

Rodents and the Barometry of Tension

Rodents and the Barometry of Tension

By Alfie Kohn

Since the innovative experimentation on canines to determine pain thresholds ("Torturing Puppies," Sadiski, 1961), little work has been done to correlate external stress with quantifiable phenomena in a laboratory context. In order to better understand how people think, feel, and interact, it seems only logical to study the physiology of small, furry animals.

The ingenious complex of experimental facilities here at the Rhode Island School of Mazeology offered my colleagues (one of whom is getting divorced next week) and me sufficient equipment for our insightful probe into behavior. After buying several thousand rats (the sheer volume of these critters renders their lives virtually meaningless), a ream of graph paper, and two cups of meal from the APA, we were on our way.

The rats were set up in a special box, brilliantly contrived by my colleagues and me, which allowed them two distinct options. If they chose to step on Lever 1 (which we shall call "The First Lever"), they would be rewarded. A lab attendant would hastily sprint in, bringing the critter a tiny armchair, a small can of beer, and a one-inch TV set with remote control. If, on the other hand, the rat chose "The Second Lever," he would be punished. Here, a 300-pound anvil would drop out of the top of the box, crushing him instantly to a powder- and jelly-like substance.

The findings of this part of the experiment were unprecedented. We were able to report a 100 percent success rate of operant conditioning. (When we called Fred Skinner with the results, he had a massive coronary on the spot.) *Astoundingly, not a single rat pushed The Second Lever more than once!*

Every one of these rats, however, demonstrated clearly abnormal behavior, bordering on a rather advanced state of schizophrenia. They appeared catatonic and refused to squeak or peep or whatever the hell it is rats do. Shocks were applied in increasing voltages but without success. We could easily cite numerous benefits to the world of psychology which will result from our work, but, in keeping with the accepted practice of disarming modesty, we will mention that a good deal more work in this field remains to be done. We confidently predict, however, that further experimentation will serve only to heap more glory on our professorial heads.

It is predicted that this study will allow psychologists to better understand emotional disorders, including chronic neuroses relating to the integration of environmental stimuli. Also why there are so many crazy people.

Copyright © 1976 by Alfie Kohn. This article may be downloaded, reproduced, and distributed without permission as long as each copy includes this notice along with citation information (i.e., name of the periodical in which it originally appeared, date of publication, and author's name). Permission must be obtained in order to reprint this article in a published work or in order to offer it for sale in any form. We can be reached through the Contact Us page.

www.alfiekohn.org – © Alfie Kohn