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The Evolution of Discovery: Finding Out the Truth for Myself

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[This First Person Account tells how a high school student used the challenge and opportunity of a class assignment to explore gambling among her peers. Note: OAC classes referred to in this article are university preparation courses for students in Ontario secondary schools.]

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Jennifer Zechmeister is a first-year student at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario. Currently in the Faculty of Social Science, Jennifer hopes to attain a post-graduate degree in journalism. Jennifer was born and raised in Hamilton, Ontario and graduated from her local high school with an award as an Ontario Scholar.

Gambling has become, over the years, an increasingly popular and socially acceptable way for us to spend our leisure time; at the same time, it has become a significant problem for many people. We, as a society, generally tend to focus more on the entertainment value of gambling and fail to fully recognize the negative side, which shows that 10%* of us Ontarians struggle with severe gambling addiction and losses every day. With gambling problems there are no physical remnants to be found by loved ones, as there are with alcohol or drug addictions. With problem gambling, there is nothing to hide except guilt, shame and, especially, secrets to keep. It is a painful addiction, which can be cleverly covered up by those who want to hide it, and one that destroys the lives of many. It is the hidden addiction.

After personally experiencing how problem gambling can affect others, I have come to a point where I can look at gambling no longer with fear, but with courage. I have chosen to join the battle of awareness and discovery surrounding a problem more severe than the average person imagines. In the past, I was naive enough to believe gambling was merely for fun, and like many, I believed gambling was just

another silly gimmick to try to get rich quick. But I've seen the power and control such an addiction possesses. I was left with many questions about gambling that I had never considered before I saw its effects, and many of the questions began with "why?"

In January 2000, I was given the opportunity to search for the answers to my questions. The OAC (Ontario Academic Credit) class called Families in Canadian Society (fancy terminology for sociology) was how I was given this chance. It was simple. Do a research project on an issue or topic that focuses on "the family." Naturally, I jumped at the chance to research the one thing that had torn apart people close to me and the one thing I failed to understand. I read all about gambling: the characteristics and symptoms of a compulsive gambler, his/her family and their own related problems, what help is available — all the while picking out more and more parallels to my own situation. I realized how serious gambling addictions really are. For example, how many people know that compulsive gambling is recognized by the American Psychiatric Association as a mental illness? Compulsive gamblers commonly experience difficulties with drug and alcohol addictions and are more likely to suffer from depression, hyperactivity, agoraphobia and compulsive disorders. They are also more likely than the general population to commit suicide and to smoke; they often suffer more from stomach ailments, insomnia, ulcers, colitis, high blood pressure, heart disease, migraines and skin problems.

After reading information like this, I began to realize how dangerous problem gambling can be and, I began to worry about the gambling practices of children and teenagers (the people who society needs to be most responsible for). In my library visits, I found a multitude of books on teen gambling and statistics that explained why there were so many teens with gambling problems. I found out some startling pieces of information. For example, teens who are involved in gambling are four times more likely to develop addictions than their adult counterparts. As with alcohol or substance addictions, the children of compulsive gamblers are more likely to develop problems with gambling in later years. I realized that via such means as the Internet, children and teens have access to gambling pretty much whenever they want it.

Here's where the problem lies. There are plenty of statistics and studies out there proving over and over how vulnerable teens are to gambling, yet the authorities who are responsible for informing them of this weakness, fail to do so.

Furthermore, these authorities promote gambling by advertisements and positive slogans that lead teens to believe that there can't be a negative side to gambling. Teens know that if they drink alcohol or do drugs they do so at their own risk. Because of advertisements and programs at school, many are aware that they may develop addictions due to such behaviours. Are they also aware that the very

same adverse effects can come from gambling? Or are they too naive, like I was, thinking that gambling is just a game, for fun, or just something to do?

In my sociology class, I had an opportunity to ask these questions myself. Our assignment was to experience the process of primary research by polling the students in our school with a questionnaire. The goal of the assignment was to learn to appreciate the time and hard work put into the studies we were using everyday as secondary research. I aimed to discover my peers' views about gambling and what their gambling practices were.

For a number of reasons, I went into the assignment with my own opinions and assumptions about my peers' attitudes towards gambling. The secondary school I attended at that time was in a predominantly white, middle-class location, a fair distance away (about an hour) from a large-scale gaming institution. I believed that because of their age most of the students would be unaware of the negative effects of gambling. Most cannot legally gamble.

Age was actually a large factor in my questionnaire. I decided that from the range of students I could access, I would interview OAC (Grade 13) students (N = 37) who were at least 18 and could legally gamble, and Grade 9 students (N = 42) who were 14 or 15 and were the youngest students in our school and too young to legally gamble. I naturally hypothesized that the OAC students, due to their age, would gamble more often and would be more aware of the negative aspects of gambling.

I administered most of the questionnaires in classrooms and with their teachers' written permission. Others were given randomly to students in the halls or cafeteria. I was always present to explain that all information was strictly confidential and to answer any questions or address any concerns.

My first question was basic. I asked whether gambling is best defined as a good source of entertainment, a good way to get rich quick or a possibly harmful addiction. Surprisingly, over half of the students surveyed (55% of Grade 9 students and 51% of OAC students) believe gambling is best described as “a possibly harmful addiction.” I was impressed that students think of gambling in this way. Due to advertisements and our social acceptance of gambling, I believed the majority of students would perceive gambling as “a good source of entertainment”; 38% of the Grade 9 students and 41% of the OAC students did, in fact, choose that answer.

My second question worked with the first in addressing the effect gambling has on our society. Although about half of the students believe gambling is best described as a harmful addiction, 64% of the Grade 9 students and 46% of the OAC students say that gambling has a neutral effect on our society, while 31% of the Grade 9

students and 30% of the OAC students believe gambling has a negative effect on our society. If gambling is best described as an addiction, isn't it natural that it would have a negative effect on us? Perhaps, the students don't see gambling addictions as serious, or perhaps the entertainment value of gambling is too strong to ignore. Only 5% of the Grade 9 students and 22% of the OAC students believe gambling has a positive effect on our society. I expected the answers of the Grade 9 students compared to the OAC students to be drastically different because of the age difference. Yet, looking at the statistics, they are similar, showing an impressive level of awareness by the younger students.

Another question brought similar responses from the two age groups. However, this time the results weren't as positive. First, I gave them a commonly used definition of gambling:

“Gambling means placing a bet, whether for money or not, where the outcome of an event is uncertain or depends on chance, and in which the player may or may not be able to improve the chances of winning because of his or her skill.”

Then I asked them to keep this definition in mind while answering if they gamble or have ever gambled. Eighty-three per cent of the Grade 9 students and 92% of the OAC students (only 9% more) answered this question in the affirmative.

About 40% of the Grade 9 students who gamble report that they do so approximately once a year; half of these 14 to 15 year old teenagers gamble at least once a month; 6% gamble at least once a week and 6% gamble more than once a week. Should we worry about the 12% who are gambling on such a regular basis?

Yet again, their responses show little difference between the two age groups. Of the OAC students who gamble, 56% report themselves as yearly gamblers; only 35% are monthly gamblers; 6% gamble once a week and 3% gamble more than once a week. These older students can gamble legally and only 9% do so on a regular basis. Comparing the statistics, Grade 9 students, who are illegal gamblers, are more regular gamblers than the OAC students, who are legal gamblers.

Since the Grade 9 students are not permitted to enter casinos or any other large-scale gaming institution, or to purchase lottery tickets, the statistics show that their gambling tends not to be institutionalized. When asked what forms of gambling they participate in, over half (57%) report they play cards for money and 51% contribute to sports pools or other types of pools. Forty per cent of these students report having played lottery tickets and 40% played bingo. Do their parents buy them lottery tickets? Do they go to family bingo? Are the people they trust the most

treating these actions as harmless?

The students were also asked what they win when they gamble. The results were age-appropriate: the Grade 9 students report winning such things as tickets to movies, candy, bicycles; whereas the OAC students only report winning money. This reinforces the fact that the younger students are participating in small-scale, non-institutionalized gambling. But does this necessarily mean that they are participating in harmless gambling? Are these innocent gambling practices of their youth creating potentially dangerous attitudes for adult behaviour?

Over all, from both age groups, the students reported that 71% of their parents gamble, and that 23% gamble yearly, 34% monthly, 34% gamble weekly and 9% gamble more than once a week. These numbers suggest most parents are social or casual gamblers as opposed to problem gamblers. However, in this day and age, are casual gamblers giving children and teenagers the impression that gambling is acceptable to the point where teens see no wrong in gambling more than once or twice a week? Is this setting the teens up for future problems? How will they differentiate between safe and problem gambling practices?

Thirty eight per cent of all students surveyed know or have known somebody with a gambling problem. Twenty-seven per cent of the students report the gambler to be under 20 years of age. This suggests to me that they are friends of the students; 7% of the students report the gambler to be between 21 and 30; 13% between 31 and 40; while 43% report the problem gambler to be between 41 and 50 (the probable ages of their parents); and 10% report the gambler to be over 51. Seventy per cent of the students report that the people they know or have known who have gambling problems have not yet recovered and still struggle with the illness. This suggests that some students are regularly exposed to gambling problems through their friends, parents, and relatives. Isn't it time they learned how to help their loved ones?

After doing my own research and analyzing all of this for myself, I am still left with many questions. However, I have started to answer many of them, and hopefully have made others start thinking as well. It is important to understand that what we do as children, more often than not, influences our actions as adults. Things that may seem innocent and harmless, like playing cards for money, may do more long-term damage than we even care to imagine. Ten per cent of us currently have problems with gambling. I would be willing to bet money that 10% of us believe scratching lottery tickets as young children cannot possibly have adverse effects later in life. I'm not a social scientist with multiple degrees attached to my name, so take my opinions and statistics for what they are worth to you. Do your own research, question what the advertisements say and join the battle of awareness and discovery. It's time to expose the hidden addiction. Thank you.

Notes

^{fn1*} *The statistic of “10% of [adult] Ontarians” with gambling problems can be seen as an inflated figure. The source for this figure ([Van Rijn, 1995](#)) chose to include those who endorsed having even one gambling problem on the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS). However, to be identified as having a clinically significant gambling problem, a person would have to endorse at least five items on the SOGS. Recent research on the prevalence of gambling problems offers a different view. A widely accepted meta-analysis by [Shaffer, Hall and Vander Bilt \(1999\)](#) describes lifetime prevalence rates of probable pathological gambling of 1.7% for adults and 4.3% for adolescents in the United States and Canada.*

— *The editor*

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