Further from Home?

Homelessness and Gambling: Exclusion, Identity and Place

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Abstract
Homelessness has been widely associated with social exclusion and a range of other complex needs and issues, including gambling. This paper discusses the findings of a qualitative study that explored the experiences and perspectives of people experiencing homelessness and gambling. In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 participants who were homeless and gambled, and 18 housing and gambling service providers.

Participants described how they struggled with the effects of social exclusion and homelessness. They described how gambling and gaming venues provided comfort,
relaxation, sociability and a sense of belonging not accessible in other areas of their lives. These experiences eased their sense of vulnerability and suffering, facilitated a sense of connection and belonging, and opened up opportunities for the development of potentially beneficial social networks. Gambling also provided social spaces to resist socially defined identities and reconstruct identity in terms of legitimacy and inclusion. While service providers argued that gambling could exacerbate financial and housing concerns, participants viewed their gambling involvement as a way to develop social connections that might provide resources and opportunities to improve their lives, and perhaps eventually lead them home.

Keywords: homelessness, gambling, social exclusion, identity, place, social capital.

Introduction

Homelessness is becoming an increasingly common reality for people within Australia and internationally. At the 2006 census over 100,000 Australians were reported to be homeless, (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008), while up to a million more were argued to be at risk of homelessness (Yates and Milligan 2007). Abundant research has now shown that homelessness is intrinsically linked to exclusion from social, economic and political realms (Daly and Silver 2008; Johnson et al. 2008; Pleafce 1998; Somerville 1998). Social exclusion is driven by structural inequalities that foster disadvantage, such as a lack of affordable and secure housing, low basic income levels, inadequate employment and educational opportunities, inadequate health and support services, and restricted access to leisure, community organisations and political processes (Beer et al. 2007; Daly and Silver 2008; Gould and Williams 2010; Morris 2010). For those who are
homeless, the denial of access to resources, opportunities and full participation in community and society characterises experiences of social exclusion.

Notwithstanding widespread recognition of the role of these structural factors in creating conditions of homelessness, there continues to be an emphasis in society, policy and social work practice on the behaviour of individuals (Please 1998; Rose 1999). Rose (1999) observes that in contemporary societies, such as Australia, individuals are increasingly obliged to take responsibility for themselves and their property by taking personal action and by making appropriate choices to secure their home and protect themselves against misfortune. As a result, experiences of homelessness and poverty are increasingly viewed as a failure of the individual (Dalton 2002; Gould & Williams 2010). Blamed for their own fate, people experiencing homelessness thereby suffer stigmatisation, discrimination and exclusion from many areas of society (Byrne 1999; Flatau et al., 2010; Johnson et al. 2008; Please 1998).

Through the ascribing of negative identities and stereotypes, stigma plays a strong role in the social exclusion of disadvantaged groups (Byrne 1999; Sarup 1994). Stigmatised identities, such as ‘homeless people’, create feelings of failure and low self-worth, and attract socially debilitating discrimination, disconnection and alienation (Antonetti and Horn 2001; Rogers et al. 2005; Zufferey and Kerr 2004). Goffman (1968) notes that those with ‘spoiled identities’ become ‘discredited persons’ instilled with social ‘failing’ (see also Farrugia 2009; Lipmann et al. 2004). Such identities disempower people denying their individuality (Horsell 2006; Shier et al. 2010), their capacity for change (Sarup 1994; Zufferey and Kerr 2004) and their ability to take an active role in shaping their own lives (Parker and Fopp 2004).
Not only must people who are homeless contend with the consequences of exclusion from mainstream society (Johnson et al. 2008; Please 1998), but research shows they often also endure multiple disadvantages such as poverty, mental and physical illness, substance abuse, addictions, violence, trauma and other issues (Buhrich et al. 2000; Flatau et al. 2010; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2009). These accumulating life histories inevitably become interwoven with everyday experiences and relations to shape present lives, as Habermas (1972) notes. The complexity of needs and issues people experiencing homelessness must contend with adds to their vulnerability and suffering, while exacerbating their homelessness and exclusion from participation in wider social worlds (Goodman et al. 1991; Lipmann et al. 2004; Mallett et al. 2005; Mental Health Council of Australia [MHCA] 2009; Plead 1998; Robinson 2005).

The lack of a secure and stable home undermines a person’s ability to fulfil expected social roles and responsibilities and function effectively in contemporary society (Lipmann et al. 2004; Plead 1998). Home is more than a shelter; it is also a place of safety, security, stability and comfort (Mallet 2004; Wardhaugh 1999). Home fosters a sense of identity, community and place; of acceptance, belonging and inclusiveness (Rapport and Dawson 1998; Somerville 1998). A person’s association with home is enmeshed with social networks of family, neighbourhood, community, and the social capital resources they provide (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu (1986) argues that social networks play an essential role in people’s lives facilitating care and support within and among groups. Members reinforce norms, values and understandings, and through their shared networks their skills and abilities are supported and nurtured (Bourdieu 1986; Daly and Silver 2008). Social networks are maintained through shared
interests, participation and reciprocity (Onyx and Bullen 2000; Putman 2000). In this way, home and its community plays a critical role as a safe and social place and space for the building of social capital resources, opportunities and support.

People experiencing homeless are not only denied access to home and community, but are also commonly denied access to public and social spaces, and relegated to hidden or ‘homeless spaces’ (Casey et al. 2010; May et al. 2007; Wardhaugh 1999). All the same, research has shown that people who are homeless continue to seek social connections and support despite their alienation (Goodman et al. 1991; Robinson 2005). In this regard, it is considered especially important for people who are homeless to find places that are safe, stable, supportive and sociable (Goodman et al. 1991; Robinson 2005). Social research recognises the importance of alternative social spaces and places away from problematised and obligated settings. Oldenburg (1999), for example, argues that alternative places enable the building of broad and diverse associations and social networks that can cultivate social connectedness and an advantageous social life. Such places provide opportunities to relax, connect and feel included in social settings and communities. Gaming venues, such as clubs and hotels, focused on the provision of hospitality in amenable social settings have long been considered such places in mainstream Australian society (McMillan 1996; Oldenburg, 1999; Productivity Commission 2010).

While research has confirmed the substantial negative impacts that gambling problems can create, especially on those who can least afford it (Blaszczynski and Nower, 2002; Dickerson et al. 1996; Lipmann et al. 2004; Shaffer and Korn 2002), considerable research has also shown that gaming venues provide accessible social environments and
opportunities to engage in enjoyable leisure activities often not readily accessible in other places (Hing 2006; McMillan 1996; Productivity Commission 2010; Rogers et al. 2005). For people who are isolated and disconnected, gambling has been shown to facilitate a sense of connectedness, acceptance and belonging in social cultures that share common interests and similar beliefs and values (Brown and Coventry 1997; Lipmann et al. 2004; McMillan 1996; Trevorrow and Moore 1998).

However, research exploring the role of gambling and gaming venues in the everyday lives of people who are homeless is lacking, especially how gambling might relate to social exclusion concerns. Lacking too are the voices and perspectives of people who are homeless and the service providers who support them (Lipmann et al. 2004; Shier et al. 2010). This study explored the experiences and perspectives of people who were homeless and gambled. An interpretive, qualitative study was undertaken in Northern NSW with 17 participants who were homeless and gambled. Participants took part in in-depth interviews and a focus group. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 18 housing and gambling service providers who, as key informants, could provide further knowledge and perspectives.

**Experiences of social exclusion and homelessness**

Social exclusion emerged as a major concern for both participants and service providers. Service providers, in particular, argued that people experiencing homelessness are excluded from so many aspects of social life that many no longer feel part of their communities, or indeed mainstream society. One service provider stressed:

> Everywhere homeless people go they are excluded. We’re talking about community all of the time but we don’t act like a community, and homeless people are certainly not part of that community
they talk about. And yet mostly they have ended up in this situation simply because of the roll of the
dice; homelessness can happen to anyone. It depends on the hand that has been dealt, the structural
stuff, the economy, the lack of affordable housing, people’s level of family support…

Reinforcing the critical role of structural inequality and circumstance in creating
conditions of homelessness, participants and service providers repeatedly sought to
reconcile what they viewed as conflicting social discourses of community cohesion,
caring and support, alongside the lived realities of isolation, alienation and exclusion.
Loss of relationships, social support networks and a sense of belonging were repeatedly
highlighted. The suffering and vulnerability that accompanied these losses was keenly
felt, as these participants’ comments suggest:

When you lose your home you lose your whole life in a way, the life you knew, everything. You get
pushed aside, you know. You lose your roots.

I had to move out … I just couldn’t afford it anymore … and you lose a lot of friends and that
support. You’re not one of them anymore. … There’s nowhere to go and nothing to fall back on. It’s
just miserable.

A sense of social isolation and disconnection from others and from the wider community
permeated participants’ accounts of homelessness. Their exclusion was described, not
only as deeply traumatic, but as conflicting with understood social ideals of community
cohesion, mutual support and reciprocity.

In their interactions with a wide range of people, participants described being judged as
lacking not only the material requisites for inclusion, but also the necessary personal
qualities, as the following participant said:
You feel like you’re always being judged. … Yeah, people turn their nose up at people like me.

Man, the way they look at you sometimes - you just feel like shit! … Worse still if they know you gamble.

Many participants believed they were looked upon as failures and ‘somehow less worthy’. Participants and service providers alike observed that this perceived lack of social worth contributed to an erosion of self-esteem and identity, which further marginalised and excluded them. One participant explained:

People say ‘ah, homeless person’, ‘bum’, not worth the time or effort. And they keep on walking.

Linked with social stereotypes of ‘homeless people’, this objectification and ‘Othering’ was noted to create discrimination and stigmatisation. Participants emphasised that being visibly homeless contributed to everyday living conditions fraught with vulnerability and risk, especially in public places:

Its not safe without a place to go. I’ve been beaten up, spat on and pushed around by security and people in the street. You don’t have any rights. You’re worthless … just a bag of garbage.

Plenty of times I’ve had to leave town, just up and walk away because someone wants to beat you up. They don’t want you around. That’s why I travel so much. Sometimes its best to keep moving.

Viewed as different, undesirable and outsiders, these participants described feeling rejected because of their visible poverty and homelessness. As such, a reliance on public spaces was deemed problematic. Participants talked of the pervasive sense of vulnerability and fear that accompanied the use of public spaces and their ‘need to be off the streets’ as much as possible to avoid the derision that their homelessness produced. In this regard, the use of sanctioned spaces in which to safely go about their everyday life was of ongoing concern.
Most reported that their ability to draw on family and friends was limited and imbued with challenges, obligations and expectations. Along with public spaces, the homes of family and friends were described by most participants as also being problematised zones of marginalisation and exclusion. One participant said:

I used to be pretty tight with my family and friends before this happened, but we’ve drifted apart. It’s too hard on them and on me.

Experiences of gambling and homelessness

For participants experiencing homelessness, gaming venues were conversely seen as safe spaces for relaxation, leisure and sociability. Their homeless identities were believed less visible and they felt a greater sense of safety and inclusion.

It’s safe and warm inside. They look after you. The club is a place to go to get away from all the dark stuff; have a few drinks, relax, be okay for a while, not out on the streets or wherever. When you haven’t got a home you don’t get that.

No-one sees you as a homeless person when you’re gambling. You can forget all that for a while. … and no one tells you you’re not welcome. You’re just like everyone else, having a good time, a few laughs.

Gambling and gaming venues not only provided comfort, leisure and enjoyment for participants, but were recognised as alternative spaces where the harsher realities of social stigmatisation, and problematic life situations and vulnerabilities, could be temporarily suspended. Thus, participants and service providers alike suggested gambling provided opportunities and experiences not available in other areas of participants’ lives. A number of service providers also proposed that gambling was a way of challenging exclusion from other social realms, as the following service provider argued:
Gambling comes from loneliness and a big part of homelessness is the isolation and the meaningless, especially being told you don’t belong in all the normal places people go to.

Gambling was viewed as a way, of not only overcoming isolation and hardship, but of connecting socially with a wide range people and gaining a sense of being accepted and included. One participant explained:

Gambling was a way to be with people and not feel left out. There were other players there, other people playing the pokies. You could easily fit in, be part of the group. I think for me it was a way of connecting, having somewhere to go where I could feel at home.

All service providers believed that maintaining and building social networks and some sense of community is especially important for people experiencing homelessness, not only to overcome isolation and vulnerability, but to also assist their ongoing survival and moves towards stable housing, employment and other needs.

It’s the social connection stuff that is really important for homeless people and that can be hard - not only coping with everyday life but finding ways to go forward, to improve their situations. Many are extremely isolated and some feel they can only get that sense of community and belonging through gambling.

Participants described how comforting it was to be engaged in gambling activities and the relationships it facilitated. By managing social proximity and distance in these mediated relationships with other patrons and venue staff, and encouraging relatively uncomplicated yet nurturing relationships, participants developed a sociality that suited their complex and changing needs, while masking their homeless identities.

Gambling I think is one of those things where you can be around people who don’t expect too much. I can go to the pub and have a drink and a chat, put a few dollars in the pokies but leave when I want. You’re with people, but not with them. And mostly that suits me.
People can be hard work, families, friends. It can bring you down too much. I never have that with poker. We don’t get too close – the rule is ‘respect each other’s space’.

Participants described feeling respected and included in these social groups, while maintaining their sense of anonymity, distance and control. Established rules of engagement were said to assist experiences of mutual consideration, reciprocal benefit and a sense of inclusion in perceived communities of gambling. Within these communities, homeless identities were recast in ways that enhanced self-esteem, self-worth and a sense of inclusion, as the following participant said:

Its one of the few places that I’m worth something. I know the dogs, I’m respected on the track. Sometimes I win a bit. And people look up to me, say ‘what’s your secret?’ and things like that.

Participants observed that gambling also provided conceivable ways of winning and being successful which gave a sense of hope for future resolution of housing problems and a return to social legitimacy and inclusion. For instance, the following participants suggested:

Maybe I’ll win the jackpot and buy myself a house and some respect. …It will be my ticket back in.

You meet a lot of new people, get to talk. You hear about things … things that can help you out. I’ve picked up a bit of work here, more than once.

Notwithstanding the opportunities and social resources gambling seemed to offer, it was also recognised by most participants to have its problematic side. Despite the personal and social benefits, some suggested their gambling had also created additional problems, sometimes further exacerbating their housing problems, and further isolating them from family, work and community. One participant explained:
The danger is that gambling is also a way of shutting out the world, of isolating yourself even further. It was just me and the poker machine much of the time. I just wanted to get as far away as I could.

Because of the considerable negative affects problem gambling can have, service providers consistently viewed gambling as harmful and inappropriate for people who are homeless, even as a way of building social networks and opportunities for greater inclusion. One service provider believed that gambling could not provide a desirable level of connection:

I think with the clubs quite often there’s a sense of community, it’s safe, it’s got a lot of people, it’s got a nice layout. And it’s that community there, but it’s pseudo-sociability. It’s like ‘I’m around people but I don’t have to deal with people, and especially homeless people, they’re being served by people. It’s like they’re getting some sort of connection and respect that they wouldn’t get in their normal social status. It’s a level of engagement with others but it’s often not at a deep level.

Service providers voiced concerns, not only with the negative impacts gambling could have, but also with the nature of relationships formed through gambling. Generally, they considered a ‘deep level’ of engagement was important to nurture the kind of caring and supportive relationships participants sought. Service providers and some participants concluded that these relationships were somewhat limited in their capacity to sustain advantageous social networks, redefine their social identities and build the social capital resources needed to address their social exclusion in the wider world.

Yet, participants had a different view, arguing that given the overwhelming difficulties experienced in being homeless and social excluded, gambling participation provided at least partial access to advantageous social networks and resources, as well as inclusion in secure places and cultures of sociability, where as one participant suggested, ‘I could feel
at home for a while’. In this way, gambling provided a means of remaining partially engaged in the society from which they had been excluded. It also gave them a sense of hope for the future; a sense that they would move out of their homelessness and back into the world they were denied, as the following participant reasoned:

While I was playing, I felt like I had one foot in the world … I could still make my way back.

**Discussion**

Both participants and service providers in this study identified social exclusion as a critical concern. In this regard, our findings concur with an extensive body of research acknowledging the negative role of social exclusion in the lives of people who are homeless (Gould and Williams 2010; Horsell 2006; Robinson 2005; Pleace 1998; Shier et al. 2010). In this study, participants and service providers alike spoke of the complexity of issues and needs experienced by those facing homelessness within the current neo-liberal framework. The role of structural factors (a lack of housing supply and affordability, entrenched disadvantage and poverty) along with cumulative life histories and experiences, all merge to shape current life experiences (Beer et al. 2007; Habermas 1972). In this study, these factors had far reaching impacts on each participant’s ability to maintain secure housing. Compounding this, participants believed they were viewed as fundamentally lacking self-responsibility, regardless of their personal circumstances and access to resources (Dalton, 2002; Gould & Williams, 2010). The stigmatisation and social exclusion accompanying their homelessness left them with eroded social networks and ‘spoiled identities’ (Goffman 1968).

Despite its potential pitfalls, gambling appeared to provide participants with the kind of beneficial opportunities and resources widely recognised in other gambling research
(Brown and Coventry, 1997; Productivity Commission 2010; Trevorrow and Moore 1998). Gambling and gaming venues provided a form of escape, a way to cope with their difficult lives, a sense of hope for improved situations, and a sense of belonging and of inclusion. And while some may view this escape and hopefulness as illusionary - because on leaving their gaming venue they were still homeless – for a while at least participants felt they were in a position to develop social connections and support that would not only improve their experience of everyday life but enable them to be included in alternate and legitimate social worlds. Through gambling, participants were able to utilise safe and nurturing spaces that eased their vulnerability and suffering, provided enjoyable experiences often not available in other areas of their life, opened up opportunities for the development of social networks and access to resources, and facilitated a sense of connection and belonging within a shared social community and culture.

However, some service providers considered the relationships formed through gambling would be problematic in terms of providing supportive relationships and advantageous social networks that would facilitate inclusion in wider social worlds. Nevertheless, the social connections forged through gambling were highly valued by participants and resonated with the kind of shared norms, respect and reciprocity that Putman (2000) identified as being crucial for fostering a sense of connectedness and belonging. For these participants, gambling represented a strategy to develop their social capital through connections that might provide resources and opportunities with the potential to improve their situations and lives as (Bourdieu 1986).

Gambling also provided social spaces for these participants to enact resistance to socially defined identities of ‘homeless person’ that boosted their self-esteem and enabled a
shaping of identity in terms of legitimacy and inclusion. Within their gambling communities at least, these participants were not ‘discredited persons’ with ‘spoiled identities’ (Goffman 1968). Gambling provided advantageous social places and spaces for renegotiating social inclusion, in at least one socially sanctioned realm.

**Conclusions**

Gambling is commonly viewed as one of the ‘self-destructive survival tactics’ that Robinson (2005:8) and others argue can compound social exclusion and move ‘homeless people further from home’. Certainly, the service providers in this study argued that gambling was problematic for people experiencing homelessness, contributing to loss of finances, isolation from the support of significant others, and compounding conditions of homelessness and social exclusion.

Yet, participants presented a more challenging view. While most acknowledged the negative affects gambling could have, they also espoused the beneficial role that gambling and gaming venues could play in assisting them to reconstruct their identities, develop their social connections and access potential resources and opportunities. In this way, participants’ experiences of gambling resonated with Bourdieu’s notion of building social capital by seizing ‘the energy of [the] social’ as a way of addressing the deep structural inequalities in their everyday lives (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:119). This active stance and desire to move away from the margins resonates with notions of personal agency and like other research, challenges assumptions of passivity and deficiency amongst people who are homeless (Farrugia 2009; Gould and Williams 2010; Parker and Fopp 2004; Shier et al. 2010). In this regard, the findings of this study suggest
that experiences of gambling by those experiencing homelessness may be more complex than commonly conceived.

For participants in this study, gambling was not viewed as further decline in a ‘cycle’ or ‘pathway’ of accumulating homelessness, as some research suggests (Antonetti and Horn 2001; Johnson et al. 2008; Mallett et al. 2005; Rogers et al. 2005). Rather gambling appeared to be a way of embracing beneficial experiences and opportunities, while resisting negative identities and rejection from legitimate places and social networks. Indeed, participation in gambling was generally conceived as an active and empowering step towards greater social inclusion and perhaps eventually towards home.

**References**


