

## Young Adults' Stories of Gambling in a Research Situation: A Narrative Inquiry

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**Abstract** Narrative research is rarely undertaken in the field of gambling research. For this reason, the present study used narrative methods to explore young adults' personal accounts of gambling in a research situation. It had three interrelated aims: namely (i) to delineate the gambling-related identities of young adults; (ii) to examine how these gambling-related identities were constructed; and (iii) to identify the use of narrative techniques that contributed to narrative credibility. Study participants were young adults aged 18–24 and living in Tasmania. Data were collected through telephone interviews and written stories. A reduced data set comprising one interview transcript and two written stories was selected for the purposes of intensive analysis and publication. The analysis shows how participants who supplied this data set explained and justified their involvement in gambling, managed their identities and endeavoured to construct a shared reality. Some methodological issues arising from the study are discussed.

**Keywords** Gambling · Identity · Credibility · Young adults · Narrative · Interview

The gambling industry is now well established in Australia. Rather than being seen as a vice undermining personal integrity and social cohesion, gambling is increasingly viewed as a common recreational activity that is for the most part unproblematic. Nonetheless, controversy persists. Proponents of the industry highlight its benefits to the economy, contribution to tax revenue and the widespread enjoyment of gambling as a leisure-time pursuit (Novak and Allsop 2009). Critics contend that the individual and communal resources devoted to gambling

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could be better used elsewhere and that the costs and the benefits of the industry are unevenly shared (Eadington 2003; McMillen 2006; Samuelson 1970). They also express concern about the addictive potential of non-strategic games and particular technologies (Doughney 2007; Livingstone and Woolley 2008) and the damage done by problem gambling; i.e., gambling that has moved beyond the bounds of recreation and has the potential to affect not only the gambler, but members of the gambler's family and/or the community at large (Australian Productivity Commission 1999).

Although debates about gambling are vigorous and persistent in academic and industry publications and in the media at large, studies exploring public attitudes are scant. Survey research recently conducted in the UK suggests that in this jurisdiction at least, members of the adult public still hold conservative and ambivalent views. On the one hand, they mostly support people's right to gamble and oppose prohibition. On the other hand, there is still a general view that gambling brings more harm than good to individuals, families and the community overall (Orford et al. 2009). Australian studies present a similar picture. According to Moore and Ohtsuka (1999), young adults (mean age 22) tend to approve of moderate gambling but at the same time feel that gambling is excessive and that gambling opportunities are too readily available. More recent data gathered in the state of Victoria likewise suggest that members of the adult public perceive gambling as a serious social problem and favour stronger restrictions on the supply of gambling services (Centre for Gambling Research 2004).

### Gambling and Self-Presentation

Increased gambling opportunities and the attenuation of social and legal constraints mean that gamblers must now set their own limits on gambling expenditure and take personal responsibility for the consequences of their gambling behaviour. They must also decide when, and to what extent, they will discuss their gambling with others. Self-disclosure entails risk, and in light of public ambivalence (see above), they may reasonably anticipate some degree of stigma and discrimination. Problem gamblers are especially vulnerable to censure and rejection given that they are likely to be seen as lacking in self-control, and by extension, as having made some contribution to their own predicament (Feldman and Crandall 2007; Reith 2007). Unsurprisingly, studies report that these gamblers often conceal or deny their difficulties and seek solutions independently (Evans and Delfabbro 2005; Hing et al. 2012; McMillen et al. 2004; Tavares et al. 2002).

In light of the above, it is of interest to explore how gamblers actually construct their identity in particular social situations. Goffman (1967) suggests that all behaviour can be understood in terms of self-presentation and that social activities give people opportunities to portray themselves in a favourable light. By implication, it is reasonable to assume that individuals who discuss their gambling with others will strive to present a preferred self-image. In a similar vein, identity theorists (e.g., Burke 1991; Stryker and Burke 2000) contend that people who encounter or infer social stigma can regain a sense of cognitive congruence by changing their social circumstances and/or their personal attributes. When these options are impractical or unpalatable they may need to rely on narrative identity construction; i.e., the creation of a life story which embodies their preferred self-image and elicits respect.

Specific techniques of stigmatized identity management (e.g., separating oneself from less desirable group members and avowing non-stigmatized identities) have now been identified in groups such as the homeless, transsexuals, delinquents and violent offenders (DeWard 2007; Juhila 2004; Mason-Schrock 1996; Presser 2004; Sandberg 2009; Snow and Anderson 1987; Sykes and Matza 1957). A recent and small-scale study of (self-identified) professional poker

players indicates that gamblers may use similar techniques (Radburn and Horsley 2011). According to the authors, these professionals invoke various membership categories (e.g., those of gambler, non-gambler, grinder and maverick) to counterpoint and illustrate their own style of play. By elucidating category attributes, they are able to separate themselves from other gamblers and simultaneously, to position themselves as undertaking a legitimate and productive activity with skill and self-control.

Verbal negotiations over issues of identity are often denoted by the term “talking back”. Juhila (2004: 263) defines talking back as “...acts which comment on and resist stigmatized identities related to culturally dominant categorizations and which have the function of presenting the difference between one’s own self or a group and the dominant definition.” As she points out, talking back does not necessarily involve a forthright disavowal of the stigmatized identity; rather, the possibility of alternative identities may be raised gradually and indirectly as conversation proceeds.

### **Gambling in Australia: The Case of Young Adults**

In Australia, the age of eighteen is a chronological marker for adult identity and rights. At this age, adults can legally gamble. Studies concerned with young adults’ gambling suggest that these individuals are at risk. According to the Australian Productivity Commission (1999), adults aged 18–24 have the highest prevalence of regular (weekly) gambling and the highest prevalence of gambling-related problems relative to all other age groups. A more recent study of Australian apprentices reaches similar conclusions (Dowling et al. 2005). An obvious question arising from these findings is why young adults are so attracted to gambling. Various possibilities are canvassed in the literature; for example, it is suggested that young adults are highly exposed to wagering opportunities; also that gambling is a means for managing the stressors of early adulthood and gaining acceptance from peers (Delfabbro and Thrupp 2003; Dowling et al. 2005; Moore and Ohtsuka 1999).

A further possibility is that gambling constitutes a form of self-presentation which contributes to the construction of a desired adult identity. Holtgraves (1988) explores this idea in depth, suggesting that two related but conceptually distinct types of identity may be in play; namely, (i) a general identity derived from engaging in gambling; and (ii) more specific situated identities derived from gambling in particular ways. According to his argument, many actions carry social meaning; i.e., there is a consensus regarding their identity implications. This consensus allows people to infer their self-image from their behaviour, or alternatively, from how they believe that their behaviour appears to others. For example, gambling involves risk-taking, and in some cultures and circumstances at least, risk-taking is positively valued. By implication, people who gamble may infer a positive self-identity whereby they are daring and venturesome rather than timid and restrained.

### **Aims and Methodological Framework of the Present Study**

Building on the above, the present study was exploratory and geared to explore how young adult gamblers managed their identities in a formal research investigation. It had three general and interrelated aims. The first was to delineate the nature of the identities constructed in the context of the research interview and in written stories subsequently supplied at the interviewer’s request. The second was to consider how these identities

were constructed (e.g., whether individuals attempted to rebut negative categorizations of gamblers or invoked their own category system in order to define and justify their personal style of play). The third was to identify narrative techniques with implications for narrative credibility. As various theorists point out, individuals who wish to convey their personal experiences to others must firstly engage their audience, and secondly, ensure that their stories are plausible, even when they are primarily recounting subjective events (e.g., thinking, feeling, intending and remembering) that can never be observed or verified. When these two ends are not achieved, the reliability of the storyteller and the significance of his or her experience may both be called into question (for discussion, see Gudmundsdottir 1996; Ochs and Capps 1997; Scott and Lyman 1968).

With reference to methodology, the present study drew on the principles and concepts of narrative theory; in particular, the notion that personal identities take shape when people verbally account for their behaviour. The life-story model of identity formulated by McAdams (2008) provided an underpinning framework. Essentially, this model suggests that people living in modern societies start to construe their lives as evolving stories as they progress through late adolescence and early adulthood. These stories incorporate narrative models and conventions learnt in the wider society and may change significantly as people accumulate new experiences, forget or reinterpret the events of the past and interact with different audiences in different settings. Following the premises of discursive theorists (e.g., Billig 1987; Juhila 2004; Reynolds and Taylor 2004), people's stories were expected to reflect the wider cultural milieu and to draw on common strands of argument regarding the topic addressed.

The significance of the study lies partly in the fact that narrative approaches are rarely used in the field of gambling research. Even when they collect data in qualitative mode, researchers usually deploy more standard forms of thematic analysis which ignore contextual and social interaction effects and privilege narrative content over narrative structure and style. In addition, narrative approaches have not yet been widely applied to the study of identity, as this pertains to gamblers in general and young adult gamblers in particular.

## Procedure

As indicated above, the present study targeted young adults living in Tasmania. Advertising materials indicated that individuals were eligible to participate if they were (i) occasional, regular or longstanding gamblers; (ii) between 18 and 24 years of age; and (iii) had gambled at least once for money in the last 3 months. Thirty-four men and seventeen women eventually consented to participate. Three were interviewed face-to-face and the rest were interviewed by telephone. In all but three instances the researcher was the interviewer. At the start of the interview, participants supplied demographic information and completed the Gamblers Anonymous 20 Questions [GA 20] measure. A score of seven or more on this measure indicates that the respondent may have a gambling problem. The rest of the interview was semi-structured in format, with participants being encouraged to discuss their personal experiences and understandings in regard to gambling. All interviews were audio-taped with participants' permission. In seven instances, individuals who mentioned unusual or interesting gambling experiences (e.g., instances of high betting) were requested to expand their comments in writing. Although a topic area was negotiated, no stipulations were made in regard to the way this task was undertaken.

## Data Analysis

### The Empirical Data Base

In a preliminary review undertaken by the researcher, participants' experiences and understandings regarding gambling were considered with reference to the principles and concepts of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a broad construct denoting a family of methods for interpreting written texts or verbal utterances (Polkinghorne 1995; Riessman 2008). This being said, theorists using this form of analysis tend to explore the individual story in depth, rather than fragmenting a number of stories into thematic categories. In some instances they interrogate an extended response to a single question. Alternatively, they focus on an extended interchange that is preserved and treated as an analytic unit (Riessman 2008:12; Riley and Hawe 2005). Both approaches were taken here.

The need to present data in depth obviously precludes an extensive citation of individual interview transcripts and written stories. A reduced data set comprising one interview excerpt and two written stories was thus selected for the purposes of intensive analysis and reporting. The three participants who supplied this data set obtained GA 20 scores <7; i.e., they were formally classified as recreational gamblers only. It is important to note that the reduced data set was not selected because it was representative of the data corpus overall, but rather because it demonstrated some of the diverse ways in which gambling-related identities can be constructed. Participants' linguistic skills and consequent ability to convey what it was like to be in their storied world constituted a further selection factor, given that the study aimed in part to illuminate some of the narrative techniques that allow narrative credibility to be achieved.

### Analytic Parameters

The researcher conducted the intensive data analysis since she had been the primary interviewer. This procedure is appropriate given that the interpretive process begins when the research interview starts (Riessman 2008). To illuminate the various ways in which identities were constructed, the analysis was broad in scope. Specifically, participants' written stories were considered with reference to plot development, the storytelling voice, the representation of character and place and stylistic features such as diction, syntax and rhetorical devices. A central point of enquiry was how different characters were positioned in relation to each other through story design, dialogue and/or meta-narrative activities. The interview transcript was also considered with reference to the verbal interchange between the interviewer and the interviewee; in particular, the nature of the interviewer's responses and the interviewee's capacity to define the conversational terrain (for discussion, see Deppermann 2013; Norrick 2008).

It is important to stress that the analytic findings presented below reflect the personal views of the researcher. As Barry and Elemen (1997) point out, to a greater degree than many other approaches, narrative theory assumes that words and stories are ambiguous, and that subjective, heterogeneous interpretations are the norm. Stories which are polyphonic or multi-voiced are especially likely to evoke conflicting views, since authority over meaning is "dispersed and embedded" and the author does not have the final word (Riessman 2008: 107). More specifically, narrative theory assumes that the interpretation of words and stories will inevitably be coloured by audience characteristics (e.g., people's personal history and values, cultural background, interests and knowledge base). Consonant with this assumption, a consensual viewpoint was not sought in the present study; however, it did incorporate a peer debriefing

process, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985: 308). This process helped to ensure that the researcher did not misrepresent participants' remarks or neglect to consider some interpretive possibilities.

## Findings

### Presentation of Findings

Findings from the analysis are outlined below. In essence, they show how three participants constructed their identity as gamblers and the manner in which this was done. As recommended by Morrow (2005), the data are presented in detail to help the reader engage in consensual validation. Participants' anonymity has been protected by altering or removing particular dates and details and replacing real names with pseudonyms. On some occasions, minor dysfluencies (e.g., grammatical errors and repetitions) have been removed to promote brevity and clarity. The interview excerpt includes the words of the researcher and also a private observation she made at the time. This is in keeping with a dialogical approach and embodies the belief that quotations including contexts of production (e.g., audience input) are most likely to persuade (Riessman 2008: 191).

### Case 1: Alice

Demographic data obtained in the context of the research interview indicated that Alice was 18, Australian born and single. As a tertiary student with part-time employment, her annual personal income before tax was low (i.e., < \$25,000). Her GA 20 score was 1. As indicated below, she started her gambling career by visiting the casino on her eighteenth birthday and continued to enjoy a variety of gambling activities. Throughout the research interview, she repeatedly gave primacy to the social aspects of gambling, but at one point she did concede that money mattered and was "... part of the fun." Although she acknowledged that gambling had risks, she was unequivocal in regard to her enjoyment, self-control and determination to continue: "I don't have any intentions of stopping—I don't find it a negative thing."

A bounded segment of the research interview is presented below. It includes the beginning of the interview and terminates at a natural breaking point. At this point, a freestanding "So" indicates that Alice (A) has said her piece and now desires feedback or guidance on how to proceed (De Fina 2009; Norrick 2008).

I: Well, maybe with the interview part we might start historically, about when you first started to gamble and what you were interested in and what triggered you to start at that particular time.

A: Oh, OK. On my eighteenth birthday, my older brother—3 years older, he was twenty-one—took me to the casino and we played roulette for a while. And he taught me how to play.

I: Uh-huh.

A: And, you know, we just did that eighteenth birthday kind of thing for a while. I had a go at roulette and put a few dollars in the pokies, and had a look at blackjack and all that kind of thing. Just going round to check it out. And I found I really enjoyed roulette because, uh, we knew where to go and how to play. Because our dad works in the gambling industry.

I: Oh, OK.

A: So I feel pretty at home there, you know. We stayed at them both throughout my childhood—obviously not at the casinos, but they have the hotel section as well. So, I think a lot of people don't consider or get into it because they are not really familiar with the environment. But it was quite a natural thing for me. So I enjoyed playing the double or low stakes roulette. You only have to bet a dollar or two dollars or whatever.

I: Yes.

A: So you know, my brother had the right idea, and I do as well, I think, where you sort of treat it [gambling] like the same way you pay \$20 or \$30 to go bowling or whatever. For a few hours of entertainment, you take your \$20 or \$30 and play carefully and you know, you have a bit of fun. And if you win, then that's good. And if you don't, well, you don't expect to, so it doesn't matter. And I find it relaxing, and fun and social. So, yes, it's good.

I: So, you've had a bit of a flutter on a number of casino games and the pokie machines as well?

A: Yeah, yeah. I had to go to bet... I don't play blackjack because... I can play the game but I find it goes too quickly and the stakes are always a bit high, so I never really do that. I prefer roulette, And... I always put, like, a dollar in the pokies, because I have really good luck with them. But it's not really fun and it's too stacked against you for me to consider spending much money on them.

I: The pokie machines are too stacked against you?

A: Yeah. Yeah. Whereas roulette...

I: What is it about roulette that's particularly attractive to you?

A: Well, I play the ones where it's a human spinning it, so I don't feel like it's... You know, if you're playing against the machine, it's quite a different experience as far as I am concerned.

I: Uh-huh.

A: But, um, there are ways to, you know, structure your bets in roulette where you can cover your bases and there's different strategies. There's more to it than just sitting there and pulling a lever or pressing a button, you know. So even if you don't win anything, you've still, sort of, put thought into it and gone out and interacted with people. For me, it's another activity like bowling or the movies or anything like that.

I: So you're saying it's more intellectually complex than playing the pokie machines?

A: Ah... Yeah. [pause]. I suppose I'd agree with that. Yeah. *(Tone here indicates uncertainty)*

I: Uh-huh. And you're also saying that part of the enjoyment is the social component. So you are saying it's not like playing the machines. Can you explain that a bit more? It sounds like the social interaction is important to you in roulette.

A: Well... Yeah. Part of it is that I probably wouldn't go alone. I'd usually take a friend or a family member. We'd go together. But even if I was there alone, you know, you are at the table with maybe four or five other people. And you all sort of congratulate each other on a win or lament if none of you win. And if zero comes up it's a big deal. It's just a bit of fun. Whereas if you're sitting at a pokie machine, it's just sort of mindlessly pressing a button.

I: OK

A: It's very extreme. And I suppose there could be a social aspect with people sitting near you, but, um, not in a way that really grips *me*. So.

As indicated in the transcript, the interviewer begins by asking about the interviewee's first gambling experience. The interviewee responds by indicating that gambling was a rite of

passage on her eighteenth birthday and that she spent the evening at the casino with her older brother. Her initial comments refer to her brother's mentorship, her preliminary inspection of the activities on offer and her enjoyment of low stakes roulette. These details establish that she is a novice with limited income and portray her as a person who is curious but restrained.

The conversation then shifts to an explanatory mode as the interviewee discusses why gambling was "a natural thing" for her to do. Her statements suggest that her father's employment in the gambling industry made her familiar with the casino environment and hence more confident about gambling in this setting than other young people may be. At this point in the interview she also starts to justify her gambling, answering inferred questions rather than ones that have actually been asked. Her proactive behaviour obviously suggests that she anticipates criticism and is seeking to pre-empt it. In brief, she argues that gambling is one recreational option among many and that its costs can be appropriately gauged with reference to what would be paid for alternative forms of entertainment or sport. This philosophy allows her to relax and have fun—losses do not matter and winning is a bonus.

Subsequently she compares the costs and benefits of different gambling modalities, noting differences in regard to their odds, pace, complexity, the minimum outlay required and the extent to which they are social. She goes on to explain that she particularly enjoys roulette because it permits calculated betting and social interaction. Her description of the emotional interplay and bonding between roulette players, coupled with the claim that she would not go alone, indicate that she actively incorporates a social dimension into her gambling and complies with situational norms regarding expressive performance (for discussion, see Holtgraves 1988). On the basis of these details, it is reasonable to conclude that gambling constitutes a forum where she can hone and display her social skills and betting strategies. EGM (pokie) players serve as negative referents as her self-portrait unfolds. They are stereotypically depicted as gambling in isolation and as "mindlessly" pressing buttons on machines which are "stacked". Her explicit rejection of machine-based roulette can be reasonably interpreted as a distancing device: in contrast to EGM players, she is not in thrall to machines.

Overall, the interviewee positions herself as a discerning consumer of gambling products and as a player who is smart in a social and intellectual sense. She does not deny that gambling poses financial risks; rather, she sets limits on her expenditure and treats her losses as reasonable payment for the benefits she receives. The citation of specific dollar amounts lends credence to her claims. Her interpretive framework not only serves to pre-empt criticism of her gambling to date but permits her to gamble in the future, given that disapproval flowing from internalized norms or others in her social environment is essentially rebutted in advance (for comment, see Sykes and Matza 1957). It is important to note that the interviewer does not contest the interviewee's statements. Instead, she reiterates their content and makes minimal responses to show that she is attentive and wants the interviewee to hold the floor.

## Case 2: Ben

Demographic data indicated that Ben was an Australian born male aged twenty-two. Because he was a tertiary student and had part-time employment only, his annual personal income was low; i.e., < \$25,000 before tax. His GA 20 score was 4. His gambling career started after he turned 18 and began to play poker with school friends. The combination of drinking, socializing, play acting and competition brought him considerable enjoyment: "Sometimes we all got dressed up—tailcoats and stuff. Got right into it!" At the time of the research interview, he played various table games at the casino but maintained a preference for poker on the basis that it had a "style factor" and was less random than other games. Conceding that he

and his friends had had their “dumb moments” over the years, he nonetheless believed that they still took the same approach: “It’s just a bit of fun, not a means to an income.” Because he needed money to fund travel and other interests, he did not foresee that he would ever gamble to excess.

His written story is one of biographic change. Essentially it describes an incident of high betting that underscored the possibility of financial loss and altered his attitudes and behaviour:

Here is a detailed account of my negative experience at a roulette table. In the long run, this has been a positive experience, as I am now far more aware of the possibility of losing money.

I went to the casino in Hobart just to have a fun night out with my girlfriend (who doesn’t gamble herself, but doesn’t mind if I do it every so often). We had a quiet drink together before I decided to go and have a go on the roulette tables. Initially I used the electronic rapid roulette option, and made use of a strategy I had read about on the internet. In this strategy, one places the minimum bet onto a 50/50 place on the roulette table such as black or red. If this is lost, the bet is then doubled for the next spin. This is continued until it eventually hits, and then the bet is returned to the minimum for the next game. I played like this for a while, winning approximately \$60. I went and had another beer, and then went back to play more roulette. As the rapid roulette tables were full, I used the physical table. I had a large amount of cash on me in preparation for using this strategy. I won approximately another \$50 before the trouble started. I put \$5 on red, and in short there was a large streak of black. My bets went as follows (\$)5, 10, 20, 40, 80, 160, 320, 640 before I finally hit the red. During this time, I felt none of the fabled gambler’s rush of excitement, only feelings of nausea and dread. In my fluster, however, I had accidentally miscounted and bet \$320 twice instead of doubling it. Should I not have made this mistake, I would have had \$640 on the table one spin earlier and it would have lost, so therefore this mistake saved me from losing the lot! So for the night, I ended up losing approximately \$200, a minor loss compared to the 1,000 or so dollars it very nearly was. An old man next to me even said, “You’ve got some serious cabbage betting that much, matey”.

Since this night, I have barely gone near a roulette table, and in the times I have, it was only to double \$5 in order to purchase another beer.

Hope this helps, and feel free to email me with any questions or clarifications. Hopefully others can learn from this!

In this extract, the writer appears in two guises. Initially, he is the protagonist in an incident involving reckless betting at the roulette table. Later, he is an older and wiser person who recounts the events of the night from his present perspective. The text has a satirical edge. Unlike the “fabled” gambler who is excited but composed, the earlier self is apprehensive and bumbling and only manages to avoid financial disaster by virtue of a flustered miscalculation. The transformative power of his unexpected train of losses is lexically underscored by terms emphasizing the rapidity and magnitude of the behavioural changes that follow (e.g., “since that time”; “barely”). Nonetheless, a subsequent passage indicates that the writer (later self) still plays roulette in the hope of covering the costs of a beer. Concluding meta-narrative remarks highlight the story’s educative potential and position the interviewer as a conduit to other gamblers who are at risk. In addition, the writer expresses a desire to assist the interviewer and signals his willingness to elaborate on request.

The story positions the writer as a competent gambler in a number of ways. Firstly, the writer himself asserts that on the basis of firsthand experience, he is now keenly aware of the potential for financial loss. This assertion, coupled with his satirical depiction of his former self

and his emerging doubts about gambling lore (e.g., the notion of the gambler's rush), imply that he is unlikely to bet so naively and recklessly again. Secondly, by suggesting that his story has an educative potential, the writer effectively distances himself from people who are, or may become, problem gamblers. Simultaneously, he aligns himself with the interviewer, who is presumed to share his educative agenda. Thirdly, the text indicates that although the writer has not relinquished gambling, he has nonetheless reflected on his experiences and moderated his behaviour accordingly. He still hopes to make money, but has downsized his bets. In sum, he positions himself as a person who is venturesome and fun-loving but nonetheless able to exert self-control. It is reasonable to conclude that he will continue to dabble in gambling but is unlikely to develop serious problems because he is reluctant to sustain large losses and has self-management capabilities.

The credibility of the story—and by extension, the writer's identity construction—is enhanced by a range of writing techniques. These include lively expression (e.g., the use of exclamation marks for emphasis), the provision of vivid descriptive detail (e.g., the itemizing of amounts won and lost) and the drawing of comparisons to inject humour and nuance (e.g., the earlier self's apprehension stands in contrast to “fabled” notions of the gambler's rush). The citation of direct speech likewise assists, partly by drawing the reader into the storied world. Of particular note here is the onlooker's suggestion that only people with “serious cabbage” (i.e., lots of money) would bet so freely. This anachronistic slang implicitly confirms that the onlooker is “old” and allows his statement to the earlier self to be interpreted as an indirect query fuelled by fatherly concern. The quirky and unusual nature of the slang also suggests that the onlooker's statement has lingered in the writer's mind; i.e., the reader is subtly led to believe that the story is devoid of creative artifice and objectively reports the events of the night (for discussion, see Edwards and Potter 1992).

### Case 3: Shaun

According to the demographic data supplied, Shaun was an Australian born male aged nineteen. As a tertiary student with episodic part-time employment only, his annual personal income before tax was low; i.e., < \$25,000. His GA 20 score was 6; i.e., he was on the threshold of a problem gambler categorization. During the interview, he revealed that he enjoyed various forms of gambling but primarily aimed to win money. In recent months he had become increasingly involved with scratchies since they were cheap, readily available and promised a “quick fix” in relation to ongoing money problems. His remarks suggested that they were often an incidental purchase and not necessarily synonymous with gambling: “You get a scratchie when you get the newspaper, to make it up to \$5.” Overall, he did not regard his current gambling as problematic since he had little discretionary income to spend and could abstain without problem at his partner's request: “It's not winding me up.” Nonetheless, he acknowledged that he found gambling pleasurable and conjectured that he might spend more on casino and sports gambling if his income increased.

His written story concerns his scratchie involvement and describes a tussle between emotion (optimism) and intellect (realism). In contrast to claims made earlier (see above), it reveals some perplexity and concern:

Before I buy a scratchy I feel like I'm going to win. Obviously, otherwise I wouldn't buy one. But it's weird, like I think that, “This one's going to be a big winner, because the last one wasn't.” I go into the newsagency and buy one, most often a five dollar crossword scratchy. Sometimes I leave it for a bit, to build the anticipation. Sometimes I forget about it completely and only scratch it after I remember I bought one. Most of

the time I scratch it as soon as I get in the car. While I'm scratching, I feel like it's a winner. That seems to be the way, especially with crossword scratchies. They build you up with all of the letters, only to give you a 'Z' or a 'Q' on the last scratch panel. Then when I don't win, I always calculate how much I would have won if I had have gotten one letter instead of another. It's normally a lot, which I find kind of amusing. On the other hand, if I win, it's never more than twelve or fifteen dollars. And then I cash it in, generally buying another scratchie with my winnings, pocketing whatever's left over. It seems like a bit of a cycle I suppose.

So that's my scratchie habit, a weird childish form of gambling that is affecting me in what I feel are minor but incredibly annoying ways, especially financially. I'd like to spend my money on something worthwhile, but I need to shake the feeling of "I'm going to win next time." And I feel like that's harder than it sounds.

In this story, the writer reports buying scratchie tickets because he *feels* he is going to win. He *knows* that this is irrational, since he has never won a major prize before. Mostly he scratches the ticket immediately, but to prolong the period of anticipation, he sometimes puts it aside. The sense that he will win persists as he scratches, even though he fully appreciates how the technology is designed: "They build you up with all of the letters, only to give you a 'Z' or a 'Q' on the last scratch panel." When the scratching is finished, he compares his potential and actual winnings. The gap—which is typically large—is a further source of amusement as well as a sign of his foolishness. Nonetheless, his winnings are normally spent on the purchase of further tickets, thereby ensuring that the cycle continues.

In a subsequent paragraph, the writer goes on to explore the significance of these scratchie experiences. Essentially, he acknowledges that scratchies have only a minor impact on his life but at the same time expresses his annoyance about the money they absorb. The intensity of his feeling is lexically underscored by the use of the adverb "incredibly"; also by the self-criticism inherent in the suggestion that money should be devoted to things that are "worthwhile". His coda is pessimistic, indicating that it may not be easy for him to put the idea of winning aside. This suggests that he has a sense of vulnerability and is unsure what the future will bring.

Throughout this story, the writer is wryly observant of himself. He regards his attachment to scratchies as irrational but nonetheless struggles to desist. Words such as "weird" and "childish" indicate that he finds his behaviour puzzling and incongruous in light of his emerging adult identity. Although his annoyance regarding money is emphasized, key questions are unaddressed. For example, it is not clear why he finds the prospect of winning so enticing or why opportunity costs are a source of such concern. These omissions may signify a degree of mystification (for discussion, see Scott and Lyman 1968), or simply a failure to appreciate how further information would contribute to understanding.

The gambling literature suggests some ways in which the writer's experiences can be interpreted. For example, it is reasonable to surmise that he has developed an unanticipated dependency on scratchies and has a disconcerting sense of internal divide. As Reith and Dobbie (2012) point out, intense desire is sometimes experienced as alien to the self: "...it is a case of *not* wanting to want what you want." Alternatively, he may simply enjoy contemplating a big win, even though knows that this is unlikely and that money will be lost. Empirical studies support this interpretation as well, suggesting that daydreams about winning are reasonably common in the gambling population and constitute part of the pleasure that gambling confers (Abbott and Volberg 1999; Thomas and Lewis 2011).

The credibility of the story—and by extension, the writer's identity construction—is once again enhanced by particular writing techniques. For example, the systematic and detailed discussion of shifts in writer's thoughts and feelings helps to create a sense of factuality and to

convey the private and solitary nature of his scratchie experiences. The gentle self-satire suggests that he is frank rather than defensive, and by implication, that he is telling the truth as he sees it. The self-satire also serves to deflect stigma, in the sense that his susceptibility to the lure of a win is trivialized and the reader is led to feel amusement rather than concern. As indicated above, the personal meaning of this story is not tightly nailed down. This helps to promote engagement, in the sense that readers have scope to speculate and can thus make the text their own (for discussion, see Iser 1989/1993:10).

## Discussion

Narrative theory suggests that talk should not necessarily be taken at face value, but instead seen as a form of action that accomplishes something in particular social and interactional contexts (for discussion, see Riessman 2008:12–13; Sandelowski 1991). In the present study, what is achieved is the construction of a positive personal identity. Two of the young adult gamblers under scrutiny (Alice and Ben) depicted themselves as competent consumers who made reasoned assessments of gambling technologies, favoured some of these technologies over others and in general, managed to obtain enjoyment without significant harm. Each of these participants preferred games where they could choose how much to bet, perhaps because this increased their sense of agency and allowed them to infer that they were shrewd and self-determining players and would be seen as such by others. Each acknowledged that they sometimes lost money, but portrayed their losses as inconsequential on the basis that they either involved small and affordable amounts or were a feature of the past rather than the present or the future. The third participant (Shaun) provided a more complex and nuanced account of his gambling, and by implication, a slightly more ambiguous identity construction wherein he was generally competent but struggling to curtail his involvement with scratchies.

Overall, participants' comments support the notion that in modern consumption and service-based economies, consumption preferences provide a basis for claims regarding identity (Majamaki and Poysti 2012). Allusions to fun, excitement, socialising and winning money are consonant with the way gambling is advertised and (sometimes) portrayed in literature and film (Holtgraves, 1998; McMullan and Miller 2010; Milner and Nuske 2012). They also testify to the fact that Australia is a modern and affluent society with hedonistic and pecuniary values and one where many people have time and income to spare. It is important to note that while participants enjoyed gambling, they also acknowledged various risks. Partly for this reason, their long-term involvement is not easy to predict. As recent longitudinal findings (Delfabbro et al. 2013) make plain, young people's participation in gambling rises rapidly as they move from adolescence to adulthood and can legally take part in the commercial activities available. The rise is not maintained, perhaps because real-life experiences of gambling allow those involved to gauge its likely outcomes more accurately.

With reference to the issue of how an identity is constructed, findings from the present study show that young adult gamblers have a variety of narrative techniques to call upon. These include: challenging accepted definitions of gambling; advancing self-categorisations; describing formative experiences; positioning oneself towards an audience and/or characters within a story; using humour to shape interpretative responses; and articulating a personal philosophy or approach. A further technique is to discriminate between particular categories of gambling; for example, to affirm negative judgements of certain types of gambler but to insist that these judgements do not apply to oneself. Current evidence (see above) does not suggest that these techniques are peculiar to gamblers; rather, that they are likely to be deployed whenever stigmatized individuals talk back to a dominant contemporary value system.

With reference to narrative credibility, it is clear that people are not at liberty to create any story they please, either in a research situation or elsewhere. As indicated above, they need to consider what will be regarded as possible or probable as well as what will be deemed appropriate by way of linguistic style. They also need to encode their personal experiences in ways that are engaging and persuasive. Exemplifying these imperatives, the three participants who contributed to the reduced data base did not simply recount their gambling experiences; rather, they used direct speech and concrete details to bring these experiences to life. They spoke and wrote in straightforward and confiding ways, avoiding sentimentality and dramatic excess. In general, they conveyed their identity by describing their thoughts, feelings and behaviour in particular situations, rather than by relying on ungrounded authorial claims and predictions. This choice is important, not only because abstract and global claims are vulnerable to challenge but because audiences are more likely to be sceptical if they sense that their responses are being forced.

Four of the present study's methodological limitations warrant mention in conclusion. The first is the use of telephone interviews. Although telephone interviews help to contain costs and facilitate contact with people who are geographically dispersed, they do preclude access to nonverbal aspects of communication that may negate or modify what is verbally expressed (Buck and VanLear 2002). The second is the use of a single interview. Repeated conversations are likely to yield richer data, given that interviewees may become sufficiently confident to eschew stock responses (Riessman 2008: 26; Wiersma 1988). The third is the interviewer's reliance on a collaborative editing style. This style is appropriate when study participation is voluntary and it is necessary to ensure that informants do not become hostile or defensive (for discussion, see Marvasti 2002; Scott and Lyman 1968). Nonetheless, it precludes generalization, given that self-constructions may be different in other social situations where the audience is more sceptical or challenging. The fourth relates to participant attributes. As indicated above, the three young adults who contributed to the present study possessed good oral and writing skills. This raises an important aspect of narrative research; namely, the premium placed on linguistic abilities and the consequent potential for bias. As Gudmundsdottir (1996: 300) points out:

Informants are often keen to please their researchers, who in turn are desperate for good data. In these cases, the scene is set for compelling stories that sparkle in their narrative truth.

## In Summary

Narrative approaches have to date been somewhat neglected in gambling research. This is surprising, firstly because the storied nature of human experience warrants attention in its own right and secondly because narrative research permits diverse lines of inquiry. The present study is obviously small-scale and exploratory in nature; however, it does indicate how young adults who are formally classified as recreational gamblers construct their gambling-related identities in the context of a formal research investigation. Future studies may build on its findings by exploring how young adults who are problem gamblers construct their identities, not only in the context of research but in other social situations.

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**Informed Consent** All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number H0012593, and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000 (5). Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

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