# Bingo: Winning and Losing in the Discourses of Problem Gambling

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***Abstract:*** This study focuses on how popular discourses of problem gambling construct gendered and racialized identities in central British Columbia, a region producing the highest bingo revenues in the province. It explores how bingo discourses emerge as a symbolic resource within a socio-economic context imbued with a colonial legacy of racialized power relations. The goal is to illuminate, through the application of critical discourse methods, how these discourses legitimate local regimes of power through the pathologizing processes that result in stigmatizing children and women as "bingo orphans," "bingo bags" and "bingo addicts."

**Keywords:** Indigenous peoples, racialization, problem gambling, discourse, power relations

***Résumé :*** Cette étude se concentre sur les discours populaires des problèmes de dépendance au jeu en Colombie-Britannique centrale, région qui produit les plus hauts taux de revenus de bingo dans la province, et analyse comment ces discours construisent des identités raciales et de genre. Elle explore comment ces discours s'avèrent des ressources symboliques qui émergent d'un contexte socio-économique imprégné de l'héritage colonial et des relations de pouvoir racialisées. L'objectif est d'éclairer, par des méthodes critiques d'analyse, comment ces discours légitiment des régimes locaux de pouvoir qui, par des procédés pathologisants, stigmatisent les enfants et les femmes comme des « orphelins du bingo », des « sacs de bingo » et des « dépendants du bingo ».

**Mots-clés :** Peuples autochtones, racialisation, dépendance aux jeux d'argent, discours, relations de pouvoir

## Introduction

Despite the long history and widespread growth in popularity of bingo among frequent gamblers, few researchers have explored how bingo playing produces collective subjectivities and sociality within and between communities where bingo, whether as a charitable or commercial enterprise, is a regular year-round activity. In the particular socio-economic context of northern British Columbia, where bingo is a regular pastime of residents and a significant source of charity income for small communities, this oversight is particularly surprising. Indeed, charitable bingo is either not mentioned or given only passing reference in ethnographic and social geographical accounts of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities (Larsen 2006; Markey et al. 2008). A plausible explanation for this oversight may lie in the current focus of gambling research on, on the one hand, large-scale socio-economic impact studies of destination casinos in First Nations communities (Belanger 2006; Williams et al. 2011) and, on the other hand, studies of problem gamblers (Belanger 2010; Cunningham-Williams et al. 2000; Williams and Wood 2007). Current research ranges from state-of-the-art neuroscience studies (Clark et al. 2013), through psychological evaluations of addiction (Collier 2008; Pulford et al. 2009) and personality disorders (First et al. 1995), to studies of co-morbidity (Petry 2005). This work seeks solutions to individuals' gambling behaviours that are said to result in social estrangement, broken family relations, child neglect, financial bankruptcy and so on. Studies of problem gambling therefore prioritize understanding individual behaviour over the sociocultural contexts of gaming activities. They direct our attention away from both the social relations in small communities as they are constituted by the socio-political structures that support, and are supported by, gaming activities and the emerging sociocultural contexts that arise from, and give meaning to, community charity bingo and its frequent participants. This is significant since globally

Indigenous women are readily viewed as susceptible to gambling addictions (Bellringer et al. 2005).

Only a few researchers have departed from this trend. Ray C.H. Leung and Kenneth C.C. Kong (2013) adopt discourse analysis to argue that the government of Singapore juxtaposes the identities of social and problem gamblers as a symbolic resource to achieve political goals. Sandra O'Brien Cousins et al. (2002) find that women, the elderly in particular, dominate bingo playing owing to a sedentary lifestyle rather than one marred by drinking, smoking or poor eating. Their research speaks to the pleasure and sociability experienced through regular playing (Witcher and O'Brien Cousins 2004). Constance Chapple and Stacey Nofziger offer support for this perspective in their investigation of the social aspects of bingo for the elderly, concluding that "although gambling has largely maintained its deviant reputation, bingo, as a form of gambling, remains untainted by labels of deviance" (2000:517). Joan L. Bottorff et al. (2009) examine exposure to tobacco smoke in the bingo halls of the Gitxsan First Nation in the context of broader questions of community relations and economy. They find that women turn to bingo halls as an important refuge from everyday stress and trauma, a social practice that they argue reinforces marginalization. Nonetheless, they do not examine the larger dynamics of the social consequences of bingo for women and children, and overlook the formation of stigmatizing subject positions that carry transgenerational negative ramifications.

However, studies from England refute the view that bingo players are not rendered deviant. As early as 1976, Downes et al. asked why bingo came to be "singled out not so much for moral as for purely social censure—'mother playing bingo' as not so much feckless as feebleminded." They answer that the expressive nature of the game offends a ritualized control of emotions idealized in upper-class gambling, "and once [bingo is] established as a game for the 'low-brow,' the processes of social selection sustain the pattern" (2013:175). Laybourn proposes that the class biases of British anti-gambling laws arose in part from "the moral distaste of women and children being brought up in a culture of getting something for nothing" (2007:10). More recently, Emma Casey has introduced feminist analysis of women's gambling in Britain. She argues for "examining the everyday patterns and motivations of gamblers" who are not addicted, since they comprise the majority (2008:3–4). She calls for a shift away from "the pathology of gambling, towards an approach that engages with the social and cultural pleasures of gambling" (5). This approach problematizes journalistic and popular discourses of pathological, deviant gambling and locates an understanding of gambling within power relations of gender and class. Her study leads her to support the work of Rachael Dixey and Margaret Talbot (1982), which shows that bingo offers women "a 'safe' and 'acceptable' leisure space" (Casey 2008:130). Suzanne Morton makes a similar case for the popularity of bingo among working-class Canadians, who, like their British counterparts, have been subjected for decades to criticism from the middle class. Morton (2003:106–107) shows how, historically, stereotypes of addicted and obsessed women were associated with tales of child neglect, careless spending, waste of time and money, and family dysfunction. This focus, she argues, obscures the underlying pleasures and social benefits women experience as they seek out bingo for companionship and community. She further shows how practices of discrediting gambling in ethnic groups historically "had less to do with the actual practice of gambling and betting among members than with the myriad ways this behaviour took on significance for those outside the group" (128–129). Anti-gambling discourses and political actions, she demonstrates, reinforced class, ethnic and religious prejudices. Gerda Reith advances this argument in her Foucauldian analysis of "ways in which problem gambling, as a distinct social phenomenon, is configured within Western societies as a whole" (2007:33).

This article addresses these processes through analysis of anti-gambling discourses and practices in small, relatively remote, rural neighbouring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in northern British Columbia. The goal here is twofold: first, to critically explore how discursive strategies of everyday life legitimate local regimes of power by marking Aboriginal women as pathological bingo players and their children as "bingo orphans"; and, second, to illustrate women's resistance to this representative regime, which occurs when bingo players reclaim these pejorative epithets and resignify them, making them symbols of an empowered social identity. That is, the aim is neither to provide an ethnography of bingo playing itself nor to address the discourse of pathological gambling as a psychological or medical construct. Rather, I offer a critical analysis of a discursive practice that is casually taken up in everyday social interactions. For the purposes of this article, bingo discourses are located within the broader frame of problem-gambling discourses that are "constituted from a configuration of medicalized discourses that reflect broader socioeconomic tensions" (Reith 2007:33). These socio-economic tensions, I maintain, arise within neoliberal praxis that has led to the decline of the welfare state, rising dependence on global trade and transfer of former government obligations to the citizenry to opportunities for private enterprise (as, for

example, privatization of care for the elderly). Neoliberal political-economic theory places private property rights and individual choice at its centre, with the expectation that individuals are solely responsible for the consequences of their decisions and actions (see Harvey 2005). Within northern British Columbia, a commonplace neoliberal world view idealizes self-reliance and rugged individualism (Fiske 2005) and a community grounded in self-sufficiency as demonstrated through volunteerism (Fiske et al. 2012).

## Methods

This article offers a "thick description" (Geertz 1973:20–21) of popular bingo discourses as they emerge in everyday social interactions. It is grounded in a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as constitutive of subjectivity and power relations. By applying critical discourse methods I explore how power relations and the social construct of the "other" are reproduced. Critical discourse analysis interrogates who has power to define discursive relations, given that "dominant discourses work by setting up the terms of reference and by disallowing or marginalizing alternatives" (Shore and Wright 1997:18). Critical discourse analysis does not limit the concept of discourse to conversation or to the immediate context of that conversation. Rather, it is understood that discourses "are made up of shifting networks of associations, bodies of knowledge, expertise, agencies and problems" (Green and Sonn 2006:383). Hence, meaning is derived from the complex interplay of conversation, social interaction, knowledge, social views and preconceived notions. Discursive constructions are made meaningful in particular social locations. "Context is defined as the mentally represented structure of those properties of the social situation that are relevant for the production or comprehension of discourse" (Van Dijk 2001:356). The power of dominant discourses reveals itself in the taken-for-granted expressions of stereotypes as true and factual representations of social behaviours, particularly as they emerge in casual conversations and routine social interactions.

This article arose from broader, ongoing ethnographic studies of caregiving, economic change, racial relations and social economy of social assistance recipients in isolated, rural communities that spanned 15 years of fieldwork.[1] Bingo was not an intended subject of any of the original studies; however, the subject, both as a chosen pastime of research participants and as an alleged site of social problems, arose frequently. For example, during interviews with First Nations women on their life histories and community engagements, participation in bingo was given as an example of their social commitment; contrarily, educators identified bingo as an explanation for educational disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal public school students. Bingo revenues also were discussed with respect to declining federal and provincial funding within the region.

From field notes and interview records from the 1990s, 15 bingo players, all of whom played the game on average twice weekly, were identified. Interviews with seven public school teachers of one large school district serving several small communities had also been conducted during this period in a study of educational disparities. Through these 22 interviews, I was able to identify 14 individuals, then children, who had been tagged as bingo orphans. In 2006, 10 of these individuals, now young adults, were interviewed, and ethnographic research (2007–10) was conducted by participant observation at charitable and commercial bingo venues. This ethnographic work was enhanced by following local debates at community meetings, in the local press and on the Internet about the merits of gaming as an alternative source of funding for health, social and educational services.

## The Context

This research was conducted in north-central British Columbia, in 12 communities located between the port city of Prince Rupert and 800 kilometres to the east, at Prince George. This region was one of the last in Canada to be settled by European and Asian newcomers, the first of whom established a staple economy. Settlement began in earnest in the mid-20th century with the expansion of mining and forestry, a time when provincial and federal policies favoured immigrant labour forces, leaving First Nations economically marginalized. Failure on the part of the state to negotiate treaties with First Nations at the time of early settlement led to uneasy relationships between First Nations and settler society, which persist today, marked by racialization and social marginalization. Currently, First Nations throughout the region are negotiating modern-day treaties and raising court challenges to protect their Aboriginal rights and title.

The economy of the region since European settlement in the late 19th century has been built on resource extraction with a reliance on international markets for wood products, minerals and fish. The area remains sparsely settled compared to the southwest of the province (where 50 per cent of the provincial population of 4.5 million resides). Apart from Prince George, an urban centre of 84 thousand, communities range from a few hundred to 15 thousand residents (British Columbia 2014). First Nations communities are scattered through-

out the region. They are linked to small and larger service centres by secondary highways, logging roads and seasonal gravel roads impassable during heavy snowfall and wet conditions during the spring thaw. These communities are primarily supported economically through transfer payments from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada; however, these provide only modest employment opportunities. Contribution agreements with the province or Canada create limited employment contracts in the resource sectors, while seasonal employment is also found through contracts with resource corporations. First Nations also establish on-reserve enterprises that employ a few people. However, none of these economic strategies offers consistent economic benefits to the community as a whole. Within a constrained community economy, a vast array of social, recreational and educational activities are either ineligible for funding or fail to receive sufficient support owing to low government revenue. Moreover, local control over the dispersing of funds received from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada is restricted by externally imposed conditions (Halseth et al. 2011:54). In this context, charitable gaming emerges as a logical economic practice. Provincial controls over on-reserve gaming are minimal, and monies raised by organizations on reserve enjoy flexibility in dispersing their profits to community activities of their choice.

Similar economic needs drive neighbouring non-Aboriginal communities. The hinterland region currently suffers economic decline as a consequence of the combined weaknesses in the resource sector and a provincial policy that fails to invest in this region (Markey et al. 2008, 2012; Young and Matthews 2007). The province is said to view the region as a "resource bank" (Markey et al. 2008). As the province reduces funding transfers, it calls on municipalities of all sizes to rely increasingly on volunteer services and local initiatives. Hence, small communities bear an increasingly bigger burden to provide social, health and recreational services. Charitable bingo, organized for local purposes, is one way to offset lost government revenue and to control the disbursement of profits. In addition, charitable bingo games hosted by community clubs and social agencies are popular; they are easy to run and require few resources other than the paper game cards. Games can be scheduled regularly, which appeals to a local community of players.

The attraction of gaming returns places small communities in an ambivalent position with regard to perceived and experienced social issues that arise from problem gambling. Intra- and intercommunity competition for players and profits can divide community members. Even as towns advertise bingo as one option among other entertainments that enhance social life, citizens pressure municipal authorities to provide healthier entertainment and social options, particularly for seniors and elders whose physical mobility and economic means are limited (Ryser and Halseth 2013:83). Throughout the region, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leaders are criticized for failing to develop a local economy less susceptible to the boom-and-bust cycle of resource dependency.

Given the small populations and the long distances between communities, all gaming enterprises strongly rely on drawing in regular clientele residing within or immediately adjacent to the community. This is particularly true in winter, when road travel is hazardous. To raise substantial funds, communities must sponsor games frequently and sustain the participation of repeat players who not only participate to support a particular agency or cause but also play frequently as a preferred social activity. In the past 40 years, this clientele primarily comprised of women from these communities, who sought both friendship and modest excitement; they turned to bingo because it offered a comfortable social routine in familiar surroundings with like-minded companions. It is these women, as we shall see, who become marked as the stereotypical player, not only owing to shared characteristics of age and gender but also as a consequence of social labelling within pathologizing and moralizing discourses.

From 2004 to the present, commercial bingo halls throughout the province have been transformed by the government from the familiar social setting of the bingo hall to community gaming centres where bingo is played alongside slot machines. The provincial government mandated this change owing to declines in bingo revenues and the need to attract a wider gambling clientele. Although bingo provides a relatively small share of provincial gaming revenue (in 2009–10 bingo generated $185,529,000, while the gross provincial gaming revenue was $2.51 billion), it remains a popular pastime. Indeed, British Columbia had the highest bingo revenues of all provinces (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health 2011). In 2014, the BC Lottery Corporation reported that Prince George generated the highest bingo revenues in the province, of $54.69 million (Nielsen 2014). Despite its continuing popularity, the government argued that traditional bingo games, where paper cards are daubed in a specified pattern in response to randomly called numbers, appeal only to an aging clientele, whereas electronic bingo and slot machines attract, and hold, younger players and a greater number of male players. Community gaming centres, however, are not an option for small communities, who in consequence face greater

competition for the committed bingo clientele. Nor is the return to the community from these centres as profitable as remote communities would like, given provincial centralization of fund distributions to charities (Hanlon et al. 2007).

Within the context of a rapidly expanding gaming industry and overall economic decline in resource industries, rigorous debates emerge in political settings, the media and private conversations as to the wisdom of municipal reliance on gaming incomes, the nature of gaming as an entertainment, and the true costs of problem gamblers. Public resistance to the expansion of gaming of all sorts is framed within anti-gambling discourses denouncing the character and moral fibre of gamblers in general. In 2010, the city of Prince George held a forum to address a crisis experienced by charities whose provincial funding from gaming had declined drastically. Some attendees expressed concerns that gambling leads to increased criminality and dependency on the welfare state. The tenor of the debate at the public meeting extended to an Internet discussion in a local paper, where the anonymous contributors framed their objections in sweeping stereotypes common to anti-gambling discourse: child neglect, family dysfunction and poor use of money and time. One participant read the following statement at the forum and later posted it online:

> Gamblers will lie, cheat, and steal to gain funds to gamble. They use the money for groceries, the mortgage payment, the kid's shoes and diapers, car and utility payments, etc. Actually any money they can get their hands on to put into a gambling machine. They will leave their babies in a car and go into a casino. The marriage break ups soar, and the young will actually grow into emotionally disturbed adults, as the wars that take place in the homes are full scale ... Any resident who approves of casinos or additional ones deserves to suffer the consequences. They are not built to make the gambler rich and if losing your money in a machine is entertainment—you are lacking a gene that contributes to intelligence. In actual fact—you are downright "stupid."

This same speaker voiced suspicion of the provincial government's motives. "BC vowed years back that they [casinos] would 'NEVER' be a part of our economy. Now they will 'FOREVER' be a part of the rip off the public willingly contributes to. Sad—is it not?"[2] Within this anti-gambling climate, as we shall see, women who frequent bingo halls are vulnerable to discourses that pathologize them through casual deployment of tropes of addiction and compulsion. This stands in sharp contrast to how the women see themselves.

## Bingo Addicts

As other researchers have confirmed, the majority of bingo players are women (O'Brien Cousins et al. 2002:4–6). Unlike in urban areas, where senior women are more likely to play regularly than younger women, in these small communities women of all ages frequent charity and commercial bingos in their own and neighbouring communities. As has been found elsewhere, women seek out the game for social reasons, for the excitement of winning and for refuge from daily stress (O'Brien Cousins et al. 2002; Witcher and O'Brien Cousins 2004). For some Aboriginal women, the bingo hall is one of a very few public places where they feel accepted. One disabled non-Aboriginal player also found social acceptance in the bingo communities. While she found herself subjected to stares and unpleasant comments from passersby on the street, she felt welcome at the bingo hall. In an interview with me, she stated:

> They look at you, stare and say, "Oh, look at her, poor thing." Like you're a monkey or circus freak. They don't do that in the bingo halls. Like nobody treats you bad. They help you out and ask about _____ [her daughter] and just the normal things. Like they know me and they know I am normal. You don't get that just anywhere. And I go to the Indian bingo and they are all really nice, and I make friends with them. They chat when we are in the mall or something, so that makes a difference to me.

A First Nations woman in an adjacent community expressed similar views, commenting on how she struggled with racism—"prejudice all the time"—but not at community bingos or even at the commercial bingo halls in a larger urban centre where she played several times monthly with friends and relatives. A young Aboriginal mother of three young children, formerly on social assistance and now holding a good job, commented that bingo was her only social pastime:

> It keeps me out of the bars and the kids don't mind. They like being with their cousins who help them with homework, which I don't do well ... I guess you could call me a bingo addict.

The term *bingo addict* arose in interviews with a non-Aboriginal elderly woman regarding her volunteer caregiving. She provides support for a neighbour who has limited mobility, and she babysits grandchildren when their parents are at work. Asked how she managed stress, the woman replied, "How? I am a bingo addict! We have games here in town and on the reserves, it gets me out." *Bingo addict* is used freely in conversation

by bingo players. They reappropriate the term, often humorously or, conversely, in self-defence of their habitual playing. Women who volunteer in charity bingos also use the term freely, sometimes fondly and sometimes disparagingly, in reference to individuals who frequent the games. A volunteer in a small community of 1,500 described her "regulars" as "sweet and lonely" people "[who] come out all the time together ... They get called bingo addicts but really they are just sweet old lonely dears, what with their families all moved away."

Use of the term is not limited to those who play the game or who work at paid or unpaid positions in the bingo halls but is found more widely in the community, commonly as an epithet that carries moralizing judgments encoded in neoliberal discourse. In this discourse, notions of gambling addiction do not adhere to clinical definitions. Whereas psychologists and scholars of problem gambling approach the issue from the perspective of an impulse control disorder and identify problem or pathological gamblers as those who gamble despite experiencing negative consequences and having a desire to stop, neoliberal discourse used socially does not. The fourth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1994) defines pathological gambling as persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behaviour that disrupts personal, family or vocational pursuits. Within taken-for-granted social practice, *bingo addict* operates as a negative identifier of women's social pastimes; it broadly refers to anyone presumed to play frequently, to prefer playing to other forms of sociability and to use money unwisely. Deployed as a stereotypical label, it implies a moral judgment that indexes a range of personal inadequacies that border on the deviant, such as excessive smoking or drinking, reliance on social assistance and a general lack of personal responsibility. A First Nations woman who worried about the frequency of bingo games in her community and the lack of other social activities for youth appropriated this discourse when she acknowledged the power of having her community depicted in this way. She stated:

> We just have too many bingo games, almost every night, and then the hall can't be used for anything else. And it gives us a bad name, like when you go to town and do your business with a very little bit of money. They call you down and say, "Well they're just a bunch of bingo addicts and they won't pay your bills." Like it gives us all a bad name ... umm it gets us all that way.

As she implied, deployment of the term frequently carries a racist subtext, which she sought to distance herself from it. The racist subtext becomes overt when drawn on as a rationalization for educational differences between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students. Thus, in an interview, a non-Aboriginal public school teacher in a small-town high school gave this response to the question, "Why do we not have Aboriginal students pursuing academic subjects needed for university entrance?"

> Well, they talk a lot about culture and the future generations. But I don't see that, not here in ____, like we have some really smart girls but they seem to stop doing well when they get here. If there's a culture it must be bingo for the ladies. There's games all the time here and the kids go there with their moms. You can't do well, if you spend time becoming a bingo addict. It's a problem 'cuz they don't study and they come to school tired. You know, we face that all the time.

Volunteers at the bingo hall describe the atmosphere as one that is far from relaxing despite many players' assertions that playing offers stress release. Two women, interviewed together, spoke of their volunteer time as a contribution to the community. They volunteered twice weekly in their small community and several times a year at the large commercial bingo hall in nearby Prince George. Both suggested that regular players exhibited stress and, when they were unsuccessful at games held earlier in the evening, were more likely to play later games as well. In their view, regular players had serious problems and were unable to control their emotions. Invoking tropes of neoliberalism, the volunteers described bingo-playing women as lacking self-reliance. "They just can't get a life and they go out here all stressed," stated one of the two. The second, who had been in a minor car accident with a bingo patron a few weeks earlier, added, "They get so wound up when they can't win but they just keep coming back. And they are addicts and addicted to more than just bingo, like it's everything and none of them have any money really."

When probed as to how often the women they identified as addicts played, the first speaker gestured toward First Nations patrons: "Well, I see B__, M__ and S__, those three sisters here several times a week, and when they don't come in to PG [Prince George] they're back home playing. I don't think they're ever home with their kids." The second speaker, sharing views on the unsuitability of the game and the frequency of some of the younger clientele, echoed her friend's views: "Bingo addiction is just the same as being a drunk; it always comes first and no way should kids be left at home just to be here." In speaking in this manner, the volunteers drew on assumptions of anti-gambling

discourses by imputing child neglect on the part of regular players.

The two volunteers did not characterize all of the regulars in this manner but dichotomized the frequent patrons according to their perceptions of the social status of individuals, based on their age, race (whether or not they were Aboriginal) and source of income. Women they knew were social assistance recipients, or whom they believed to be, were singled out as addicts, as were young Aboriginal women. They pointed to one First Nation's practice of holding nightly games in its community hall as evidence that "there are a lot of addicts there," while overlooking the fact that their own non-Aboriginal community was also holding games several times a week, each hosted by a different social club, athletic team or seniors' group.

Stereotypes invoked by these volunteers reverberate throughout the region as citizens contest the wisdom of gaming in all its guises, and communities compete with each other for the scarce funds needed for culture, sports and municipal operations. Thus, wherever one finds condemnation of regular bingo players, one also finds rationalization for hosting the games. For some, it is a matter of choice and free will. Not reflecting on a clinical understanding of the term *addiction* but using it loosely, apologists for the gaming practices of the government condemn the frequent patrons as addicts, whom they describe as not exhibiting self-control even as they defend bingo and other gaming practices as an effective way to contain personal taxes and allow local groups to support activities of their choice. This reflection can lead to strong language, such as the comment offered in an interview with a local teacher that "slots are a tax on the stupid and bingo is a tax on the even more stupid." While older women are less likely to be stigmatized for their bingo playing and less likely to be perceived as deviant, they are not always viewed kindly. To some, as with the two volunteers cited above, they are objects of pity. Speaking of a group of elderly women, the two discussed the probable loneliness of the women's lives and suggested the elderly women had been abandoned by their families and thus "had nothing else to do." Few remarks carry greater approbation of the elderly players than this stinging comment, made at the public forum mentioned above regarding the transformation of a bingo hall to a community gaming centre: "As for the bingo, it's a toxic vice, but I guess it is better to be an addicted old lady than a drinker."

Some are more ambivalent than this participant; they feel communities have no choice but to rely on the volunteer groups' charity bingos. Nonetheless, they criticize provincial and municipal governments for creating an economic regime that raises money in the short term but generates long-term social problems through problem gambling, unpaid debts, neglected children and elders and so forth. A middle-aged woman who is an active volunteer in a range of sports activities at her children's school, which receives bingo revenue for cultural activities, had mixed feelings about increased reliance on gaming revenue, despite volunteering to serve at bingo games on behalf of the school's parents' councils. Drawing on tropes of class that are common to anti-gambling discourse, she condemned the moral quality of regular bingo players:

> You hear that the old bingo addicts have nothing else to do, but why do we fund that? Why don't we fund something for everyone who doesn't play bingo? The bingo gets the halls all the time ... that's just a way to say, "Oh well, if they are addicted and we can get their money, what's the problem?" But not everyone gets any benefit, so like my friend always says, it's a tax on the stupid. But really it is a tax by the stupid 'cuz it just is a blind eye to all the problems the bingo addicts cause, like neglecting their kids and wasting their welfare money.

Here, too, we find that younger players are held most accountable. An elderly male, one of a few men among the regular patrons at community bingos in his community, commented that the game was not really intended to be played "all the time by young women who can get about and should be doing something useful." "Bingo," he said, "is for people like me who can't drive."

In interviews and in casual conversation, public school teachers expressed strong reservations regarding the impact of bingo playing on parents and children. Despite appealing to their parent advisory council to raise money for supplemental educational programs and athletic support through gambling revenues, the teachers interviewed, without exception, identified all forms of gaming as social harms, and because bingo is the game most frequently played in all communities in the school district, they were particularly concerned about its negative impacts. Once again, the term *bingo addict* emerged as a gendered marker of deviance and as a signifier of deeper problems for which the community as a whole would have to pay. One young, non-Aboriginal teacher who vented her frustration with a particular First Nations family, whose children were in her class, drew on anti-gambling assumptions of a lack of free will and self-control when she stated, "Like the bingo addicts are just that—addicts." She identified them as irresponsible to the point of child neglect. "They spend all that

money in the bingo halls, and then they can't pay their rent and they run to the food bank 'cause they can't feed their kids."

### *Bingo Orphans*

Stigmatization of the bingo culture extends beyond stereotypes and negative labels applied to frequent players to include their family members. Here, as elsewhere (Downs 2011; Morton 2003), there is the prevailing assumption that frequent bingo playing, as with other forms of gaming, leads to child neglect; in consequence, children of frequent players are often dubbed *bingo orphans* and *bingo babies*. In this discourse, children bear the burden of their caregivers' social activities, as the label *bingo orphan* takes on a morally suspect meaning when children perceived to be neglected in this way become labelled as troublemakers prone to mischief and worse.

Most troublesome for children is, in Stuart Hall's (1996:3) term, the "suturing" of caregivers' entertainment choices and academic achievement. This joining of concepts, which are not *necessarily* linked, risks children's well-being and social futures through creating self-fulfilling expectations. Undeniably, reports of child neglect by caregivers at bingo halls around the world, notably leaving infants and toddlers in unsafe conditions such as parked vehicles, have been headlined in the media and posted on anti-gaming websites. While some studies have correlated parental neglect with gaming practices, prevalence studies consistently identify problem gamblers as a very low proportion of all gamblers. Figures reported for British Columbia indicate that 0.9 per cent of adults have serious gambling problems. However, bingo does not factor largely into the issue; electronic gaming, slots and video terminals attract the majority of problem gamblers (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health 2011). Thus, the tendency to stereotype all who gamble grossly overemphasizes family problems arising from gaming in general and bingo in particular. Nonetheless, tendencies toward marking women bingo players as problematic offer an easy and socially sanctioned way to rationalize children's learning struggles and to deny wider, complex social relations that impinge on educational policies and individual educators' practical decisions as they cope with challenging learning situations.

Popular perceptions of caregivers' neglect resulting from bingo playing can lead school teachers to the assumption that learning challenges arise as a direct consequence of caregivers' entertainment choices. Reliance on discourses of gaming gives ideological coherence to social constructs of children's academic potential and social aspirations within social relations marked by race, class and gender biases. The depth of these biases can be sensed when casual discussions about general educational and social challenges facing the region shift abruptly to anecdotes regarding troubled and troublesome children. At a social gathering in one small community, a teacher in the district school related the following incident. An elected municipal representative had confronted a young First Nations girl who he alleged had tossed small stones at his vehicle. He left his car, approached her and gave her a smart slap. When the First Nations government and social service workers heard of the incident, they protested, and the story was carried in the community paper. From this teacher's perspective, blame lay with the child's parents and communities since "it was just another bingo night for them; it's always bingo and the kids just wander around getting into trouble." Overhearing her, a colleague agreed and said, "Well, it's getting out of hand and we have to deal with it. I think up here we need to have curfews on the reserve, like for the parents and the kids."

The concerns of these two professionals lay in the rising number of students in their classes who were experiencing learning difficulties. Having limited resources within the schools, they felt pressured in their ability to allot teaching assistance to their pupils who were failing to achieve grade-level expectations. When queried about how they were responding to the complex learning environments, they both acknowledged that they chose to provide greater resources to children whose families, in their opinion, provided the best home support for the children. As one said, "there is little point in sending kids to the learning assistance and giving them extra homework they need, if nobody at home makes them do it. Kids like that just don't get ahead without that help at home."

In a casual conversation at a community sporting event in a neighbouring community, one teacher narrated troubles he was experiencing with an elementary student and turned to anti-bingo discourse to justify lack of educational support at the school:

> [The child] just can't do the work at this level, and there is all this pressure from the [First Nations] liaison worker to put her in a special program. We can't do that without testing, and we just don't have the psychologists to test every kid. So we have to be careful. And we know that her mom is a bingo addict so the kid's on her own all the time, roaming around at night. You know, without proper supper and not doing homework. There's just no supervision ... it's a typical case of the bingo orphan. So what would a special program do?

The case of two cousins, in their early 30s at the time of the interview, illustrates the power of anti-bingo discourses to influence children's social status in school and the community. Of the same age, the two girls were raised in an extended-family environment, with their maternal grandmother sharing primary care duties with their mothers. The girls' mothers were, and remain, a frequent presence at charitable bingos; however, the eldest rarely played, as she worked the floor both in her home community and as a charity volunteer at the commercial bingo venue in a larger centre. The younger sister played regularly, often several days a week, at both larger commercial bingo halls and community games. The girls recalled how they spent many evenings without their mothers, often caring for younger children and assisting their grandmother. In a joint interview they recalled how their lives were influenced by their mothers' social practices:

> We were living in _____, and I was having all this trouble at school. That's when our [First] Nation was trying to work with the school board about cultural courses and the teachers learning our ways. Mom and grandma were always on to them at meetings and stuff about giving kids more help when they struggled. And me, well, I guess I was singled out for being a dummy along with a bunch of other kids, but there were no special classes or anything for us. And we got to know how some of those teachers saw us. Like, they couldn't be bothered with us and they would make comments, you know, that we would hear them talking about this one or that one would be playing bingo all the time and that's why we were stupid. And I hated being in school, and I got real resentful 'cuz Mom was in bingo, so I started to blame her.

Asked how she later managed to succeed in school (at the time of the interview she was enrolled in university in a bachelor program and is now completing a master's degree), she explained:

> Mom moved, she met a man [laughter from her cousin] and then she got religion. So we came here to Prince George and she put me in a Christian school. And I guess they didn't know she was the bingo addict or maybe they just didn't care, 'cuz they just kept testing me and giving me special classes. They tried lots of stuff with me and gave me a special teacher, the one-on-one routine, and maybe I just grew out of it. When I went to secondary school everything was okay, like it was hard but it was okay. Then after that, I worked for a while at no-good jobs. That's when I decided to go to university. Dr _____, she thinks I should do my masters. Not bad for, what they used to call me a bingo baby and all [laughter from her cousin]. Well, you can laugh, school was easy for you.

Her cousin interjected, "Yeah, you were the bad one and now you are going to university and me, I just have college." More seriously, she went on to describe episodes from their shared childhood:

> My mom was at bingo with aunty all the time, except she was there volunteering. She did it for our women's group on the rez and then, when we all came to the city, she was into the big bingo hall here working. But no one complained about her, she got on with everyone, even all the white ladies, and they never thought she was neglecting me. But the two of us, we stuck together and we stayed with grandma a lot and she sure was tough on us. Strict, oh my god, she was strict with us [more laughter] and she made us do our homework. When she went to play, we would hang out in the car doing the homework. I'd do all the reading and she'd do the maths. We never did it all by ourselves, always together so we only did half the work [more laughter and teasing].

When asked whether the negative attitudes toward her as a child and toward her mother's bingo playing have had a lasting impact on her, the first woman responded with mixed and deep emotion:

> It's kind of funny; you don't really know what is good. All the ladies played bingo, that's how they ran things, you know, for the kids and the elders. Where else would we get the money for the community? And it seemed like it was a good thing for some and not so for others. Some families really fight over the money when you win, and some get into big battles over spending it. With a single mom and me the only kid, I never got that. But, yeah, grandma would get going at mom, give her a hard time if she thought she spent too much or wasn't out there in the bush doing the fish and berries. Never got after aunty, though, so I guess it did affect me. But I'm not angry with mom anymore, I go play with her when she comes to town [she then teases me about being in the bingo halls, and asks, "Maybe you are an addict too? Does your husband know where you were last night?"] ... But I can get really angry when I think about school and how the teachers couldn't be bothered with me and it wasn't just racism, although that is a big, big part of it all. It was like they looked down at mom and treated me like sh.., and a lot of others too. It was just a lame excuse not to bother. Well, I graduate next year and I'm going back to that school and wave that paper in their noses.

Throughout the region the local and district-wide parent advisory councils rely heavily on gaming revenue to finance extracurricular activities for the schools. From a centralized provincial fund of gaming revenue, they can receive up to $20 per student (an increase from $10 before 2008) to use on government-approved activities. With vast distances between communities and high transportation costs, support from gaming revenue for sports and other activities has become essential. However, not all the goals of the advisory councils are eligible for funding; hence, like other social service groups and charities, advisory councils host local charitable bingos. The irony of the situation is not lost on education professionals. They rely on gaming revenue even as they take it for granted that gaming exacerbates the difficulty of their work and can undermine the well-being of their students. In a more nuanced reflection on the situation than was offered by staff members in social conversation, a principal in a particularly small community had the following to offer:

> Our school is small and diverse. We have Christian parents who oppose all gambling very strictly, First Nations families who, of course, support the bingo and raffles in the reserves and a whole host of families who will buy lottery tickets and raffles but who speak against bingo. But we need the gambling money, whether it comes from the province or from right here. And we are so small, if there is a bingo, who is going to come? Once you exclude the religious opponents there's not many left to play or to run it! I understand why my staff can be confused about this. We have kids who need special programs, individual assistance and lots and lots of home support. Some don't get that and we can't compensate. So when moms and whole extended families go to the bingo hall they are easy targets. My staff get discouraged when they know the kids need parents at home helping them. But the truth is, when you think of these ladies, you have to ask, "What else is there here for them?" And if it weren't bingo would they be doing something else and not helping the kids anyway?

When questioned about the provincial reliance on gaming income for education and other social services, she conceded that she disliked the system. Families who refrain from gambling out of religious convictions or from personal pragmatism benefit from the playing of others, the very others they morally pronounce against.

> Every child in our system benefits in the same way from the gaming money that PAC [parent advisory council] gets. So even if the parents of a kid are totally against bingo or whatever, it doesn't affect them in the end. But the situation can be a powder keg. Someone in the community speaks up against gaming and then the bingo players and others say, "So who's paying for your kid's hockey trip?" Yeah, it can be troublesome and the bingo players can get bruised feelings about it all ... there's no place to hide up here and we all know who they are and who goes into the casino all the time.

The principal's remarks capture the contradictions and ironies surrounding pathologizing of bingo players and reveal the shared values within this discourse. Despite her efforts to reflect carefully on the complex social and economic factors shaping educational practice and prejudices, she reinforces commonly held attitudes. She takes it for granted that First Nations women will frequent bingo venues, that bingo players are inept at participating in more approved forms of entertainment and are likely suspects for child neglect and poor parenting. Like others, she fails to reflect on the implications of categorizing Aboriginal mothers in this fashion; nor does she reflect on the academic consequences for the women's children as they bear the brunt of the pathologizing standpoint that has become commonplace. This raises the question: Having been marginalized as "bingo orphans" and "bingo addicts," how do the women and children reclaim a positive identity that refuses stigmatization of their bingo playing and Aboriginal identity?

## Bingo Bags

Gendered constructs of bingo players are visible to women who frequent the bingo halls, whether as players or as volunteers. Some reappropriate the epithets of *bingo addicts* and *gaming addicts* in representations of self-deprecating humour and resistance to marginalization. Comfortable with their own social identities, they publicly proclaim their association with bingo through tote bags, T-shirts and other clothing decorated with bingo icons and slogans: *bingo addict*, *happiness is shouting bingo*, *bingo first*, *friends let their friends play bingo*, *I heart bingo*. Women shop together in the local dollar stores for bingo paraphernalia and novelties that include bingo daubers, specially marked bags and purses for carrying their paraphernalia, seat cushions and small tokens, such as key fobs. They proclaim their identity through the display of bumper stickers, car decals and rear-view mirror ornaments decorated with bingo icons. Stuffed toys bearing bingo symbols and slogans are also popular, and it is not uncommon for women to make little shirts and pants to dress teddy bears, which circulate as gifts and good luck charms throughout their bingo-playing community of friends. "They're just like little hockey players; they've got their

own jerseys ... Team uniforms," joked one of the First Nations women.

First Nations women do not limit their social expression to the novelties commonplace in any bingo-playing family and community. Finely beaded moose-hide bingo bags, beaded earrings with bingo icons and other artistic creations serve as a cultural referent that simultaneously subverts the pathologizing of themselves as bingo addicts and as Aboriginal women. Traditional crafts mark Aboriginal identity and signify a cultural pride that is explicitly gendered. Incorporated into the sociability and identity of bingo playing, they gesture at a refusal to be stigmatized in everyday power relations shaped by a colonial legacy.

The social ties between frequent bingo players carry into self-recognition that is simultaneously resistant and self-deprecating. Women laughingly refer to themselves as "bingo bags." Just as they reclaim *bingo addict* through humour and social relations, they take up *bingo bag* and refuse the sexualized ageist imprinting of their bodies and social practices.

One of the two cousins cited above reflected on how her mother presents herself:

> She has all the stuff, you know, the bags, the clothes, the luck teddy, and she calls and says, come out and play tonight. And if I say no, she says, "What's the matter, you afraid to be seen with this old bingo bag?" And she's laughing when she says it, you know, kidding and all. And she says she's gonna make a new sign for her door, "the bingo bag lives here" [general laughter]. She's in town now right at that busy corner so everyone would know who it is [more laughter].

In short, bingo bags perform on multiple levels as art, symbols of identity and functional items; they reconstruct meaning within popular anti-bingo discourse to reclaim a subject position of resistance and establish a conscious sense of community through action and symbol. The term itself disrupts the normative. Moreover, by displaying bags of traditional hide and beading, the women not only notify the community that they are bingo bags, they do so with a sign that is encoded within traditional First Nations aesthetic. Being a bingo bag is a performance of identity and community resistance.

## Conclusion

Bingo discourse arises within a neoliberal discourse replete with pathologizing significations. It speaks to and is constitutive of governance of marginalized women and children. Meanings of bingo, encoded in a regime of representation, emerge as taken for granted within local and extra-local social practices and relations. This research demonstrates how anti-gaming discourse intersects with racialized and gendered social practices to produce denigrated subject positions that are indexed by pathologizing practices. As the provincial government of British Columbia has shifted public reliance from tax levies to gaming revenues and simultaneously withdrawn support for hinterland regions, small communities and resource-strapped educational districts are caught in a series of social contradictions expressed through discourses that reveal social fault lines ostensibly expressing rational positions on taxation, individual responsibility and free choices in entertainment. With playing constituted as a negative form of entertainment, those who play are similarly negated through pejorative stereotyping embedded in moralizing discourses. Whether gaming is dismissed as a "tax on the stupid" or as a voluntary regressive tax, citizens disclaiming gaming as a legitimate entertainment can enjoy the benefits of it through reduced taxes and redistribution of revenue to educational, health and social services and to community sports and cultural programs. As they pathologize the players through an overemphasis on social problems associated with a minority of players, they promote inaccurate images of regular players who seek social time and refuge from domestic and work stresses.

Social contradictions underlying provincial economic policy construct subject positions through which educational practices are shaped and, in turn, shape individual identities and social opportunities. Children whose mothers are represented in gambling discourse as problematic are in turn positioned as problematic; generalizations of child neglect and parental incompetency are implicitly and explicitly drawn on to rationalize decisions about the deployment of scarce educational resources. Dominant discourses on gambling and gaming reinforce social inequities through social construction of marginalized identities, as "bingo orphan" children come to represent the pathologized position into which their mothers are placed, a marginalization that can shape children's life opportunities and social and mental well-being. Targeted individuals draw from these discourses as they construct their own identities in resistance to the subject positions carved out for them. Despite the power of bingo discourse to pathologize and racialize, the cultural permeability of these narratives is revealed as bingo bags reassert their identities in terms of social cohesion and thus contribute to the social good of the children deemed bingo orphans.

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## Notes

1 All research conducted underwent ethical reviews by the appropriate universities' research ethics boards and additionally, in the case of research conducted in and with First Nations communities, by their research review panels. Data were recorded and transcribed by myself and graduate research assistants. In First Nations communities, community researchers reviewed the tapes with the participants, and each consented to the use of the interview data in published research reports and papers. Ethnographic data contained here were recorded at public meetings attended by the researcher and community research assistants. In accordance with the ethics protocols agreed to, neither the communities nor individual participants are identified in this article.

2 These comments are drawn from commentary in the *Prince George Free Press* online, where they were attached to an article published on November 4, 2010 (Wishart 2010). For further comment on the impact of the reductions to charity funding in Prince George see Fletcher 2010.

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