

Chinese migrants' experiences of responding to gambling harm in Aotearoa New Zealand

Wenli Zhang, Christa Fouché and Peter James Adams, The University of Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Forming a problematic relationship with gambling has major consequences for gamblers, families, communities, and society. As the third-largest ethnic group in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Chinese community faces increasing challenges with casino gambling. This paper reports on Chinese migrants' lived experience of their challenges and needs in responding to gambling harm.

METHODS: Sixteen recent migrants (both gamblers and affected family members) from eight families were interviewed. Data analysis comprised a comprehensive thematic approach involving multiple readings of interview transcripts and an iterative development of themes, guided by hermeneutic phenomenological methods.

FINDINGS: Participants shared their experiences of pathways into gambling and ways to respond to gambling harm. The key findings are presented as four stages, which can be conceptualised as: *misconnecting, disconnecting, reconnecting, and rebuilding natural life*.

CONCLUSION: This article presents qualitative evidence of Chinese migrants in Aotearoa New Zealand's experiences with excessive gambling and considerations for social workers, service providers and policymakers when developing programmes and policies for preventing and minimising gambling harm for this population.

KEYWORDS: Phenomenology; gambling treatment approaches; gambling harm; Chinese migrants; Chinese culture

Gambling harm is a continuing and significant public health issue (Thimasarn-Anwar et al., 2017). Casino gambling and electronic gaming machines (EGMs) are the most harmful modes of gambling compared with other modes of legalised gambling (Abbott & Volberg, 2000). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori and Pacific people have been reported as most harmed by EGMs (Dyall, 2007; Wheeler et al., 2006), while Chinese/Asian populations are most harmed by

casino gambling (Ministry of Health [MoH], 2006; Tse et al., 2012).

Chinese comprise the largest proportion of the Asian population, which makes up the third-largest and the fastest-growing ethnic community in Aotearoa New Zealand (Stats NZ, 2018). Gambling related harm is of great concern in the Chinese community and has attracted particular attention in gambling problem treatment and research

(MoH, 2006; Tse et al., 2010; Tse et al., 2012). The purposely designed addictive features of casino gambling, including the gambling environment, the features of games, and the nature of operating systems (Livingstone et al., 2014; Orford, 2020; Reith, 1999; Schüll, 2012), make it more likely for players to retreat into a dissociative zone. The sense of escape and intimacy are seen as attracting gamblers to return and to encourage them to stay longer. Research has highlighted how VIP customers are overrepresented as frequent or problem gamblers (Wohl, 2018). Additionally, in Aotearoa New Zealand, cases reported in the media reveal casinos as sites where money laundering, drug dealing, prostitution and loan sharking (i.e., lending money at a high interest rate, in some cases up to 260% annual interest) all take place (Gower, 2007; Savage, 2016, 2017).

Numerous interventions, mostly focused on medical and psychological approaches for problem gambling, have been developed over the years as researchers reported on the harm caused by casino problem gambling among Chinese (Ledgerwood & Petry, 2006; Marlatt & George, 1984; Petry et al., 2017). Research on the support needs of this population to respond to gambling harm is limited, though. This article reports on a study that was undertaken with Chinese recent migrants in Aotearoa New Zealand to understand pathways into, and out of, excessive gambling and approaches for professionals, including social workers, to effectively respond to gambling harm for this group.

Casino gambling and Chinese migrants

The practice of targeted ethnic marketing to attract Chinese customers to casinos is well known and widely practised. Target marketing strategies that aim specifically at attracting Asians or Chinese in particular, include offering free bus rides, cheap buffets, gambling coupons, employment of Chinese-speaking dealers, and building more casinos

near Chinese communities (Wong & Li, 2019). Cultural symbols have also been employed to target vulnerable populations. Casinos in Aotearoa New Zealand have applied ethnic and indigenous cultural icons to create a sense of familiarity which lure people into the venues by means of cultural objects such as large-scale Māori carvings at entry points and displaying the image of a dragon dance around the Chinese New Year festival (Dyall et al., 2009).

A 2012 qualitative inquiry in Aotearoa New Zealand across four ethnic groups (Māori, Pacific people, Asian and European) into why people gamble revealed that the motivations for Asian migrants to get involved in gambling are to cope with the stress associated with factors such as language barriers, unemployment, and isolation, and stressors associated with immigration and post-immigration adjustment (Tse et al., 2012). The research identified the high availability and accessibility of legalised commercial casinos as important in encouraging new migrants to engage with gambling. The loan shark issue is also of significant concern to the Chinese community (Tse et al., 2007). However, studies on Chinese gambling have focused less on these concerns and how to support those experiencing gambling harm, and more on motivations for gambling and the types of harms experienced (Sobrun-Maharaj et al., 2013).

Gambling venue self-exclusion policies are a peculiar phenomenon in the modern gambling world and provide an interesting illustration of how modern commercial gambling has the potential for promoting addictive play. "It is a dangerous form of consumption that can trap people to the point where they have to take special steps to reduce the harm it is causing" (Orford, 2020, p. 91). In Aotearoa New Zealand, a legal requirement in the Gambling Act 2003 is that gambling venues offer a self-exclusion policy (Department of Internal Affairs [DIA], 2019). According to data from SkyCity Casino

Auckland, Chinese migrants have made heavy use of the casino exclusion orders to stop or reduce their gambling (October 2012, personal correspondence). An increasing number of people who have accessed gambling services have been repeatedly excluded (2017, personal conversation). Chinese excludees' experiences of using casino self-exclusion policies have not been appropriately explored.

Approaches to gambling harm

Numerous treatments for problem gambling have been developed over the years, mostly focused on medical and psychological approaches (Petry et al., 2017). Relapse prevention has been a constant concern and challenge among those approaches (Ledgerwood & Petry, 2006). Relapse generally refers to "a breakdown or failure in a person's attempt to change or modify any target behaviour" (Marlatt & George, 1984, p. 261). One of the most significant flaws in these types of medicalised approaches to addiction lies in their methodological individualism, which focuses on an individual's experience, isolated from the social, cultural, and historical context in which they live (Granfield, 2004). Recent research indicates that social connections could play an essential role for Chinese new migrants in preventing and minimising gambling harm (Lai, 2006; Li & Tse, 2015; Wong & Li, 2019).

Alexander (2010) argued that addiction involves issues with social structures. He focuses on "dislocation" as a state that emerges when people are forced to work or live isolated from their original supportive relationships. He believes that "dislocation" produces insufficient "psychosocial integration," making a severe and prolonged dislocation quite difficult to endure. Adams (2008) proposed a social-ecological (SE) model which locates addiction in relational processes in a social context. "Instead of viewing addiction as an attribute attached to a particular addicted person, the central idea

involves understanding addiction as a social event" (Adams, 2008, p. 27). These emerging theories on addiction offer a paradigm that shifts the focus from individual attributes to focusing on ways of increasing meaningful social connections to reduce the increasing number of those addicted.

This thinking is compatible with social work practice, as it is closely related to ecological systems thinking—a well-known approach for dealing with complex interpersonal relations and social systems. As ecological systems thinking will be widely used by readers of this journal, it will not be discussed here, other than to clarify that ecological systems thinking distances the focus from individuals and directs it towards societal mechanisms, structures, and processes (Payne, 2020).

Chinese cultural influences in responding to gambling harm

Chinese people have a rich culture which is rooted in Confucianism, Daoism, and is integrated with Buddhism (Fung, 1948). An overarching concept of Chinese traditional philosophies is harmony between humans and heaven (tianrenheyi 天人合一). Confucianism emphasises harmony in human society, while Daoism focuses more on harmony between humans and nature. In Confucianism, humans are innately good with sympathetic hearts; a person is born into interwoven relationships including family, communities, society, and all human beings. Family is the basic unit of society; social order and harmony are preserved when people observe their place in society and fulfil required obligations and duties. The Chinese self can be regarded as a "being-in-relations," which can be considered a cultural mode of engagement for Chinese people.

In Daoism, humans are seen as a part of *ziran* (自然). Man models himself on earth; earth on heaven; heaven on the way (*dao*); and the way on *ziran*. *Ziran* can be translated

as “nature” or “spontaneity” (Chan, 1963). *Ziran* does not mean the natural world; it is the *dao* (道) of the universe, the principle of the universe operating. Daoism claims that this operational principle is a self-transformational and spontaneous state; the characteristic of being a human (*qing* 情) is rational judgment (Yu, 2008). Daoism advocates the ideal way of living is to follow *ziran*. How to live with nature? Daoist doctrines state that nothing is absolutely good, or bad, and that there is no need to worry too much about negative encounters, because nature will activate its rebalancing course. Humans are required to learn to adapt to it instead of trying to master it. Humans should not be disturbed by desires and external events; to live with nature means to restore our original spontaneous aptitude (Yu, 2008). This is likely one of the reasons why Chinese gamblers repeatedly apply for a self-exclusion order.

Chinese philosophy views humans as social beings with an emphasis on building a family-unit-based harmonious society, aligned with the ecological system. Living in family harmony and with nature has been an ideal lifestyle in Chinese culture. In conjunction with the frameworks of the dislocation theory of addiction and the social-ecological model, Chinese philosophy provides a cultural lens to understand Chinese migrants’ responses to gambling harm. It is within this context that the findings from a study will be presented.

Methods

The project focused on Chinese recent migrants’ lived experience of responding to gambling harm. A hermeneutic, phenomenological approach was applied. In this approach, meaning-making is undertaken through a hermeneutic circle in which understanding between the researcher and participants provides a broader understanding of the specific phenomenon under investigation. It encourages “... reflection on the basic structures of the

lived experience of human existence” (van Manen, 2014, p. 26). A purposeful sampling method was used to select information-rich participants rather than a large population sample frame which is less sensitive to cultural perspectives (Creswell, 2013).

Sixteen recent Chinese migrants (aged 20 or over) were recruited from eight families including eight gamblers (G) and eight affected family members (AFM), with a wide range of backgrounds relative to age group, gender, social-economic situation, length of problem gambling, and length of recovery. The study involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews, in which two people (a gambler and an AFM) were interviewed together to generate a co-constructed account of family realities (Reczek, 2014). Participants were interviewed twice within a one-month interval. Each interview took between 60 and 90 minutes and all were audio-recorded with participants’ consent. All names are pseudonyms.

A hermeneutic phenomenological and comprehensive thematic analysis method was applied. Thematic analysis is a tool assisting with recovering the structure of meanings embodied in human experience in text (van Manen, 2014). It helps researchers reflect on daily, taken-for-granted understandings and to unravel the surface of the phenomenon studied (Ho et al., 2017). All data were managed both manually and with the assistance of NVivo 12 (qualitative data analysis computer software). Ethical approval was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC).

This paper reports on a study focused on Chinese migrants’ lived experience of responding to gambling harm in Aotearoa New Zealand. This narrow focus enabled deep analysis of this phenomenon, but consequently had several limitations. It may not be representative of Chinese migrants’ gambling issues in other Western countries. The study was conducted from the

standpoint of Chinese gamblers and affected family members only. It does not reflect the opinions of social workers or other service providers who deal with problem gambling. Furthermore, the study intended to raise the voice of people who experienced casino gambling harm. Other forms of gambling harm were not explored.

Findings

Participants shared their experiences of pathways into gambling and ways to respond to gambling harm. The key findings are presented as four stages, which can be conceptualised as: *misconnecting*, *disconnecting*, *reconnecting*, and *rebuilding natural life* (See Figure 1).

Misconnecting

Understanding why Chinese migrants engage with casino gambling in the first place can help professionals make sense of intervention approaches that are more likely to be successful. Participants indicated the reasons for their engagement with casino gambling were two-fold: their migration/post-migration experience and the gambling environment. These reasons have been reported by many scholars in their studies

on why Asian migrants gambled and the gambling-related harms they experienced (Sobrun-Maharaj et al., 2013; Tse et al., 2012).

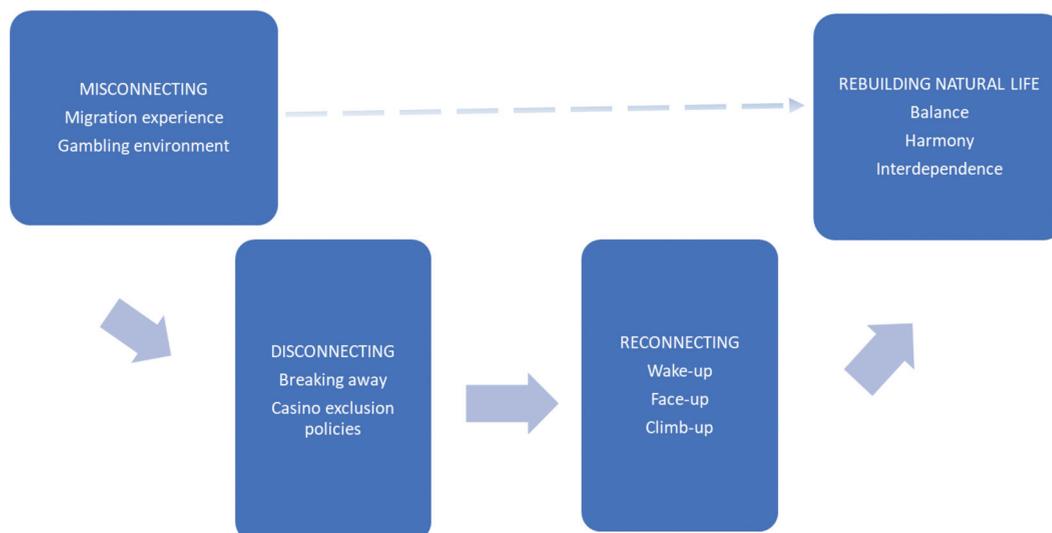
Migration experience

Participants reported losing connections with their familiar cultural, social and physical living environments through migration, and then, as a way of attempting to settle in their host country, they “misconnected” from their social world in favour of casino gambling. Losing personal status due to changing living circumstances is a common theme in this study. For example, Molly (G, female, aged 50) came to Aotearoa New Zealand as a skilled migrant. She recalled:

I was a lecturer in China. I wanted to pursue a more meaningful life. However, I felt deeply lost since coming here. I couldn't find a job, I had to work as a cleaner ... I had arguments with my ex-husband at home. My landlord took us to visit the casino. Inside the casino, I felt so different from outside, really. Since then, we both went to the casino instead of quarrelling at home.

For some, casinos became a convenient place for socialising because it is easy to

Figure 1 Chinese Migrants' Experiences of Pathways Into, and Out of, Gambling Harm



access, always available, with Chinese commonly spoken and the presence of increasingly familiar faces. Sen (G, male, aged 70), reunited with family in Aotearoa New Zealand 20 years ago and worked as a kitchenhand in a Chinese restaurant. He went to the casino as a way of socialising.

After working for a whole day, I felt tired and was nothing to do in the evening. I followed my workmates and watched them playing in the casino. Apart from going to the casino where else could you enjoy fun in New Zealand (在新西兰除了赌场还有哪里好玩?)

Moving away from their original support networks reduced their level of social involvement, which led to feeling lonely and depressed and made them susceptible to excessive alcohol and other drugs as well as increases in gambling to ease this psychological distress (Alexander, 2010). They did this without a strong awareness of the addictive features of casino gambling. Once they engaged in gambling, which Livingstone et al. (2014) and Schüll (2012) named the “zone,” their relationship with gambling intensified.

Gambling environment

Several participants highlighted that their gambling and, in particular, the intensification thereof, was related to the design and operation system of casinos. James (G, male, aged 50+) came to Aotearoa New Zealand as a skilled migrant and was naïve to the addictive potential of the casino. In Aotearoa New Zealand, casinos are legal and are promoted as harmless entertainment. James shared his experience and the impact of misleading information.

They [casino promoters] say, “we are playing; we [casinos] are for entertainment not for gambling.” Actually, that [casino game] is gambling. When you were in there [the casino], you would think of only gambling. I just ignored everything;

I wouldn’t want to leave the table a minute because I didn’t want to miss out on anything here. I was just gambling, gambling, gambling until all the money ran out. Nothing [activities in the casino] is for playing. I was not controlled by myself. The casino controlled me.

James’s statement suggests he accepted this casino promotional message without challenging it. He had gambled in the casino over 15 years, his family lived in government-assisted housing and relied on government benefits for over 10 years. As his daughter Candy (AFM, female, aged 20) stated, “we lived in extremely poverty for over 10 years when I was a child.”

Oliver (G, male, aged 50), was an investment migrant. Within a year of arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand, he became involved in casino gambling. This lasted for 18 months, during which time he accumulated a huge gambling debt. He described some of his painful memories:

My betting increased and I stayed longer and longer there. Then, I was invited to play in the VIP room. Over 1 year, I gambled away all my family savings and accumulated over \$1 million of debt that I borrowed from banks, credit companies, loan sharks and relatives. In the VIP room, Oh, you felt “I am a really important person.” The system leads you quickly to overdraft all your financial resources. In that situation, you become addicted like a drug addiction.

This is consistent with the framing of casino gambling as a dangerous consumption (Adams & Wiles, 2017; Livingstone et al., 2014; Schüll, 2012).

Disconnecting

The stages of disconnecting and reconnecting focus on participants’ reflections of pathways out of excessive gambling, the challenges they faced, and the support they needed.

Disconnecting required both a commitment to “breaking away” and engagement with exclusion policies.

Breaking away

Participants recalled how they had struggled for long time before finally breaking away from an intense relationship with gambling. Tom (G, male, aged 30+) came to Aotearoa New Zealand as an international student. He explained:

My life was trapped in a circle of working, studying and gambling for many years until I graduated from university. I told myself “stop going there!” I was determined. But in less than a week, I went there again. It was hard to exercise self-control. I still liked gambling after we married, but I set a limit.

Lili (AFM, female, aged 30) compared a gambling problem to a “hidden bomb.” She had to be vigilant all the time to prevent her husband from overspending or devoting too much time to gambling. She was fearful whenever she thought about how their marriage could be destroyed by this “bomb.”

Whenever he [husband] went out to gamble, I would have those images appear in my mind, and then I wouldn't be able to focus on other things. I would second guess about our marriage, and even wondered do we still want to stay together as a family (*jia hai guo ma* 家还过吗)? I was very uncertain [about husband's gambling]. It seemed like a bomb that would explode anytime.

Lili emphasised that getting her husband away from the casino was the only way she could prevent her family from being harmed. She regarded it as vital for the gambler to leave the casino to stop gambling harm.

Casino exclusion policies

Seven out of eight gamblers in the study reported that they had applied for a casino

exclusion order to support their break away from gambling harm. Some had used these policies repeatedly because, unexpectedly, they found it very hard to stop gambling. James had applied for a casino exclusion order at least four times at the urging of family members or friends.

The last time I quit [gambling] was three and a half years ago. A friend of mine persuaded me to quit. I felt someone cared about me. If I didn't listen to her, I would feel guilty...If you really know that you can't go, you just give it up. It is your choice to go there, nobody forces you to go there. They give you a choice. Some people like me cannot choose appropriately. We will suffer and damage our family.

James felt moved by his friend having confidence in him and her unconditional help. He felt he was cared for, and that he ought to respond to this caring, otherwise, he would feel guilty. It seems for some gamblers, like James, an effective intervention can be as simple as someone caring.

AFM also need to approach the problem with concern and understanding. Kobe (AFM, male, aged 30) provided a perfect example of how he became mindful of the gambler's helplessness.

One day, I went to look for my mother in the casino. I saw that she was a completely different person from who she was outside the casino. It looked like she didn't know me. I searched online for the information and applied for the casino exclusion order against my mum. The order set a barrier for her to enter. So, she would not be able to go there as before.

During the interview, Kobe commented that if AFMs observed the situation, they would better understand how to help the person trapped in casino gambling.

Participants challenged the effectiveness of the casino exclusion policy, because many excludees could easily re-enter the

casino without being detected. The major disappointment participants had regarding casino exclusion policies was that the casino did not take these provisions seriously. This challenge is consistent with overseas studies (Gainsbury, 2014; Livingstone et al., 2014). Some repeatedly applied for re-entry once the order expired without a full appreciation of the addictive feature of casino gambling. That led them to becoming trapped in a vicious gambling circle that involved repeated attempts to change, followed by relapse. Moreover, participants described how excluding themselves from the casino was not enough, but to break the gambling circle, they then also needed to reconnect to a life outside of gambling.

Reconnecting

After breaking away from casinos, Chinese migrants spoke of a rocky journey to reconnect with what they referred to as “natural life.” Participants indicated that a successful escape from excessive gambling required taking three steps: *wake-up* (xingwu 醒悟), *face-up* (miandui 面对), and *climb-up* (pandeng 攀登).

Wake-up

Wake-up was a significant step as participants recognised both the impact the casino system had on them and the importance of family. *Wake-up* also means that participants had discovered the different faces of the casino. For some, gambling was like a spiritual opium (赌博是精神鸦片) and others realised that “controlled gambling” was only a myth promoted by the casino (赌博自制在赌场只是一个迷思). There was “no free enjoyment” (没有白享受的), and the casino had a “horrible face” (可怕的面目). The recognition of the casino’s dangerous features was an indicator to begin waking up from the gambling fantasy.

Oliver shared his reflection in the following extract:

I came to understand from personal experience that gambling is spiritual opium (赌博是精神鸦片). It may be easy to stop, but it is very difficult to stop the psychological dependence. Even when I had \$200, I would want to give it a try. Who knew that there could be a miracle?

Some realised that the casino is a high-consumption business but presented as a place in which people could enjoy “free services.” Kun (G, male, aged 70), a retired civil servant, after losing NZ\$20,000 in one session, gained insights regarding casino gambling:

Initially, I didn’t intend to win money, but I didn’t want to lose money as well. I thought I went to the casino purely for excitement and entertainment. Yes, I was served with drinks and food. It is impossible that all were free. There was no free enjoyment.

As highlighted earlier, in Chinese culture, the family is the basic unit. Social order and harmony are preserved when people strive for family harmony and fulfil their family obligations and duties. Keeping family harmony is crucial for family well-being, including each member’s well-being. Kun emphasised that he always remembers his father teaching him to never put personal interest before the family’s interests.

This [gambling] is only my hobby, it should not harm the family and children. That is irresponsibility, and I would feel guilt (自己心里过不去).

Lee (AFM, female, aged 60+) Kun’s wife, commented on his behaviour change “[that] was out of his own conscience (是他自己的良心发现)”. Once Kun recognised his gambling violated his responsibility as a father, he was able to stop casino gambling without applying for a casino exclusion order.

Participants also reported that counselling could inspire them to wake up, although some accessed the service involuntarily. James stated:

Two months ago, I went to counselling again, of course, the purpose was to get a letter to re-enter [the casino] again. But, during the counselling, I also realised that this [casino gambling] is nothing good at all. All the money I have will be sent there, and we will have a miserable life again. So, during the counselling, an idea came to my mind, I made the decision that I don't want the letter. I won't apply to re-enter again.

Face-up

Face-up is how participants dealt with the consequence of their gambling. Many participants expressed their emotional vulnerability and some commented that this was the hardest phase in the process of reconnecting and required them to avoid "burying one's head in the sand" (不能有鸵鸟心态). Oliver stated:

After I stopped gambling, my life was full of pain and chaos (千疮百孔的生活), and I struggled (jiujie 纠结) for at least three to four years. The worst situation was when I faced all the bills, I felt hopeless, hopeless and despair ... and our family lives were getting harder and harder each day. I knew that I had no one to blame; this was my own path. I am an adult, and I must accept the consequences ... I can't, like an ostrich, bury my head in the sand to stay safe.

Some participants recognised that an open-minded and letting-go attitude helped them to face the challenges and to accept what had happened in their lives. Lucy (G, female, aged 50), came to Aotearoa New Zealand for a new relationship but that did not work out. She was trapped in a gambling cycle for over 10 years. She articulated her regrets and her commitment to change:

My [son's comment] made sense to me and moved me. Whenever I mentioned going to the casino, he said to me "Mum, why are you going to the casino? You have gone

there for so many years. Each time when you get home, you have headaches, and your heart is pounding; what you ought to win, you had won and what you ought to lose, you had lost (该赢也赢过, 该输的也输了). If you stop going there, everything would be fine from now." I thought he was right. Well, what ought to be lost had been lost. Let's follow the natural way (该失去的已经失去, 那就顺其自然吧).

The expression, "Let's follow the natural way" indicates an attitude of accepting what has happened in the past and facing up to the future. In Lucy's statement, both mother and son adopted an open-minded way of thinking that created the possibility for them to reconnect. When the mother-son relationship strengthened, Lucy's relation with gambling further weakened.

For many AFMs, they felt anger, resentment, and distress. They described facing up as crucial for the whole family, which included accepting each other, supporting each other and working together. Family members could play a vital role in achieving this. Sarah (AFM, female, aged 40+) shared how she felt when faced with the chaos and mess in her family caused by gambling harm:

I had thought of complaining (mai yuan 埋怨) to him [husband], but that was unhelpful. Because he was so depressed and had no courage to act, I must do something to show him that we still have hope. Then, I thought first we needed income, so I tried to look for jobs.

Practically, looking for a job and having a regular income was crucial to stabilising family life. Achieving this would, in turn, help establish a foundation for the family to move forward. Some participants reflected that this phase was the hardest step in their journey of disconnection from casino gambling because it could either move them forward to reconnecting to natural life (ziranshenghuo 自然生活) or, for some, lead them into relapsing.

Climb-up

Participants described *climb-up* as affirming their decision to change and act. James shared a story of how his father–daughter relationship had improved through his daily actions. Once he had decided to change, he acted, and he also received positive feedback. James happily recalled:

In the past, she [James' second daughter] didn't look at me and never talked just like an enemy, like a stranger. The day before yesterday, she said "good morning, Dad!" That hasn't happened for a long time. I think she saw me every day for these 2 months, I do dishwashing, cleaning here [kitchen], I think things changed gradually not suddenly.

During the interview, Lucy described receiving professional help when she struggled to get away from gambling harm and stated that the service was crucial for her as a migrant:

The agency has helped me a lot. At least it provided a place for you to share your unhappiness, your troubles, something about gambling problem. You felt relieved. Whenever I was stuck, especially when my gambling problem got more serious, I hoped for a person who could pull me out of the deep mud (拉我一把). I always think I have hope here.

Participants' experiences indicated that support from their wider community and society, including banks, is equally crucial. Oliver had a lot to say about this issue:

With the support from my counsellor, I was able to negotiate with the banks and strive for favourable conditions for me to consolidate my debts. I was really surprised to know that they agreed with my plan to stop charging me interest. I felt warmth in my heart. We could rearrange our family life and gradually returned to the normal track.

Oliver's experience illustrated that attention to financial rearrangements (particularly debt consolidation) was a vital task for his family to return to normal living. He wanted his story to be told to let gamblers and their family know that there are resources in the community which can help them to move away from gambling harm. The challenge is how to let people know of those services. The financial repercussions may be beyond what psychological treatments can reasonably impact upon, yet such long-term debt may contribute to relapse and contribute to ambivalence (Toneatto, 2008).

Rebuilding natural life

Participants explained that, in "natural life," people uphold a balanced lifestyle, maintain harmonious relationships with others and the world around them, and accept that they are interdependent. This notion of natural life is strongly influenced by traditional Chinese culture, emphasising harmonious relationships with families and with the natural environment. Once reconnected to natural life, casino gambling loses its prominence in gamblers' lives, and they live a more balanced life.

Lucy claimed, after engaging in casino gambling for 20 years, "Now, I don't have the urge of playing tiger machine. Now the game is over." For Daniel, "Now, I like fishing on a boat." Chelsea recollected the change in her family.

I called the casino "a dangerous place". That was the secret code for both of us. In the past, he wouldn't have mentioned it if he suddenly wanted to go [there]. This code seems to have disappeared in our family (危险信号好像没了).

Similarly, Sarah described that they were so glad that the topic of gambling and debts was no longer part of their daily conversation:

We now have completely different topics in our conversation. In the past, the topics

always involved gambling and casinos, or some friends who were related to our debt. Now, we have set up a family trust. We want to create a good future for our children, to provide them with good education, and to guide them to be a useful person to society.

Family support was reported as the first accessible and reliable resource when people needed help; but not all family members are available or capable of offering their support. Lacking family support when needing it could keep people trapped in difficult situations for longer.

Fang (AFM, female, aged 30+), Sen's daughter, was greatly concerned about her father's gambling once he was allowed to re-enter the casino. After 2 years, the casino allowed him to re-enter without any preconditions. She also hoped her father could be referred to alternative activities.

I think the best way is to ban him from entering the casino. The casino should stop him once he was excluded. He can't control himself. I am working and can only take him for yum-cha at the weekends. It is better to introduce him to an agency so he can attend some other activities.

As a family member, Fang offered her support as much as she could, and she recognised her father needed more social support. Fang's situation indicated that family members might be overstressed so they need to be supported as well. Professional services may be able to work toward narrowing the gap.

Sharing with people who have had similar experiences has been reported as a helpful resource for some participants. Tom doubted whether, without personal experience, clinicians would be able to understand problem gamblers fully and provide them with the support they needed. He felt more understood and accepted within a peer group and, accordingly, better able to accept himself. Lucy shared the same opinion:

In listening to other members' stories, I realised that there were many unfortunate people in the group. I was lucky in many aspects. I was encouraged spiritually and psychologically.

The benefit of attending a group programme or a peer-support group is the way it reminds members that others share similar, painful experiences and highlights the value of what they have in their lives. These resources can generate positive energy and motivate them to maintain a gambling-harm-free life. However, Molly shared a contradictory example of peer support. She preferred to attend an educational programme in a group setting because members quickly understood each other, and the knowledge learned from the programme helped her in understanding better why she had developed a problematic relationship with gambling. At one time, Molly found that the group members invited each other back to the casino after the session which was not helpful. This should raise a concern for peer group organisers to prevent that event from happening.

It is clear from participants' encounters that the effective approaches to responding to gambling harm require a focus shifting from individual gamblers to their relationships and interdependence in life including affected family members, broad communities, and society (Adams, 2016). Professional social service agencies can play a significant role to make the shift.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that recent Chinese migrants get side-tracked by casino gambling in the journey of maintaining a natural life in their host country after migration. They faced a variety of challenges and, in responding to these, they required different supports to eventually find pathways out of excessive gambling. Some recommendations for professionals can be considered from these findings across the four stages.

Misconnecting stage: Prevention is better than intervention. Social services and social workers should advocate that information about the dangers of casino gambling be widely available to new migrants. Being aware of the addictive features of casino gambling can reduce the risk of people engaging in problematic casino gambling in the first place. At the same time, agencies delivering social services to migrants should enable more opportunities for new Chinese migrants to access resources to help them with the transition to the host country and avoid harmful involvement in gambling.

Disconnecting stage: Changes are needed to policies regulating casino operations. An evaluation of the current casino exclusion policies is also required. Professionals in the social services sector have a significant role to play in making policies more effective in preventing gambling harm and ensuring early intervention when gambling harm occurs. Social service agencies need to make their service visible to gamblers— particularly in the Chinese community. It is important to raise awareness of early warning signs of gambling harm and the benefits and challenges of casino exclusion policies so that any affected family members or concerned community members can access support as soon as possible. They can take on a more active role in a collective effort to “awaken” gamblers who are immersed in gambling.

Reconnecting stage: The findings of the study suggested that it is crucial to include family members in supporting gamblers out of excessive gambling. This is needed to widen the focus for intervention from the addicted individual to the family, so that the steps of wake-up, face-up and climb-up can be fully supported. Family-friendly practice is also culturally appropriate for Chinese migrant communities. However, this needs to happen alongside professional services. Professional services and counselling support was regarded as particularly helpful to people who experienced gambling harm. Peer support groups can also be a good form of on-going support.

Rebuilding natural life stage: Rebuilding a natural life for Chinese migrants requires an understanding of, and support for, traditional Chinese culture. The notions of a balanced lifestyle, harmonious relationships with families and with the natural environment and awareness of interdependence are essential to the wellbeing of Chinese people and should remain a core focus to help this group to manage gambling harm.

The notion that a good life is to “live with nature” is not only a key concept of Chinese philosophies, but it is an important strand of Western philosophies. According to Yu (2008), like Daoism, Stoicism from ancient Greek ethics also claimed that human beings are a part of nature and advocated for an ideal life that includes living at large with nature. Both Daoism and Stoicism agree that nature does not mean the natural world—it is the most fundamental operational principle of the natural world. However, there are different views between the two schools. For Stoicism, the natural world operates with rational order, consistency, and harmony; human nature is rational; living with nature is to educate the individual’s rationality; and people should take their experience of fortunes or misfortunes as providentially ordered and should accept it contentedly. In contrast, Daoism refers to nature as a self-transformational and spontaneous state; living with nature is to restore our original spontaneous aptitude; the characteristic of being human (*qing* 情) is rational; and people should accept their good or bad luck as a natural process without complaining, but not necessarily with satisfaction (Yu, 2008).

Despite these differences, both Daoism and Stoicism discourage one’s desire at the expense of another’s interests; both advocate that living with nature should be detached from conventional social values and devoid of emotional involvement. “Both [encourage] people to be indifferent towards the gain or loss of external fortune, give people

psychological fortitude and strength in times of distress and calamity, and encourage people to concentrate on the inner self and seek spiritual freedom" (Yu, 2008, p. 13). The idea of detachment can have a valuable therapeutic function to help people live with a strong spirit and stable emotions in a harmonious society.

The understanding of the differences and similarities between the Eastern and Western concepts of living with nature can help social workers adopt cultural appropriate approaches to working with their clients. It is also important for social workers and other caring professionals working with gambling harm, that ecological systems thinking distances the focus from individuals and directs it towards societal mechanisms, structures, and processes (Payne, 2020). As such, as we have seen from the experiences of the participants to this study, interventions can include support for the individual, but must be more than that.

Conclusion

The journey of Chinese migrant gamblers suggests a process of misconnecting from natural life by engaging in gambling, and eventually disconnecting from gambling and reconnecting to rebuild their natural life. Acknowledging the consequences of gambling harm was described by participants as the most difficult stage and it was clear that they needed significant support from family, community, and professionals. Participants described these supports as influential in effectively responding to casino gambling harm. These findings should be considered by policymakers and service providers to enable a positive social environment for preventing and minimising gambling harm for this population.

Received 23 December 2021

Accepted 11 May 2022

Published 15 July 2022

References

- Abbott, M. W., & Volberg, R. A. (2000). *Taking the pulse on gambling and problem gambling in New Zealand: A report on phase one of the 1999 national prevalence survey*. Department of Internal Affairs.
- Adams, P. J. (2008). *Fragmented intimacy: Addiction in a social world*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Adams, P. J. (2016). Switching to a social approach to addiction: Implications for theory and practice. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 14(1), 86–94. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-015-9588-4>
- Adams, P. J., & Wiles, J. (2017). Gambling machine annexes as enabling spaces for addictive engagement. *Health & Place*, 43, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2016.11.001>
- Alexander, B. (2010). *The globalization of addiction: A study in poverty of the spirit*. Oxford University Press.
- Chan, W. T. (1963). *The way of Lao Tzu: Tao-te ching*. Bobbs-Merrill.
- Creswell, J. W. (Ed.). (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Department of Internal Affairs. (2019) *Exclusion order (problem gamblers) guidelines*. [https://www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/wpg_URL/Services-Casino-and-Non-Casino-Gaming-Exclusion-Order-\(Problem-Gamblers\)-Guidelines#four](https://www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/wpg_URL/Services-Casino-and-Non-Casino-Gaming-Exclusion-Order-(Problem-Gamblers)-Guidelines#four)
- Dyall, L. (2007). Gambling, social disorganisation and deprivation. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 5(4), 320–330. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-007-9085-5>
- Dyall, L., Tse, S., & Kingi, A. (2009). Cultural icons and marketing of gambling. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 7(1), 84–96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-007-9145-x>
- Fung, Y. L. (1948). *A short history of Chinese philosophy*. The Macmillan Company.
- Gainsbury, S. M. (2014). Review of self-exclusion from gambling venues as an intervention for problem gambling. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 30(2), 229–251. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-013-9362-0>
- Gower, P. (2007, June 22). SkyCity deals to loan shark pair. *NZ Herald*. https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10447448.
- Granfield, R. (2004). Addiction and modernity: A comment on a global theory of addiction. *Nad Publication*, 44, 29–34. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Robert_Granfield/publication/265238393_Addiction_and_Modernity_A_Comment_on_a_Global_Theory_of_Addiction/links/54b3bf6b0cf2318f0f956dd7.pdf
- Ho, K. H., Chiang, V. C., & Leung, D. (2017). Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis: The "possibility" beyond "actuality" in thematic analysis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 73(7), 1757–1766. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13255>
- Lai, D. W. (2006). Gambling and the older Chinese in Canada. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 22(1), 121–141. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-005-9006-0>
- Ledgerwood, D. M., & Petry, N. M. (2006). What do we know about relapse in pathological gambling? *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26(2), 216–228. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2005.11.008>

- Li, W. W., & Tse, S. (2015). Problem gambling and help seeking among Chinese international students: Narratives of place identity transformation. *Journal of Health Psychology, 20*(3), 300–312. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105314566611>
- Livingstone, C., Rintoul, A., & Francis, L. (2014). What is the evidence for harm minimisation measures in gambling venues? *Evidence Base, 2*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.4225/50/558112A877C5D>
- Marlatt, G. A., & George, W. H. (1984). Relapse prevention: Introduction and overview of the model. *British Journal of Addiction, 79*(4), 261–273. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1360-0443.1984.tb03867.x>
- Ministry of Health. (2006). *Problem gambling intervention services in New Zealand: 2005 national statistics*. <https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/problemgambling-nationalstatistics2005.pdf>
- Orford, J. (2020). *The gambling establishment: Challenging the power of the modern gambling industry and its allies*. Routledge.
- Payne, M. (2020). *Modern social work theory*. MacMillan Education.
- Petry, N. M., Ginley, M. K., & Rash, C. J. (2017). A systematic review of treatments for problem gambling. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors, 31*(8), 951. <https://doi.org/10.1037/adb0000290>
- Reczek, C. (2014). Conducting a multi-family member interview study. *Family Process, 53*(2), 318–335. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12060>
- Reith, G. (1999). *The age of chance: Gambling in western culture*. Routledge.
- Savage, J. (2016, February 20). Wealthy businessman loses \$5M in 82 minutes. *Newstalk ZB*. <https://www.newstalkzb.co.nz/news/national/wealthy-businessman-loses-5m-in-82-minutes/>
- Savage, J. (2017, January 13). Taskforce Ghost: Exposing Auckland's underbelly. *NZ Herald*. https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11770151
- Schüll, N. D. (2012). *Addiction by design: Machine gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton University Press.
- Sobrun-Maharaj, A., Rossen, F. V., & Wong, A. S. (2013). Negative impacts of gambling on Asian families and communities in New Zealand. *Asian Journal of Gambling Issues and Public Health, 3*(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2195-3007-3-14>
- Stats NZ. (2018). *Asian ethnic group*. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/tools/2018-census-ethnic-group-summaries/asian>
- Thimasarn-Anwar, T., Squire, H., Trowland, H., & Martin, G. (2017). *Gambling report: Results from the 2016 Health and Lifestyles Survey*. Health Promotion Agency Research and Evaluation Unit. https://www.hpa.org.nz/sites/default/files/Final-Report_Results-from-2016-Health-And-Lifestyles-Survey_Gambling-Feb2018.pdf
- Toneatto, T., Cunningham, J., Hodgins, D., Adams, M., Turner, N., & Koski-Jannes, A. (2008). Recovery from problem gambling without formal treatment. *Addiction Research & Theory, 16*(2), 111–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16066350801923638>
- Tse, S., Dyall, L., Clarke, D., Abbott, M., Townsend, S., & Kingi, P. (2012). Why people gamble: A qualitative study of four New Zealand ethnic groups. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, 10*(6), 849–861. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-012-9380-7>
- Tse, S., Wong, J., & Chan, P. (2007). Needs and gaps analysis: Problem gambling interventions among New Zealand Asian peoples. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, 5*(1), 81–88. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-006-9039-3>
- Tse, S., Yu, A. C., Rossen, F., & Wang, C. W. (2010). Examination of Chinese gambling problems through a socio-historical-cultural perspective. *The Scientific World Journal, 10*, 1694–1704. <https://doi.org/10.1100/tsw.2010.167>
- van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Left Coast Press.
- Wheeler, B. W., Rigby, J. E., & Huriwai, T. (2006). Pokies and poverty: Problem gambling risk factor geography in New Zealand. *Health & Place, 12*(1), 86–96. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2004.10.011>
- Wohl, M. J. (2018). Loyalty programmes in the gambling industry: Potentials for harm and possibilities for harm-minimization. *International Gambling Studies, 18*(3), 495–511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2018.1480649>
- Wong, C., & Li, G. (2019). *Talking about casino gambling: Community voices from Boston Chinatown*. Massachusetts Gaming Commission. https://scholarworks.umb.edu/iaas_pubs
- Yu, J. (2008). Living with nature: Stoicism and Daoism. *History of Philosophy Quarterly, 25*(1), 1–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27745110>