

research snapshot

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How beliefs in free will and determinism may be related to gambling intention and behaviour

What this research is about

Free will suggests that people choose to act in a certain way in a given situation. In contrast, determinism suggests that behaviour is driven by prior events and the laws of nature. As such, people do not have a choice over their action. Past research has found that people with stronger beliefs in free will perform better in school and at work, set more meaningful goals, and show more autonomy. On the other hand, people with weaker beliefs in free will are more likely to have a history of addiction.

According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, positive attitudes towards a behaviour, such as gambling, predict intention to engage with it. Perceived behavioural control also influences intention. Perceived behavioural control is the amount of control a person believes that they have over the behaviour. People who do not believe that they can control their gambling behaviour often have less intention to gamble. In turn, intention predicts gambling behaviour.

No study has looked at the role of beliefs in free will and beliefs in determinism in the Theory of Planned Behaviour. The aim of this study was to examine how beliefs in free will and determinism might be related to attitudes, perceived behavioural control, intention to gamble, and gambling behaviour.

What the researchers did

The researchers invited students attending a university in the UK to complete an online survey (T1). The survey included the following measures:

- The Attitude Toward Gambling Scale, which was used to assess gambling attitudes.

What you need to know

The Theory of Planned Behaviour is a prominent theory to understand social behaviours. Based on this theory, it can be predicted that people have greater intention to gamble if they have stronger positive attitudes towards gambling and weaker beliefs in their ability to control gambling behaviour. Greater intention then predicts gambling behaviour. The aim of this study was to examine the role of beliefs in free will and determinism in the Theory of Planned Behaviour. The researchers found that beliefs in free will did not influence gambling behaviour directly. But people with stronger beliefs in free will had weaker attitudes towards gambling and stronger beliefs in their control over gambling behaviour. Consequently, they had less intention to gamble. Intention in turn predicted gambling behaviour. Beliefs in determinism did not have an influence on either gambling intention or behaviour.

- The Perceived Control over Gambling Refusal Scale, which was used to assess the belief that one has the ability to control gambling behaviour and chooses not to gamble.
- Intention to gamble was assessed with three items.
- Beliefs in free will and beliefs in determinism were assessed with subscales from the FAD-Plus.
- Frequency of gambling and socio-demographic questions, including age, gender, ethnicity, university level, religious and political affiliation, religiosity, and political ideology.

Participants were invited to complete a second questionnaire four weeks later (T2). The second questionnaire asked how often they gambled and the number of weeks they engaged in gambling in the past four weeks.

What the researchers found

Participant characteristics

A total of 316 participants completed the first survey at T1, and 218 completed the second survey four weeks later at T2. Most participants were between the ages of 18 to 24 years old (77%). About 51.6% were men, 46.8% were women, and 1.5% identified as “other” or did not disclose. In terms of ethnicity, most participants identified as White (76.6%).

The researchers categorised participants who had never gambled or who had gambled once in the past year as “infrequent gambling”. Those who gambled more than once within the past year were categorised as “frequent gambling”. Among the 316 participants, 137 gambled frequently.

Participants who gambled frequently had stronger attitudes towards gambling and less intention to gamble. In contrast, those who gambled infrequently had stronger beliefs in their ability to control gambling behaviour and stronger beliefs in free will. No difference was found for beliefs in determinism.

The role of beliefs in free will and determinism

Past research has found that political ideology and religiosity are associated with beliefs in free will. Thus, the researchers took these two characteristics into account in their analyses. In line with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, stronger attitudes towards gambling predicted greater intention to gamble. If people had weaker beliefs in their ability to control gambling behaviour, they also had greater intention to gamble.

Beliefs in free will did not influence gambling behaviour directly. However, people with stronger beliefs in free will had weaker attitudes towards gambling and stronger beliefs in their ability to control gambling behaviour. Consequently, they had less intention to gamble. In turn, greater intention

predicted gambling behaviour. Beliefs in determinism did not have an influence on either gambling intention or behaviour.

How you can use this research

This study suggests that promoting people’s beliefs in free will may reduce their positive attitudes towards gambling and increase their beliefs in the amount of control they have over gambling. The results may be relevant to clinical practice and interventions to reduce gambling harms. Future research could confirm the findings of this study.

About the researchers

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