Understanding the Construct of Working Alliance and its Relationship to Gambling Therapy:

A Letter of Intent for the CAAP Final Project

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This letter of intent proposes a review of gambling therapy literature with a focus on the core components of gambling treatment with implications of the role of working alliance in successful gambling therapy. This letter will review the problem statement, project rationale, supporting literature, methods, and procedures, and the research implications concerning the development of this final project.

Problem Statement

The concept of working alliance, and the idea of “the client and therapist forming a partnership against the common foe of the client’s debilitating pain” (Horvath & Greenberg, 1994, p.1), is an important theory in counselling psychology. Researchers looking at working alliance demonstrate the importance of the alliance strength in positive treatment outcomes. One overarching question that emerges to guide this project follows: how can gambling therapy incorporate the concepts within the construct of working alliance in order to better facilitate successful change? In order to address this question, this letter proposes an examination of the literature regarding successful gambling therapy interventions, assessing the possible relationship between gambling therapy, and the construct of therapeutic alliance. It further proposes creating recommendations to incorporate the construct of working alliance into gambling therapy practice, and finally to make recommendations for further research regarding this topic.

Project Rationale

This letter proposes a review of literature regarding gambling therapy, in order to identify implications for working alliance integration with gambling therapy practice. In
addition, a review of working alliance literature will also lead to an increased understanding regarding further research needed to effectively utilize the working alliance construct in gambling therapy interventions. Since working alliance plays an important role in the success of non-gambling specific treatment, a greater understanding of the working alliance construct and in particular how it can contribute to gambling therapy success would be of benefit to how gambling therapists approach their work. There is little information regarding the connection between gambling therapy practice and working alliance literature. It is interesting to know how gambling therapy with positive outcomes might include working alliance strength. Connecting the concepts within working alliance literature to the concepts in gambling therapy practice, and creating recommendations of how these two theories relate, will ultimately enhance gambling therapy practice.

Supporting Literature

Pathological gambling is categorized as an impulse disorder, but has many parallels to substance use disorders (Petry, 2002). Problem gambling treatment research shows that a small percentage of problem gamblers present for treatment (Petry, 2002), and often are not in a state conducive to a therapeutic relationship (Custer, 1982). Problem gambling clients seeking change show poor treatment outcomes (Hodgins & el-Guebaly, 2004).

Working alliance has been defined as “the client and therapist forming a partnership against the common foe of the client’s debilitating pain” (Horvath & Greenberg, 1994, p.1). Bordin’s (1979) pantheoretical construct of the working alliance includes the development of a therapeutic bond, and an agreement between client and
therapist goals and tasks, emphasizing the mutuality of the common purpose and common sentiments in the interactions between the two (Watson & Greenberg, 1994). In non-problem gambling specific treatment, there exists a positive correlation between a strong working alliance and positive therapy outcome (Horvath & Symonds, 1991). As much as thirty percent of therapy change factors are related to the relationship between the therapist and client (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 2002). Strength of the alliance rather than its type appears to be the main factor in change (Bordin, 1979). Various tools have been developed to measure the therapeutic alliance in counselling (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989), and research shows that client perception of a strong working alliance after a single counselling session, correlated significantly with positive treatment outcome ratings (Gelso & Carter, 1994). Client ratings of the alliance are far better predictors of outcome than are therapist ratings (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999).

A strong working alliance has been shown to be important in treatment of substance use disorders regarding retention (Barber et al., 2001), and treatment outcome (Connors, Carroll, DiClemente, Longabaugh, & Donovan, 1997). In gambling specific treatment, it is hypothesized that the therapeutic relationship may show strong predictive power regarding problem resolution (Smith, Thomas, & Jackson, 2004). Therapists trained in alliance skills resulted in clients reporting significantly higher rates of alliance scores (Hilsenroth, Ackerman, Clemence, Strassle, & Handler, 2002). However specifically regarding gambling therapy, there seems to be limited research into how gambling therapy can integrate the well-researched construct of working alliance into its practice.

Methods
In order to better understand how working alliance literature can inform the practice of gambling therapy, this project will develop a comprehensive literature review. This will include a critique of the gambling treatment literature using American Psychological Association criteria for treatments. Since a good literature review evaluates, organizes and synthesizes what others have done (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005), the review of research in both working alliance and gambling therapy will attempt to build a bridge of new knowledge in the field of gambling therapy literature. This will take the shape of informed recommendations integrating the concepts of working alliance with the practice of gambling therapy.

This project will include a review of the literature collected from electronic databases such as PsychARTICLES and PsychINFO, as well as searching the University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge, and Athabasca University libraries. This search will use the following keywords: working alliance, therapeutic alliance, problem gambling, and gambling therapy. As well, reference lists from articles collected will be examined to gather other possible appropriate literature or studies on this topic. In order to keep research current, the literature review will focus on references published since 1990, however, if deemed necessary references with historical significance may be included. With the information gathered in the literature review and critique, a synthesis of this material will result in the creation of recommendations showing how gambling therapy can incorporate the construct of working alliance into its practice. In addition to a review of the literature and the creation of recommendations regarding the integration of these concepts within the literature, recommendations will also be made regarding the need for further research in this subject area.
Research Implications

A review of gambling therapy literature with a focus on working alliance would benefit gambling therapy research, as well as improve gambling therapy practice. Because there seems to be a minimal amount of literature regarding the relationship between working alliance and gambling therapy in the literature, a thorough examination of the current literature could guide further research interested in better understanding this relationship. In addition, since the construct of working alliance has had little consideration in gambling therapy practice, the creation of recommendations outlining the possible relationship between the working alliance and its application to the practice of gambling therapy would be an important step in addressing the gaps in the literature.

Better understanding the role of working alliance principles enhancing positive outcomes in gambling therapy may have implications for how gambling therapists practice. Ultimately, informing gambling therapists, through recommendations emphasizing the connections between working alliance principles and its potential to enhance treatment outcomes, may have a positive impact on gambling therapy interventions. Further, for gambling therapists to approach their work from a working alliance perspective, would better equip therapists to recognize the signs of working alliance strengths and challenges in therapy with pathological gamblers, and as a result pathological gambling clients would ultimately benefit.
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