

Researchers studied the role of learning in gambling. Using a computer programme, they manipulated the predictability of 'wins' on different machines. For example, some machines were set to pay out after 2 minutes of play and others, on average, after every tenth bet.

The researchers found a link between gambling behaviour and the setting of the machine. They also found that on certain machines, people would carry on betting for a long time after the last win.

Describe learning theory as applied to gambling. Refer to the research above in your answer.
(8 marks)

Sample Answer

The learning theory suggests that gambling is learnt through conditioning, either classical (making associations) or operant (use of reinforcement). Classical conditioning is making an association between two or more factors. In this case, gamblers make an association between winning and feelings of success. In contrast, operant conditioning suggests that behaviour continues when it is reinforced positively or negatively. For instance, positive reinforcement occurs when gambling has positive consequences such as winning or feelings of euphoria or excitement. In the scenario the machines are programmed so individuals win. Schedules of reinforcement can encourage this behaviour to continue. Partial reinforcement is when wins occur unpredictably at either variable intervals (time based) or on a variable ratio (number based). These schedules can also have fixed intervals and fixed ratios. In this scenario, the 'pay out after every 2 minutes of play' is an example of a fixed interval schedule, whereas the 'pay out on average after every tenth bet' is an example of a variable ratio schedule. Partial or variable schedules tend to result in more persistent gambling behaviour. In the scenario the researchers are manipulating the schedules of reinforcement using a computer programme, as 'some machines were set to pay out after 2 minutes of play and others, on average, after every tenth bet'. Negative reinforcement could also explain an individual's gambling behaviour as it has been shown to maintain gambling behaviours through providing the gambler with an escape from their day-to-day struggles (taking away something unpleasant).

