Problem gambling and drinking among Finnish women

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ABSTRACT

AIM – This qualitative study expands on female problem gambling by examining short online narratives written by Finnish women. Problem gambling is analysed within the familial context in order to discover gendered roles and practices, and in relation to substance use and abuse in women’s lives. DESIGN – Two sets of qualitative data were used in this study. The first set was collected from two online discussion forums, and the second set was extracted from an online counselling service data in 2008. Chosen messages formed short narratives of women’s problem gambling trajectory (51 cases). The data were analysed in accordance with the content analysis method. RESULTS – Women had started gambling either in adolescence or in adulthood. Most of the women played on slot machines or gambled online. The lack of coping skills, stressful events in life and troubled relationships made the women more vulnerable to gambling harms and other addictions. In some couples, partners were either drinking or gambling. This made the women’s lives even more complicated, because they could not count on their partners’ help and support. The women tried to hide the consequences of their problem gambling for fear of losing their significant others. CONCLUSIONS – Female gambling and female problem gambling are complex concepts influenced by social, cultural and political factors. This study has shown in its limited framework that female problem gambling is related to the gambling environment, the social acceptance of gambling and the regulation of gambling operations within the place of jurisdiction.

KEYWORDS – women, problem gambling, drinking, addictions, family, short online narratives, content analysis method

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Introduction

Problem gambling is generally considered to be a public health issue. The assessment of gambling-related harms and comorbidities is generally carried out using quantitative data and analyses. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the number of qualitative investigations into gambling has grown (e.g. Li, 2007; Casey, 2008; Tepperman, 2009; Corney & Davis, 2010a, 2010b; Gavriel-Fried & Ajzenstadt, 2012; Reith & Dobbie, 2013). The application of qualitative methodology can be especially relevant in studies focusing on topics such as addiction, which may encompass individual, interpersonal and intergenerational distress, coping and social problem-solving. On the other hand, the inclusion of gender in gambling studies may highlight the ways in which different social and cultural roles, practices, situations and norms are in fact gendered. Personal accounts (e.g. interviews, diaries, written autobiographical stories) allow researchers to put forward “less visible and vocal understandings found in the more personalized settings of everyday living” (Edwards & Ribbens,
Qualitative research can thus provide new insights into specific issues, while a deeper understanding of these issues benefits scholars, experts and policymakers alike.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to expand on female problem gambling by examining short online narratives written by Finnish women. These narratives were posted to two online discussion forums created for problem gamblers and one online counselling service dealing with different types of addiction. Gender-specific research (especially on women) has been a less emphasised field of research in Finnish gambling studies, even though gender has been a growing perspective within international gambling studies since the 1980s (e.g. Custer & Milt, 1985; Lesieur & Blume, 1991; Mark & Lesieur, 1992). In this study, the topic of problem gambling is analysed within the familial context in order to discover gendered roles and practices. In addition, problem gambling is studied in relation to drinking in women’s lives.

The following research questions guide the qualitative analysis: 1) What specific factors may predispose women to problem gambling? 2) How is drinking related to problem gambling in women’s short online stories? 3) What is the impact of problem gambling on children? 4) How are financial losses and debts dealt with by couples?

Background

So far, the topic of “gender” in gambling studies has been related to women because of the scarcity of research on female gambling and problem gambling before 1990s. Earlier most of studies ignored gender issues and focused on the aspect of male gambling. As Hing and Breen (2001, p. 48) put it, non-gender-specific research ignores “how, why, when and where women gamble and the impact this has”. The interest in female gambling and problem gambling has proliferated since Mark and Lesieur (1992) criticised the lack of adequate studies on female problem gamblers and the generalisation of findings on male problem gamblers. However, Custer and Milt (1985) had already pondered “the female compulsive gambler”, focusing on how female gamblers differed from male gamblers, on whether the causes of addiction were the same for both women and men, and on how feminine or masculine the personality was of a problem gambler. Lesieur started studying female “pathological gamblers” in the 1980s by interviewing them on their gambling history, the relation between gambling and other addictions and their treatment histories (Lesieur & Blume, 1991).

The increase of female gambling and problem gambling in certain Western societies has been explained by the phenomenon of “feminization” (Volberg, 2003; Svensson, Romild, Nordenmark, & Månsdotter, 2011). Many studies have referred to this particular phenomenon when focusing on various social and cultural factors that would explain why the historically masculine activity has been embraced by women. At the same time, Parke, Rigby and Parke (2007) have pointed out the “de-masculinization” of gambling, which refers to the acceptability of female gambling especially due to the presence of female poker players in poker tournaments covered widely by the international media some years ago. The latter concept presup-
poses that gambling has been and still is a masculine activity and form of leisure. Despite more women gambling and becoming problem gamblers, men gamble more regularly and more often than women according to prevalence studies (Svensson et al., 2011).

Previous research findings on gender differences have indicated that women tend to start gambling later in life than men but that they become problem gamblers in a shorter period of time (the “telescoping effect”) (cf. Hallebone, 2002; Toneatto & Nguyen, 2007). Some women may start gambling because they are looking for fun and action, while others gamble because they are bored, feeling lonely or depressed about their lives. Lesieur actually found a “gendered split”. At first, Lesieur formulated that men were “action gamblers” and women “escape gamblers”; later he found that men, suffering from loneliness due to their profession, could also seek escape through video poker (Schüll, 2012, p. 196).

The dichotomous representation of gambling has created many stereotypes that exaggerate the perceptions of either the masculinity or the femininity of the gambler. Masculine stereotypes include the “professional gambler” and the “big spender with a big ego”, while feminine stereotypes are depicted as “little old ladies” in bingo halls and blue rinse hairdos in casinos (Hayano, 1982; Lesieur & Blume, 1991; O’Brien Cousins & Witcher, 2007; Schull, 2002). The disparity represented by the stereotypes can be based on a social “double standard” (Custer & Milt, 1985); men’s gambling has been perhaps disapproved of, but tolerated, whereas women’s gambling has not received any understanding. Nowadays it could be assumed that some of the social and cultural barriers that prevented women from gambling have been lifted. Yet not all women feel comfortable in gambling venues (e.g. betting shops, casinos) frequented by men: women still prefer spaces where they can gamble safely (Hing & Breen, 2001).

The beginning of problem gambling among women is generally associated with stressful life situations and coping difficulties, traumatic experiences in childhood or later life, and with financial difficulties (e.g. Li, 2007; Boughton & Falenchuk, 2007; Nixon et al., 2013; Dowling, 2014; Cunha & Relvas, 2014). According to previous research findings, female problem gamblers may suffer from mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, but also from eating disorders (cf. Boughton, 2003; Boughton & Falenchuk, 2007; Dowling, 2014). Other studies have indicated that female gamblers drink and use drugs less than male gamblers. Furthermore, female problem gamblers often have poor relationships, live in difficult relationships, and their partners may have substance abuse or gambling problems (cf. Boughton, 2003; Boughton & Falenchuk, 2007).

Some researchers have questioned the validity of the gender variable. According to the “gender-as-proxy hypothesis”, gender “is a proxy for factors commonly associated with gender rather than being a direct risk factor”, and thus there is a “failure to specify the mechanisms underlying (gender) differences” (Dowling, 2014, p. 203). Also, gender may predict the problem gambling trajectory among treatment-seekers, but more precisely gender predicts the age of gambling initiation, which influences the problem gambling
trajectory (Nelson, LaPlante, LaBrie, & Shaffer, 2006). At any rate, gender differences in gambling may not be unconditional. Rather, they may change along with new money games, the exigencies of social life and with cultural evolution influencing gendered norms.

As gender can be understood as a social and cultural construction of femininity and masculinity (Svensson, 2013), it can be assumed that both male and female (problem) gambling has been studied with gendered presuppositions about gender differences. For example, why fewer women gamble than men has been explained by traditional gender roles and sex-role socialisation (cf. Delfabbro, 2000). Despite the modernisation of gender roles, women are still bound to various gendered roles, practices and conventions depending on women’s social and cultural position, as defined by age, class, ethnicity and race (e.g. O’Brien Cousins & Witcher, 2007; Casey, 2008; Gavriel-Fried & Ajzenstadt, 2012). This position, in the community or in the society at large, may have an impact on how female gambling is perceived by others and by women themselves.

Data and methods
Two sets of qualitative data have been used in this study. I collected the first set of data from two Finnish-speaking online discussion forums created for problem gamblers. Both forums were open communities, which means that anybody could browse and participate in the discussions without mandatory registration. Men seemed to write on the online discussion forums more often than women, but in the case of the online counselling service the difference seemed insignificant (cf. McGowan, 2003). The data (N=48) were collected in 2008, comprising messages posted between 2002 and 2007. The A-Clinic Foundation’s ethical committee granted permission to use their message data for the purposes of this article. The moderator of the other online discussion forum allowed me to use messages written by female problem gamblers. The second set of data was offered to me for research by the kind permission of the A-Clinic Foundation in 2008. These data include more than 500 messages on different addictions sent to a Finnish- and Swedish-speaking online counselling service between 2003 and 2008.

Finnish women posted one to several messages in online discussion forums, but usually only one message to the online counselling service. Messages that formed a short narrative of an individual gambling career, the development of gambling problems, and included experiences of drinking (or references to other addictions) were chosen for the analysis. In total, 33 short narratives were analysed from the first dataset and 18 short narratives from the second dataset (N= 574). All the excerpts used in this article were anonymised in order to protect the research subjects (cf. Järvinen-Tassopoulos, 2011): the letter D refers to the first dataset and the letter E to the second dataset.

The data were prepared, organised and analysed in accordance with the content analysis method (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013; Cho & Lee, 2014). Using an inductive approach, I formulated preliminary codes for the concepts and themes that emerged from the data. Preliminary codes were then organised into different categories. After carefully reflecting upon and revising these codes, I decided on...
the final categories (factors predisposing to problem gambling; problem gambling and drinking in couples; the impact of problem gambling on children; and consequences of financial losses and debts for the couples).

Results

Background

Gambling starts in approximately two different periods in Finnish women's lives. Many women started to gamble in adolescence, which was made possible by the low age limits for gambling in Finland, while others discovered gambling in adulthood, when they were introduced to or initiated into online gambling sites, mostly based outside of Finnish jurisdiction (cf. Järvinen-Tassopoulos, 2012; Cisneros Örnberg & Tammi, 2011). When women wrote in the online discussion forums and to the counselling service, they typically already had serious gambling problems (e.g. debts, loss of credibility, relationship problems) or they had tried to stop gambling but had relapsed. The majority of women played on slot machines or online casino games before they started to develop gambling problems.

Predisposing factors to problem gambling

Adolescence can be defined as a crucial period for gendered identifications: these identifications are actively constructed in specific social and cultural contexts (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Connell, 2000). It also means that childhood comes to an end. Many first experiences occur during adolescence and they may predict later problems with gambling, drinking and drug use (Preyde & Adams, 2008). Adolescents living in families where parents are alcoholics or problem gamblers are at risk of developing related problems themselves (Briggs & Pepperell, 2009; Gupta & Derevensky, 2008).

Hallebone (2002, p. 385) argues that “pre-existing problems and coping styles are likely to be key factors in developing harmful patterns of gambling”. The lack of adequate coping skills can be explained by a troubled childhood or youth, stressful events and social or financial difficulties in life. In this study, a few women mentioned their childhood in a family where at least one of the family members was an alcoholic. Deficits in social problem-solving skills can be associated with an individual’s problem-solving experience, which can relate to personal issues, difficulties in interpersonal relationships and problematic social situations (Siu & Shek, 2010):

I’ve been a problem gambler since adolescence. At worst, my problem gambling has made me lose my credit status. I’ve had difficulties coping with my life. When I go to a supermarket or a bar, I need to play on slot machines. Recently, I’ve started to gamble online. I feel trapped, because I prefer gambling to eating. I’ve tried to get help. The psychiatrist didn’t take my problem gambling seriously: he said that I was depressed. I also drink: I don’t drink often, but when I do, one bottle is never enough. (E355)

A few women who had consulted a physician or a psychiatrist were diagnosed with depression. Usually this diagnosis was felt to be a misinterpretation of their real problem. Although there is evidence of comorbidity between female problem gambling and psychiatric conditions (Boughton &
Falenchuk, 2007; Afifi, Cox, Martens, Sareen, & Enns, 2010), these women wanted to obtain help to stop gambling. As a result, they did not purchase the prescribed medications, even though they suffered from anxiety and insomnia. In general, all the women reported strong negative feelings after they had again gambled all their money or relapsed. 

Women who had started to gamble heavily in adulthood wrote about difficult life-changing events, such as the death of a close one, loss of employment, relationship problems and divorce. In a couple of cases, problem gambling was a current problem and it had been preceded by drinking problems, or it was one problem among other addictions.

I’m hooked on slot machines. I started gambling some years ago when I moved out from my partner’s home after a very nasty breakup. I’ve suffered from depression for many years and it’s been diagnosed as chronic. I’ve been on sick leave for a couple of months. When the sick leave ends, I’ll apply for a disability pension. I can’t afford gambling anymore. How to get rid of it? I’m getting desperate. I’m very much alone, because my friends live in another town. Loneliness seems to be the reason why I gamble. (E327)

Gambling is not only a way to escape unhappy memories, difficult relationships or loneliness (cf. Li, 2007), it is also a potential substitute for activity in an environment where gambling is socially accepted. Playing on slot machines in a supermarket can be a perfect way to hide the obvious problem without anyone noticing it.

It seems that women who lack coping skills due to a family history of alcoholism and mental health problems may be more vulnerable to addictions. Loss of control over gambling can be associated with coping styles based on problem solving or focusing on emotions (Scannell, Quirck, Smith, Maddern, & Dickerson, 2000).

Gambling addiction is my main issue, because I’m a single mother and our household depends on my income. I have other problems as well, such as compulsions, and I’ve suffered from depression and overeating. I’ve overcome drug and alcohol abuse. I was sober for many years, but I’ve been drinking during the past year. My brother has a severe drinking problem: he’s been told that if he doesn’t stop drinking, he won’t live for very long. My father drinks, but not as heavily as my brother. My mother tried to commit suicide, because she couldn’t cope with those two anymore. (E109)

The childhood family is “generally the most influential shaper and regulator of an individual’s behaviors and beliefs” (Preyde & Adams, 2008, p. 8). Women may be affected by addictions because they replicate an intergenerational pattern of gambling or drinking in their personal lives, and they have been obliged to take a caretaking role already in their childhood (Zelvin, 2002). Drinking can become a way to relax from overwhelming problems and the loss of control of one’s life.

Drinking can be related to gambling
For some couples gambling and drinking are intertwined. Drinking while gambling
online may seem harmless at first, but it may end in making bad decisions. Gambling online while intoxicated can lead to chasing losses (Hing et al., 2014), but also to exceeding the personal gambling budget and the misuse of responsible gambling tools.

Yesterday I closed my online gambling account for good because our playing got out of control. I had chosen a limit to my account, but of course we gambled up to the limit in a very short period of time. So I opened a new online gambling account without limits. I played on slot machines and got back 20 euros. My partner was less lucky... Because I was a little bit drunk, I didn’t notice that he had gambled his whole salary away. Then he suggested that we should take instant loans. I disagreed, because we haven’t paid off the previous instant loans. (D13)

In this excerpt, the partner suggests instant loans to continue gambling. Over the past decade, instant loans have become a popular form of credit among Finns, because it is easy to apply for them by mobile phone and on the Internet, but they have also caused over-indebtedness problems for many (Makkonen, 2014). In general, this instant form of credit has been used for necessities (e.g. food, rent, mobile phone bills), hedonist consumption (e.g. drinking, gambling) and for other reasons (e.g. rent deposit, reimbursement of previous instant loans) (Autio, Wilska, Kaartinen, & Lähteenmaa, 2009).

If both partners are problem gamblers, it may increase the couple’s tensions due to disagreements and arguments on spending. Other problems, such as drinking, can provoke more conflicts in the family.

My relationship with my partner has been distant following the birth of our youngest child. I’ve been looking for an escape from my current situation by gambling heavily. I still have a job, but what will happen if someone finds out about my gambling debts? Day and night I fear that I’ll be exposed as a problem gambler. My partner is a short-tempered problem gambler. He plays online poker all around the clock. I try to work normally and take care of the children. There’s no love or understanding in our relationship not to mention respect. When I was pregnant, my partner called me names after having drunk several beers during a poker session. I don’t go anywhere beside my workplace and the grocery store, so his behaviour increases my anxiousness. (D15)

In this excerpt, the female partner of a problem gambler has become a problem gambler herself. Salonen and colleagues (2014) argue that the gambling behaviour of the concerned significant others (CSO) parallels the gambler’s gambling behaviour. Also in a Norwegian study, the frequency of gambling problems was higher among CSOs than non-CSOs (Wenzel, Øren, & Bakken, 2008).

Problem gambling has been related to the risk of domestic violence (physical and verbal abuse), intimate partner violence and anger problems (e.g. McComb, Lee, & Sprenkle, 2009; Affi, Brownridge, McMillan, & Sareen, 2010; Wurtzburg & Tan, 2011; Korman et al., 2008; Dowling et
al., 2014). Having problems with drinking and gambling harms the whole family, and the parents may lose custody of their children temporarily or permanently:

I don’t have anybody to encourage me. Perhaps gambling is, in my case, longing for encouragement. My children’s father is a binge drinker, and he’s sober at the moment. I don’t even dare to live under the same roof with him. Our children live in a foster home. I do need to gamble my sorrows away, don’t I? (D29)

This short online narrative reveals that both partners had been alcoholics. After having been able to stop drinking, the female narrator had discovered gambling. Being a recovering alcoholic, having suffered from other addictions in the past, feeling lonely and having lost the children to child protection services may hinder women’s problem-solving abilities and coping in everyday life. They can also prevent women from making plans for a sober and gambling-free future.

The impact of problem gambling on children
According to the background information that women gave in their short online narratives, most of them lived in a relationship and had children. A few women were single with or without children. Some women reflected on motherhood, parental duties and trust issues. These reflections describe their concern for their children’s wellbeing, but also their struggle to balance problem gambling and parenting.

Today I decided that I’ll never gamble again. I’ve closed some of my online gambling accounts. Altogether I’ve opened accounts in 20 virtual casinos. I feel that I ruin my children’s life by gambling online and not spending enough time with them. Then I snap at my children and my partner when I’ve lost my money online. (E406)

Being physically and emotionally present with children can be difficult when gambling has become an addiction (Corney & Davis, 2010b; Wurtzburg & Tan, 2011). The women felt guilty because of their behaviour and the time lost, but they also knew that there would be less money for living expenses and leisure (including holidays).

The issue of eating was common among young stay-at-home mothers with infants or small children. Becoming a mother can be a turning point that serves “as the end point of one role and the beginning of a new one” (Anderson & Bondi, 1998, p. 165). Nevertheless, it may be difficult to stop gambling if it has begun during childhood or adolescence.

I’ve had a gambling problem since childhood. I used to gamble all the money I could get hold of. Now I have a child and I must pay the rent. Sometimes I pay it late, but at least I pay it. I just can’t stop playing on slot machines. If I’m alone in a supermarket, I gamble my money and my partner’s salary away. I leave some money for the groceries, because I realise that I must feed my child. (D23)

Low income and poor budget management can have a serious impact on children’s
health and welfare. In some families, both parents lived on social benefits, which made the whole family’s financial situation precarious. Children in problem gamblers’ families can be seen being “at high risk for neglect”, which may be physical, educational and emotional (cf. Hovarth & Pierce, 2002). Material and financial losses can lead to not having food and losing a home (Darbyshire, Oster, & Carrig, 2001).

Sometimes children helped (with or without their consent) their mother to hide her gambling problems from their father or keep her away from gambling opportunities. Mothers also confided in their children rather than in their partner. In a few cases, it seems that children and mothers changed roles, especially in the case of school-age children and grown-up children.

I finally got the courage to tell about my gambling problems to my two adult children. They helped me financially. I can’t tell about my problems to my partner, because he’d leave me immediately. But it hurt when my children told me that they couldn’t trust me anymore. I need to gain their trust back. (D20)

In the process of “parentification” (Tepperman, 2009), children are obliged to parent their parents (e.g. children watch over their mother when she is gambling online). Adult children may also adopt the role of “family peacemaker” and become the confidante of the non-gambling parent (Patford, 2007). As trust issues can create conflicts in the relationship with the partner, they can also harm the relationship between mothers and children. In some cases, adult children may be obliged to pay the parents’ bills (Patford, 2007). In this study, in a couple of cases women had suicidal thoughts because they could not stop gambling and clear their debts. They felt that their family would be better off without them even though they felt sorry for their children.

Dealing with financial losses and debts of the couple

Finnish women who were stay-at-home mothers and unemployed were usually dependent on their partner’s income, although they were entitled to different social benefits (e.g. child allowance, child home care allowance). In quite a few cases, the women were responsible for the household budget.

The distribution and the use of the available financial resources seem to relate to the issue of power for the couple. According to Connell (1987, p. 107) power “may be a balance of advantage or an inequality of resources in a workplace, a household, or a larger institution”. Gambling problems weaken women’s position in the couple, especially when their only income is based on “earmarked monies” such as social benefits, which may establish or maintain inequality (Zelizer, 1994, p. 26).

Nevertheless, not all the partners had the “earning power” (Tepperman, 2009) in the couple: some of them were also unemployed or students.

Even though many women were employed or they were otherwise wealthy, problem gambling changed the financial balance in the couple. These women could hide their gambling habit better than women with a very low income and still be able to participate in the household’s expenses.
Before I decided to stop gambling, I lost thousands of euros in shopping, gambling and other unnecessary things. That’s why I wrote to this online discussion forum, because I don’t dare tell my partner about my relapse. I can’t stand the yelling and the pity. A year ago when my partner caught me out gambling, I had to give my money and my debit card to him, because my gambling was compulsive. Now I’m in the same situation. What can I say? Gambling is like alcoholism: when you’re on the wagon, you can’t even take a sip or you fall off again. (D27)

Partners’ reactions varied from disappointment to rage: they questioned the unpaid bills, were convinced of the remorse of their gambling partner and forgave her, and/or felt intense resentment, anxiety and rage. The fact of having to fear a partner’s reaction may hinder women’s attempt to stop gambling. Sometimes partners may use separation as a threat in order to make the gambler give up gambling (Krishnan & Orford, 2002):

My partner had a dream: he wanted to buy a sports utility vehicle (SUV). He thought it was also my dream, but in fact my dream was to win money as much as possible. Some years ago we started to save for the SUV. My partner has always been quite careless in financial matters, so I took care of the budgeting. I gambled our savings. When the truth came out, he was so disappointed! He left me, but for some reason he took me back. I work, but my salary is small. In addition to my employment, I deliver newspapers so that I can reimburse my partner. If I relapse, I tell him. He yells at me, I cry and I try to keep learning from my mistakes. (D43)

Partners judged female problem gamblers as morally responsible for their behaviour especially when they had debts. On the other hand, women blamed themselves and felt continuously ashamed, which inhibited them from telling the truth about their problems to their partner.

I’m in the same situation as many of you. I gambled a lot and I lost my partner and my child in the process. I never told the truth about my gambling, but my partner found out about it from the unpaid bills. I really didn’t have the courage to admit that I’m a pathological gambler. My partner can’t forgive me and he didn’t want to hear my side of the story. He told me that I’m a liar. Is there anyone who’s lost their family or has someone been misunderstood like me? (D3)

In this study, the fear of losing family seemed to be much stronger than the thought of not being able to clear the gambling debts. Women acknowledged the damage they had caused in their closest relationships. McGowan (2003, pp. 127–128) indicates that references to loss of family and relationships can be associated with “women’s abandonment of prescribed gender roles and norms” in gambling. In spite of this, most of the Finnish women in this data were able to solve their problems and keep their family together.
**Discussion**

The aim of this qualitative study was to understand the relation between gender and addiction in the short online narratives of Finnish female problem gamblers. Even though research on female gambling and problem gambling has increased during the past decades, it seems that many studies continue to examine women through gender differences defined in gambling motives and habits. Instead of taking gender differences as a standpoint, researchers could examine what factors create gendered perspectives on gambling, and what kind of differences gambling behaviour may reveal among women and men. For example, gambling marketing is full of gendered stereotypes that can be appealing to both men and women, and money games can be designed to have more feminine characteristics in order to attract female gamblers. Not all women are escape gamblers and not all men are action gamblers. New phrasing of research questions is needed to grasp the gender-specific differences.

According to Svensson (2013, p. 4), the examination of gender in gambling and problem gambling “provides a base to discuss conditions under which men and women live with regard to power, resources, division of labor as well as the constructions of femininities and masculinities”. The purpose of this study has been to expand on female problem gambling: it has shown that problem gambling complicates women’s position within the family and makes them rely on traditional heterosexual roles so that their closest significant others cannot discover the truth about their gambling. Finnish women do not justify their gambling habit by the gendered roles of spouses and mothers (cf. Gavriel-Fried & Ajzenstadt, 2012; Casey, 2008); they exaggerate these roles because most of them fear losing their family.

The short online narratives form an interesting qualitative data set for several reasons. They have been written to other online anonymous online community members and to counsellors working online. These members and counsellors are often the first persons to whom Finnish women have the courage to tell about their problem. The narratives also express an interesting “biographical discontinuity” (Goffman, 1970), which can be comprehended as a set of different and inconsistent personal identifications created by female problem gamblers who try to hide the negative consequences of their gambling habit from their significant others. Women describe their daily lives in past, present and future tenses, referring to different persons and places that have meant something in their gambling history. Thus the data is “composed of a story or fabula, comprised in actions, happenings, characters, settings, discourse or plot – the way the story is communicated” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 162).

The study at hand provides new insights into female problem gambling in Finland. First, age seems to be an understudied element in gambling studies on gender. Finnish women who posted messages in the online discussion forums and to the online counselling service were of varying ages. They had also started to gamble during different periods of their lives. An early onset of gambling can lead to problem gambling in adulthood, as in the cases of young mothers, but gambling can also become a new form of entertainment or a...
relief during difficult times for young and middle-aged women. A more thorough and comparative examination of problem gambling among women of different ages could help understand specific life stages and times when women may develop gambling problems (Holdsworth, Hing, & Breen, 2012).

The impact of structural, situational and social factors on Finnish women’s gambling is indisputable (cf. Parke & Griffiths, 2007; Abbott, 2007). Gambling is ubiquitous in Finland: slot machines and lottery games can be played in supermarkets, kiosks and petrol stations. Of course, gambling has changed a lot over the years, and online gambling was introduced to Finns in the 1990s. The availability and accessibility of gambling has made it a popular pastime in Finland. Youth gambling was legal up until 2011. Many boys and girls were introduced to gambling by their family members, though also by their peers. Furthermore, there is no evidence that women’s gambling has been a social issue in Finland, which would have harmed women’s reputation. Female gambling (and problem gambling) has been more or less an unseen phenomenon until recently.

Problem gambling was defined as an addiction by these Finnish women. Most women carried their identity of problem gambler as a stigma, because they were ashamed of their behaviour and its harmful and hurtful consequences. Yet they had to deal with it: as Goffman (1970, p. 84) writes, “The stigma and the effort to conceal it or remedy it become ‘fixed’ as part of personal identity”. This stigmatised identity made some women more aware of their childhood in families with alcohol-related problem and their personal issues with substance use when they reflected on the reasons for their addiction to gambling.

Holdsworth, Hing, and Breen (2012, p. 210) have argued that “when conducting research focused on women’s experiences, it is important that the emphasis is on women’s understandings of a given situation”. Also, counselling and treatment services should focus more on women’s experiences on gambling and problem gambling and offer gender-specific support to women regardless of their age, education, social class or ethnicity. Women should have safe places where they can share their experiences of problem gambling and recovery. These places could be peer support groups, closed online discussion communities and group meetings organised by therapists. Counselling and treatment professionals should also work closely with other experts in health and social work, child protection, debt counselling and housing division. Policy makers should take into account gender issues when deciding on prevention and treatment goals.

The qualitative data used in this study is subject to limitations. It is quite heterogeneous due to messages of different length and content. Yet the messages have been selected very carefully and have been analysed as short narratives in order to understand women’s motives for gambling, the process of problem gambling (including substance abuse or other addictions) and the impact of problem gambling (and drinking in some cases) on family members. The data were collected in 2008, which could be seen as a limitation as well, though it can also be taken as an opportunity for future research. It is not pos-
sible to carry out longitudinal qualitative research (Reith & Dobbie, 2013) with the same research subjects, but it would be interesting to gather new qualitative data from 2008 to the present. This new data would without doubt refer to changing age limits and the expansion of online gambling operations in Finland and abroad.

Female gambling and female problem gambling are complex concepts influenced by social, cultural and political factors. Thus, as this Finnish study has shown in its limited framework, female problem gambling is related to the gambling environment, the social acceptance of gambling and the regulation of gambling operations within the place of jurisdiction. It would be interesting to explore the family life of female problem gamblers and compare women’s narratives collected from different countries. Such research will shed further light on gendered roles, practices and norms in female gambling and problem gambling.

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