



GAMBLING RESEARCH REVEALS

Does the general public attach a stigma to disordered gambling?

One of the enduring mysteries surrounding problem gambling is to understand why only one in ten individuals struggling with this condition will seek treatment. One suggested explanation for this reluctance to seek treatment is because of stigma. Though stigma has long been considered a major barrier to treatment in the broader mental illness field, there have been few studies examining the degree to which stigma exists with respect to gambling. A crucial research step in our attempt to better understand stigma and gambling is being undertaken by Ph.D. student Jenny Horch at the University of Calgary. Her research seeks to establish whether stigma towards problem gamblers actually exists, rather than merely being perceived by gamblers or the general public.

What was it that sparked your interest in stigma and disordered gambling?

HORCH: Stigma interested me because it is a construct with broad applicability and because stigma has become a social policy buzzword despite the limited and sometimes methodologically weak research base. I found the overlap of stigma and disordered gambling particularly exciting as it is a new area of research. Researchers have only recently suggested that stigma impacts disordered gamblers, although it has long been considered with regards to mental illness in general. At the time I initiated my study there were no studies examining the degree to which stigma existed. Instead gamblers and non-gamblers had only been asked whether they *thought* the condition was stigmatized.

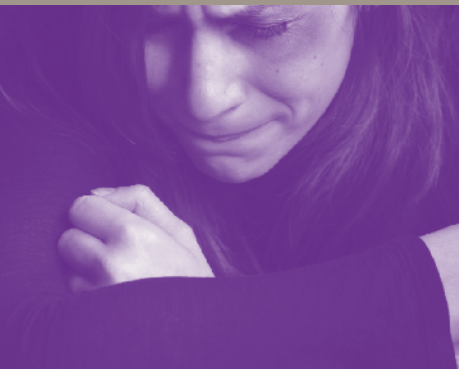
WHAT IS STIGMA?

Mental illness stigma has been defined as the devaluation of a person in a particular social context based on the perceived presence of a negative attribute or social identity (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Researchers have differentiated between public stigma (stigma held by the general public) and private or self-stigma (the internalization of public stigma; Corrigan, 2004).

The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Its primary purpose is to support and promote research into gaming and gambling in the province.*

OUR MISSION

To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society



Canadian Mental Health Commission to be based in Calgary

In September 2007, Federal Health Minister Tony Clement announced that Calgary will be the headquarters for a new Canadian Mental Health Commission. The commission will be charged with reducing stigma around mental illness and creating a Canadian strategy in the area.

Some people become familiar with disordered gambling through exposure to the media... but can these portrayals be problematic with respect to public stigma?

HORCH: Stout, Villegas & Jennings (2004) indicate that little is known about the media's role in perpetuating or reducing mental illness stigma, but note that research considering the impact of the media on stigma towards mental health conditions has revealed misinformation, inaccurate use of psychiatric terms, and unfavorable stereotypes of people with mental illness. Persons with mental illness are frequently depicted as being unlikable, inadequate, unemployable, and dangerous. I am unaware of any studies considering the portrayal of disordered gamblers in the media, although there are movie titles that come to mind.

Results of our research indicate that most people (89.6%) have viewed a television show or movie depicting an individual with disordered gambling. Fewer have watched a documentary regarding the condition (39%). Documentaries are more likely to contain accurate information regarding disordered gambling whereas other sources of media may glamorize gambling or vilify problem gamblers.

Problem gamblers are a difficult group for the general public to identify... would this make any difference with respect to public stigma?

HORCH: This is a very important point. Disordered gambling is very difficult to identify and for this reason many may choose to conceal the problem. Cues that an individual belongs to a social category may include symptoms, physical appearance, social skills deficits, or labels (Corrigan & Kleinlein, 2005). Thus, for problem gamblers, labels may be the only salient cue. These are generally conferred on individuals by mental health professionals, which is why avoiding treatment becomes a problem.

Secrecy as a coping strategy has been found to "hurt more than help" in individuals with other mental illnesses (Link, Mirotnik, & Cullen, 1991). However, just because problem gamblers are hard to identify does not change the fact that public stigma exists, and does not mitigate its negative effects.

It may be that discrimination against an individual does not occur until they are labeled, however, this does not alleviate the impact on unidentified individuals. Furthermore, a more insidious consequence of public stigma is its impact on self-stigma. Unlabeled individuals may self-identify as belonging to the category "problem gambler" and apply all the negative beliefs to themselves without members of the public doing so.

Participants in your research investigation were all university students. Do these individuals differ from the general public in their perception of problem gamblers?

HORCH: It is quite possible that a university sample may not perceive problem gamblers as the general public does. I intend to replicate this study with a community sample for my dissertation. However, I would note that I expect university students have more favourable attitudes towards problem gamblers than the general public as they are typically a younger and more liberal cohort. As such, this study is likely conservative and may underestimate stigma as opposed to overestimate it.

Are there any positive aspects associated with stigma of disordered gambling? Does a societal stigma provide a kind of warning signal about gambling?

HORCH: This is an interesting question, and it has been raised previously. Sally Satel (2007) raised this issue and suggested that stigma associated with addictions may also serve as a deterrence to the development of



an addiction and may motivate individuals to resolve their problems independently if not to seek treatment. There certainly does not appear to be any research determining whether individuals averted the development a gambling problem due to fear of public reprisal. This would be an interesting research question.

I tend to disagree with the idea that stigma is helpful, particularly for individuals who have already developed a gambling problem. There is a substantial literature linking stigma to decreased treatment seeking in individuals suffering other mental illness, and judging or “shoulding” people is not an effective way to motivate change. I am undecided as to whether stigma is helpful in discouraging the *development* of problem gambling.

How might your research study be relevant to increasing treatment seeking for disordered gambling?

HORCH: Problem gamblers do report stigma as a reason for reduced (Hodgins & el-Guebaly, 2000) and delayed (Tavares, Martins, Zilberman, & el-Guebaly, 2002) treatment seeking. While our study is not

directly linked to treatment seeking, it is a first step towards establishing that stigma towards problem gamblers does, in fact, exist, rather than merely being perceived by gamblers or the general public. Our results highlight the importance of investigating this topic further and provide quantitative data in terms of attitudinal social distance rather than simply surveying if individuals perceive stigma associated with disordered gambling.

A necessary next step is to examine problem gamblers’ awareness of stigma and whether or not they self-stigmatize (i.e., internalize public stigma and apply it to themselves) as this may have a more direct relationship with treatment seeking. Increasing treatment seeking could (and should) be approached from two angles. A reduction in public stigma may lead to changes in social policy and result in increased funding for problem gambling research. Reducing self-stigma may increase an individual’s sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to change. Reducing either public or self-stigma will likely increase treatment seeking.

Jenny Horch is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Calgary who is presently completing a program of study on the topic of disordered gambling stigma under the supervision of Dr. David C. Hodgins.

Research investigation related to disordered gambling stigma

The paper “Public Stigma of Disordered Gambling: Social Distance, Dangerousness, and Familiarity” by Jenny Horch and Dr. David Hodgins has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*.

It reports the findings from Horch’s Master’s thesis entitled “Public Stigma of Disordered Gamblers: Social Distance, Dangerousness, Controllability, and Familiarity.” The investigation involved university students (117 male, 132 female) who rated vignettes describing males with five health conditions (schizophrenia, alcohol dependence, disordered gambling, cancer, and a no diagnosis control with subclinical problems) on a measure of attitudinal social distance. Disordered gambling was found to be more stigmatized than the cancer and control conditions.



Gaming Resources @ The Winspear Business Reference Library

by *Angela Binnie*

With its focus on the industrial, organizational, managerial, and economic aspects of the gaming industry, the Winspear Business Reference Library at the University of Alberta supports the research goals of the Institute by developing and maintaining multi-faceted print and online collections. Notably, the library houses a strong core of industry standard reference materials.



Examples of these gaming-related reference titles include:

- Casino City Press gaming almanacs and directories.
- Recent editions of the *Internet Gambling Report* which describe the legal and political climate concerning Internet gambling as well as related business issues such as taxation, electronic transfer of funds, security and enforcement.
- The *Indian Gaming Industry Report* which analyzes the state of the Indian Gaming Industry in the United States with respect to economic impact, revenues, and industry trends.

In addition to its reference titles, the Winspear Library's circulating collection of gaming-related materials also includes various historical accounts, government documents, biographies, electronic journals, and audio-visual materials. Individuals with gaming-related research inquiries are welcome to contact staff in person at the library, by phone (780-492-5652) or via email businfo@library.ualberta.ca.

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