

Analysis of Gambling Behavior

Volume 2

Article 12

2008

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Linda J. Hayes

University of Nevada, Reno, lhayes@unr.edu

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Recommended Citation

Hayes, Linda J. (2008) "Commentary - Classes And Instances: Commentary of Fantino & Stolarz-Fantino," *Analysis of Gambling Behavior*. Vol. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/agb/vol2/iss2/12>

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COMMENTARY

CLASSES AND INSTANCES: COMMENTARY ON FANTINO & STOLARZ-FANTINO

Linda J. Hayes
University of Nevada, Reno

Fantino & Stolarz-Fantino's eloquently written, concise, and thought provoking review of research on gambling was a pleasure to read. My comments are addressed more to those engaged in this line of work than to these authors in particular and are intended merely as "food for thought."

As scientific operations, prediction and control apply to classes of events, not to individual members of those classes. Hence pursuit of the factors controlling gambling, and by which it may be predicted, implies that gambling may be conceptualized as an operant class. Membership in an operant class is defined by common controlling variables though; and given the varying conditions entailed in different games of chance, and the fact that the choices made by persons playing these games are influenced by these conditions, the conceptualization of gambling as a single operant seems problematic to this reviewer. One solution to this problem might be to overlook the unique features of different games of chance as to make the collection of their instances into a single class seem justified. The size of the class formed by this solution would create another problem, however, as the larger the class the less its utility in practical matters. In the end it might be more useful, particularly as it pertains to matters of

pathology, to conceptualize gambling as a number of related operants distinguished by the unique conditions of their members' occurrences.

Beyond this rather general comment, I was intrigued by the authors' explorations as to the role played by internal events in gambling episodes. While I wouldn't construe an act of thinking as an internal event but rather as a subtle interaction of the responding of a whole organism with the stimulating of an environing object, this line of research raises an interesting issue. As I see it, thinking about gambling is not a factor that may have the effect of influencing instrumental gambling activity differentially, as presumably intended by the authors, but is rather a component of gambling. Thinking is substitutional activity, and the products of such activities are sources of substitute stimulation for subsequent substitutional actions. In this sense, persons who are thinking about gambling are already gambling, and the more extensive are their histories of instrumental activities of these sorts, the more elaborate will be their related substitutional interactions. By this logic, thinking about gambling is not an independent variable in this line of research: it is an aspect of the dependent variable.

The value of conceptualizing the induction of thinking in this way is in the emphasis it places on the subjects' histories, and the fact that they cannot be isolated or differentiated from the current or future instrumental performances of those subjects. It is not surprising, therefore, that experimental manipu-

Address Correspondence to:
Linda J. Hayes
Department of Psychology / 296
University of Nevada, Reno
Reno, NV 89557
E-mail: lhayes@unr.edu

lations of these sorts produce mixed results: no two subjects' histories are sufficiently alike with respect to initial exposures, the frequencies and durations of play, games played, win-loss outcomes and so on as to expect their instrumental gambling performances to be similar – even under current, common sets of experimental conditions.

I am not suggesting that individual differences undermine or should undermine the pursuit of general principles or laws in science. On the contrary, laws and principles are among the most valuable of all scientific products. Rather, my point is simply that laws and principles are descriptive of classes, not their members – be they instances of an operant or individual gamblers. The latter are unique events, operating in the midst of unique sets of more specific conditions. This is not to say that laws and principles developed in investigative circumstances will not contribute to the development of effective interventions for the problems of pathological gamblers. They will provide only general solutions for these problems though and, as has been discovered in every other applied domain, specific solutions will be required for specific problems.

In short, solutions for the problems of pathological gamblers will not be discovered in laboratories – not just because laboratory conditions are analogues of real world circumstances or because the subjects exposed to them are not pathological gamblers – but because the solutions to these problems reside elsewhere, namely in the unique histories and specific circumstances of individual members of the pathological gambler class.