal people would buy. Like she's walking around with glasses without a frame, like without an arm, and "why don't you just go and get some bloody glasses", it's like "oh no, no, I can't do that". Do you know what I mean?

HC: Yeah.

P7: And I find that it is kind of almost embarrassing, but, she won't spend money on herself almost in prevention of what dad's going to be up to.

(Interview 7, p. 22; 17 year-old female, father gambles)

PD: Do you think the family notices the money stuff, I mean like would people notice that there wasn't as much money in the family as there should be and?

P5: Yeah sometimes, because sometimes mum, like every now and then she won't go shopping and she's.

PD: That's what I was wondering, yeah. You know are there times when, I mean do you ever have to do without things, go without things because there's no money?

P5: Hmm, mm, yep.

PD: ... Have there been times when you know when you and J [brother] or A [sister] need money for things but you know mum hasn't got any?

P5: Yeah sometimes when my friends invite me to somewhere like the movies or something.

PD: And if you ask there's no money there?

P5: Mm.

(Interview 5, pp. 5-6; 13 year-old female, mother gambles)

HC: So what's the difference, do you reckon when mum's gambling to when she's not?

P9: Um, well now we can, now we get shopping whereas when she was gambling we didn't used to get shopping, and we used to miss out on a lot of things.

HC: Did you? What sort of things did you miss out on?

P9: Oh like just normal things that we always used to get, like in school I needed a jumper, I couldn't get one of them, and I couldn't go shopping.

(Interview 9, p. 4; 13 year-old male, mother gambled)

In some instances, the gambling problem had even led to the loss of the family home due to defaulting on the mortgage payments. Homes were also lost as a result of changed financial situations following the separation of participants' parents.

HC: So in your family there's you and who else?

P1: Yeah, I've got an 11 year-old brother and mum now, and they actually got divorced after it all happened and I moved out of home. The house got taken off of them because she didn't pay the mortgage payments ...

(Interview 1, p. 6; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

P7: He's like, he takes so many risks. Like, it's unbelievable. Like, mum probably had to, have something put down on the house so he couldn't touch the house...

HC: Do you get frightened by all of that?

P7: Err, well yeah I do, because he's already lost a house before, and, yeah I guess.

(Interview 7, pp. 16-17; 17 year-old female, father gambles)

PD: So how do you see your mum getting on?

P2: Oh yeah. As long as we don't have to sell the house. We will though.

PD: You think so. Yeah.

P2: I know we will.

(Participant 2, interview 2, p. 15; 12 year old female, father gambles)

In order to gain access to more money to be used for gambling, many of the gamblers stole or borrowed money from their children.

B1: She stole about \$30 out of B2 and B3's account.

B2: Yeah.

B3: And she stole about \$1,000 out of dad's account.

B1: She stole a heap of money out of dad's accounts.

B2: She's just a stealer.

(Interview 3, p. 11; B1 – 11 year-old male; B2 – 7 year-old brother; B3 – 9 year-old male; mother gambles)

In the case of Participant 1, the money his mother stole from him was intended for a school trip to America:

HC: So she'd been borrowing money from you?

P1: She still owes me money.

...

P1: ... well I was expecting it back and I said to mum can I buy this car and she said no, and I said why not and she sort of fobbed me off. I thought the money had gone then. Um, it wasn't until later when she actually robbed a shop at C and eventually she told me what had actually happened a couple of days afterwards and then she told me that the money was gone.

(Interview 1, p. 2-3; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

P1: Um, when it got to the stage that with the America trip, she actually said to me that she'll hold my key card to um, save my money up to do, do the trip. Now silly me, I handed it over, because I'd always get my money out and spend it and eventually she ended up taking the money out and spending that.

(Interview 1, p. 11; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

In other cases the gambling parent used money intended for necessities, such as food or rent, on gambling:

HC: So that's the real reason mum and dad's marriage broke up?

A: Yeah.

B: Yeah, because mum said he used to steal all the money out the bank account and then go and use it on gambling.

L: Uh, when I was about 4 I thought mum said to us, said to me, that he was using all the rent money on food.

B: What's that supposed to mean. All the rent money on food, all the rent money on gambling.

A: Yeah it was on gambling.

L: No, on food.

A: Gambling.

HC: Okay, and he spent all the food money on gambling.

A: He spent all the money he could get on gambling

(Interview 8, p. 12; A – 10 year-old male; B – 11 year-old brother; L – 7 year-old brother; father gambles)

Another area of loss was the loss of schooling:

P1: I sort of stood by her all my life, she's stood by me, so, I sort of stayed at home for about a week I think it was, and sort of helped her out and did things for her.

HC: So you didn't go to school?

P1: No, I had a week off school.

(Interview 1, p. 4; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

P1: I mean there was bad times and like, because I was doing the housework and stuff like that I'd want to sit down afterwards and relax but I'd be told to go to my room and do my homework and I would want to do my homework, and I'd get more, more trouble.

HC: Mm, yeah. You said when you went back to school after having stayed home to look after your mum after she'd been caught, that that was pretty difficult. Could you tell us a bit more about what happened?

P1: Well basically the, the day I went back to school on the bus, I mean I didn't really get along with any people on the bus beforehand, but afterwards it just sort of got worse. They all knew about it straight away because it was in C that it [the robbery] happened and um, I'd just get abused about it, um, rumours started going around and everything and it just got like worse at school that what I'd sort of ever gone through.

HC: What sort of things did they say?

P1: Um, well a long time ago now.

HC: Yeah.

P1: And sorta you blank them out of your mind but um, I remember one kept coming up and actually abusing me in front of everyone and saying that I can't be trusted because my mother's an armed robber and ra, ra, ra, and she should be thrown in jail and things like that.

(Interview 1, p. 8; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

HC: So you had to go to the pub with your mum?

P1: Yeah, most times. I mean I could have been left at home to clean up and do my homework, or I could go out with them and have tea at the hotel or whatever, and go to the pool, things like that.

HC: So your mum's gambling and your stepfather's drinking, really cut into your study time?

P1: Well I've never really been a person to study, I mean I sit down and I'll do the class work and that and I can pass.

HC: Yep.

P1: Without doing any homework. But I mean the homework and stuff in Year 11, I really needed that, because I only just sort of passed Year 11, and I didn't even get to do Year 12.

(Interview 1, p. 10; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

PD: How's it difficult for you, I mean year 9's tough at school you know, thinking and concentrating and stuff. Have you found it hard at school to kind of you know maybe keep your mind on things and do you find yourself thinking about?

P5: I've always been like that. I've never been able to concentrate.

PD: Yeah. You find it quite hard. Would you say that you, would you find yourself worrying a lot about what's happening at home and with mum while you're at school?

P5: Um. Because I only live across the road from the school, I get to come home for lunch ever day and sometimes my mum's not home and then I go back to school I can't concentrate on my work because I'm always thinking where is mum. Or before I go home I'll sometimes, like can't concentrate or something, you know, I hope mum's home so that I can see her, but sometimes she's not.

(Interview 5, pp.8-9 ; 13 year-old female, mother gambles)

HC: Do you worry about your mum as much as you used to?

P9: Nuh.

HC: Were you pretty worried about her before [when she was still gambling]?

P9: Oh sometimes I was. Yeah sometimes she liked me staying home with her to just make sure she didn't go [gambling] 'cos when I was there she wouldn't go gambling. So sometimes she liked having me around so if I was sick that would be good for her 'cos she used to say to me, 'I'm glad I had you home 'cos I would've gone and gambling', or something like that.

(Participant 9, interview 2, p. 13; 13 year-old male, mother gambled)

P10: And then Dad had us for, once Mum went for three days.

HC: And did you know where she was?

P10: No.

HC: Were you really miserable?

P10: Aha.

HC: And how was it going to school when you were feeling like that?

P10: 'Cos every time I went to school now I always play on the playground and when I went to school before I was just sitting down and not playing.

(Participant 10, pp. 19-20; 8 year-old male, mother gambled)

Security

- a) Loss of financial security / loss of the parent as provider.
- b) Volatility / the loss of a stable home life.
- c) Isolation.

Another important facet of the theme of 'Pervasive Loss' is the loss of security that most of the participants experienced. This loss of security resulted from extensive financial loss and the loss of the parent as provider, as described in the previous section. Participants also described the loss of a stable family environment, and the sense of being isolated by the loss of extended family as well as the secrecy around living with a problem gambling parent. The majority of the participants described their home lives as being extremely volatile. For example, some participants claimed their parents became angry for no reason, and took their anger out on their children.

PD: Was there anything else different about mum like when she was in the house ... Was she sad, was she unhappy, was she angry?

B1: She didn't have a happy face on her for, on her head all the time.

B2: Yeah.

HC: Did she get cross with you guys more often or?

B3: Yeah. Yes.

B2: Yeah.

B1: Yeah.

HC: So she was a bit more grumpy?

B1: Whacks us for no reason sometimes.

(Interview 3, pp. 11-12; B1 – 11 year-old male; B2 – 7 year-old brother, B3 – 9 year-old brother, mother gambles)

P2: ... Sometimes she [mum] just gets angry.

HC: Right. Uh huh. So when mum gets angry what does she do?

P2: Gets mad at me. (laughs)

HC: Gets mad at you. Right.

P2: If I do one little thing she gets mad at me.

PD: So that's when you have to be especially good?

P2: Yep.

PD: Yeah.

HC: So when mum's mad with dad she gets cross with you?

P2: Yeah, sometimes.

(Interview 2, p. 19; 11 year-old female, father gambles)

Some participants described family arguments resulting from the gambling problem, feelings of being to blame for their parent's gambling, and feeling like they are caught in the middle.

PD: What kind of things, I mean do you have any sort of things that you do for yourself to kind of help you with the bad times and, what do you do to kind of cheer yourself up or try to make yourself feel better?

P5: Well whenever mum goes out my brother locked himself in his bedroom, because my sister's always like home and making arguments between us, so then he just locks his door to ignore her and so, and then I get left with my sister saying that she wants mum, she's scared and stuff, and she just wants mum to stay home. So I get left with my sister plus me worrying where she is and my sister crying makes me a little bit more upset.

(Interview 5, p. 12;13 year-old female, mother gambles)

P2: And mum gets upset and I don't know what I can do to help mum and dad.

PD: Is it kind of like being in the middle?

P2: Yes.

...

HC: So how's it for you when you hear, do you hear them arguing?

P2: Yep.

HC: What's it like to be you when mum and dad are arguing?

P2: Hate it.

(Interview 2, pp. 4-5; 11 year-old female, father gambles)

HC: Have you thought sometimes that it was your fault?

P2: Sometimes, yep.

HC: Hmm, mm.

PD: How did that happen? What kind of things were you thinking when you thought that maybe this is me?

P2: Well 'cause like dad sometimes comes home in a bad mood and then like he asks me to get something, he thinks I'm his servant, but, and I say I don't want to get it, he sort of gets mad when I say "I'm not getting it, why don't you go and get it, because you've got two feet as well". And because I'm tired and he just gets really mad and sort of sometimes he just goes and plays the pokies.

(Interview 2, pp. 22-23; 11 year-old female, father gambles)

The spouse of the problem gambler was also described as being affected by the gambling problem, which again impacts on the stability of the home environment.

HC: What do you see your dad's gambling, doing to your mum? What is the impact on her?

P7: Oh it ruins her, absolutely ruins her. Which is then projected to me ...

(Interview 7, p. 21; 17 year-old female, father gambles)

HC: Do you look forward to daddy coming? And when he doesn't come, what do you feel?

L: Annoyed.

HC: Annoyed. Hmm, mm. Who gets the crossest do you reckon?

B: Mum.

A: Mum.

(Interview 8, p. 19; A – 10 year-old male; B – 11 year-old brother; L – 7 year-old brother, father gambles)

The difficulty of living within the type of volatile environment described in by the participants can be seen in the following extracts. Participant 4, whose mother is continuously leaving and returning, claims that life is better and his family is more organised when his gambling mother is no longer at home. Participant two also describes her home life as happier now that her gambling father has left.

HC: Right. So are they [brothers] any different now that she's gone?

P4: No, we're actually quite happy now she's gone because she doesn't, she doesn't hassle dad for money any more, and we can get on with our lives better.

(Interview 4, p. 9)

HC: Yeah, I wonder if they're [brothers] different when mum's home to when she's not home?

P4: They're a lot happier when mum's home, but now they're, they're starting to get a lot happier now because they know that we'll, without, without mum we go pretty well and, and we get our, stuff done and all that.

PD: Yeah.

HC: Right.

P4: It's a lot more organised.

(Interview 4, p. 35; 13 year-old male; mother gambles)

PD: So how would you say things were now?

P2: Now?

PD: Hmm, mm. You know since dad's sort of gone and stuff?

P2: Mum likes it better without dad and so do I, but we don't get as much money in and stuff, but we didn't get all that much in before but at one stage we were doing really well.

PD: Hmm, mm. I mean does the house seem happier or sadder or is the house like that?

P2: Overall happier, but like now it's sadder.

(Participant 2, interview 2, p.13 ; 12 year-old female, father gambles)

Another form of loss of security can be seen to arise from the isolation many of the participants described. The sense of isolation described by the participants was a result of the absence of support for the child, be it support from the family, extended family, teachers or friends. For example, one participant attributed the drifting apart of his extended family to the armed robbery his mother committed to support her gambling problem. He also spoke of his inability to talk to anyone about his experiences:

P1: ... but the whole family practically turned on her because she was a hypocrite. She'd gone and done this [armed robbery] when she was telling other people not to. And I was put in the middle of it all, I was sort of the mediator in, in between, and I'd sort of have to tell people what's going on and give mum messages and yeah. I mean they still sort of cared about her and that, but not the way they used to.

HC: Right.

P1: They sort of, the whole family drifted apart. We were normally pretty close.

(Interview 1, p.18; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

PD: So before the, you know, the robbery and the school bus stuff, um, did any of your friends, or did anyone else know that your mum had a problem?

P1: Only my relatives and um, my aunty, one of my closest aunties, but I don't talk to her any more, um, actually turned around and said that it was because of my step father that she had this problem. And she said this to me and I said no, it's not. He's only drinking there because she's in the pokies. She's only in the pokies because he's drinking there. It's both of them, you know.

...

PD: Was it, I mean I'm thinking you know, living you know, when your mum's like this. Did you have anybody you know, is this something you'd be able to talk to friends about or anything, or did you just have to you know try and keep this to yourself?

P1: Mostly kept it to myself. I mean a lot of people would ask me, what did you do on the weekend or whatever, and it would be like, oh nothing much. Sort of won't say much to anyone, um. I talked to one of my teachers about um, my school work and stuff and she actually asked why and I said well we're never home, and it was just sort of left at that, but I was hoping that she'd ask more about it but she didn't, so. And I sort of didn't have the guts to open up and say everything that was going on.

(Interview 1, pp. 9-10; 18 year-old male, mother gambles)

Further examples of the isolation of these children can be seen in the following extracts:

PD: Does your dad ever talk to you about it [his gambling]? No? Do you ever ask him about it?

P8: Nuh.

PD: What does your Mum say about it? You know, when she's talking to you about it?

P8: She doesn't normally talk about it.

PD: Do you ask her stuff about it?

P8: Nuh.

(Participant 8, interview 2, pp. 2-3; 11 year-old male, father gambles)

HC: Sometimes it can be tough being the oldest one in the family. Has it been tough for you?

P9: Sometimes it is. I don't know how, but sometimes it is being the oldest.

HC: I think sometimes the oldest kids know a bit more about what's happening than the little ones don't. Were you able to talk to your Dad about what was happening?

P9: No. I wasn't able to do that.

HC: What stopped you from doing that?

P9: Don't know. Don't know why I didn't do that

(Participant 9, interview 2, pp. 18-19; 13 year-old male, mother gambled)

Conclusion

These children's and young people's descriptions of experiencing pervasive loss as a result of parental problem gambling, can be seen to support Brown and Coventry's suggestion that "children can sometimes be the unwitting sufferers of [parental] gambling behaviour (sic)" (1997, p. 11). The researchers believe that the importance of loss in these children's descriptions of their experiences is undeniable. This sense of pervasive loss in the experiences of these children and young people can be viewed as a significant cost of

parental problem gambling, and one that should be taken into account when exploring the costs versus the benefits of the gambling industry as it stands today.

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