

Individual Vulnerability and Dissociative-Like Experiences in Regular and Problem Gamblers

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Declaration

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Abstract

Problem EGM gambling is an increasingly prevalent public health concern because of its associated psychological, financial and social problems. In recent years there has been a heightened interest in the psychology of EGM play, and more specifically, why a subgroup of people appears to lose control over their gambling. This thesis has been guided by the literature that suggests a subgroup of people may be more vulnerable to developing gambling problems than others, for example, Durand Jacobs' General Theory of Addiction (1986), and the emotionally vulnerable subgroup of problem gamblers in Blaszczynski and Nower's (2002) Pathways Model of Problem Gambling. The primary goal of the research was to explore people's phenomenological experiences during EGM gambling, in particular, the occurrence of dissociative-like states, and how excessive gambling might be linked to people's psychological states.

The first study involved a preliminary investigation of the occurrences of dissociative-like experiences during EGM play. The findings from the study suggested that South Australian gamblers do report having experienced dissociative-like experiences during gambling. In particular, participants were more likely to report dissociative-like experiences during EGM gambling. The findings from the preliminary study provided the basis for subsequent studies. A qualitative study ($N=18$) was then conducted to explore the phenomenological experiences of problem EGM gambling and was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The main findings suggested that the problem gamblers' histories were characterised by traumatic/stressful life experiences, and that they used gambling as a maladaptive form of coping.

A survey-based study of regular and problem EGM gamblers ($N= 190$) was then conducted. The study investigated specific elements of Jacobs' (1986) General Theory of Addictions, more specifically, the emotional and physiological vulnerabilities of EGM gamblers and their within-session experiences of dissociation. The study also examined the links between dissociation and coping styles with impaired control over gambling and a number of hypothesised 'protective' factors. The results demonstrated that problem gamblers were more likely than other categories of gamblers to report psychological and physiological vulnerabilities. The results also highlighted the importance of impaired control and dissociative-like experiences in problem gambling. There was also evidence to

suggest that problem gamblers may have lower levels of protective factors such as self-esteem and social support.

A final pilot study was based on the thesis' earlier findings that highlighted the importance of 'narrowed' attention in the fulfilment of 'a need to escape' during EGM gambling. This concept of 'narrowed' attention was likened to 'trance' like states or altered states of consciousness. An innovation of the final study was that it attempted to obtain quantitative data on the phenomenological experiences of both regular and problem EGM players. The results from this final study suggested that EGM gamblers may experience alterations in consciousness during play, however, further research is needed to qualify this finding. The findings from each of the studies were then integrated and discussed in terms of the vulnerability model of problem EGM gambling, and particular attention was afforded to the clinical implications of the findings.

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