

Oprah and I

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By Alfie Kohn

My book *Punished by Rewards* was recently published in a 25th-anniversary edition – which must mean that I wrote the original version when I was in fourth grade. The new edition has a 30-page Afterword (not counting approximately 9,250 footnotes) featuring research on the topic that was published since my previous Afterword to the book, which came out in 1999. So that's almost two decades' worth of new studies – about praise for children, incentive plans for employees, financial inducements to get adults to quit smoking and students to score better on standardized tests, and a great deal more. Quick synopsis for those too cheap to buy the new edition: Rewards are still ineffective and often downright counterproductive.

I mention this now for two reasons. The first, obviously, is to shamelessly plug the new edition in the hope that you won't be one of the aforementioned cheapskates. The second is that I recently found myself thinking about a story I had related in the book's 1999 Afterword. It concerned my two 15-minute brushes with fame in the '90s when I was a guest on *Oprah* twice in the same year. (What reminded me of those appearances is that I happened to come across a videotape* of those shows in my attic and decided to digitize and upload the one that wasn't already available online.**)

By way of context, all authors back in those days hopefully

murmured Oprah's name as they drifted off to sleep each night. One day, I got The Call. I answered my office phone, heard "Hi, I'm a producer with the Oprah Winfrey Show," and fell to my knees, shouting, "YESSS!" It turned out that someone on the production staff had come across a book I'd written on the subject of altruism – *The Brighter Side of Human Nature* – which, I don't mind telling you, had in only six years sold *dozens* of copies. They wanted me to be part of an episode called "The Kindness of Strangers" with individuals who had done remarkable things for people they didn't even know ("Here, have a kidney") as well as some of the recipients of such generosity. My job would be to explain why we often help those in need, how to raise a caring child, and so on.

Confession: When the producer called me, I had never actually seen the show. I had heard of it, of course, whereas intellectual types in the area where I lived were reluctant to admit even that much when I shared my exciting news: "Sorry, I don't follow. You're going to be in an *opera*?" People who were familiar with the program, meanwhile, assured me that it was the best of the afternoon talk shows. (This, however, to paraphrase Dave Barry, is like announcing that gravel is the tastiest of all construction materials.)

By the time I flew to Chicago for the taping, I had figured out that my task was to try (in the seven or so minutes allotted to my segment) to squeeze in key conclusions from the research described in three of my books. I decided to do so by coming at the topic backwards – which is to say, by pointing out how parents could raise children who were the very opposite of these admirable guests and cared only about themselves. I pointed out that this goal could be reached in two ways: First, one could encourage kids to compete wherever possible since research shows that a focus on winning – at sports, spelling bees, or anything else – tends to discourage helpfulness and empathy. If children have been trained to see other people as potential rivals, obstacles to their own

success, they're less disposed to care about anyone's well-being other than their own.

Second, parents could praise or otherwise reward kids whenever they were caught doing something generous. That, other studies find, leads children to regard helping not as a way of making others happy (or as the right thing to do) but as a strategy for getting a pat on the head themselves. Positive reinforcement breeds self-centeredness in general – and, with pungent irony, specifically when we offer it for being generous.

When I explained these findings, Ms. Winfrey was surprised. "Isn't that interesting?" she said. And of course her exceptionally loyal audience obediently nodded: Yes, Oprah, that is indeed very interesting. "I'll be thinking about that later," she added – a response that I found frankly impressive. She was setting an example for millions of people, that when you hear something unexpected and even unsettling (because it challenges what we've been brought up to believe), you can take time to reflect on it rather than dismissing it or the person who said it.

Anyway, my life had changed. I was now Someone Who Had Been on Oprah. A flight attendant on my plane home from Chicago recognized me. Over the next few weeks, I received phone calls from people I hadn't heard from in years. ("Hi, Mom!") And then, *almost exactly nine months* after my appearance...Oprah had my love child.

Just kidding! (I feel free to make such tasteful jests now that the show has been off the air for some time.) What actually happened nine months later was that the same producer called to ask me back on the program to talk more about the effects of rewards. Of course I responded indignantly: "Hey, quit bugging me! I can't come bail you out every time your ratings take a dive."

Kidding again! As best as I can recall, my actual response was to ask in an excited, high-pitched voice, "When?" This time, however, the producers had something more elaborate in mind. Their plan was to stage and videotape an experiment similar to some of those described in *Punished by Rewards*. The videotape would be broadcast and then I would be asked on the air to explain what had happened. "That," I said to the producer, "is a great idea!" "This," I said to myself, "cannot end well." (What do people who work on a talk show know about replicating a methodologically rigorous experimental protocol?) But fortunately the staff had done their homework and were able to borrow a technique that Ed Deci at the University of Rochester had pioneered 25 years earlier.

Here's what they did: Twenty children were invited into an office building one at a time, where each was met by a producer who, pretending she worked for a toy company, asked for help in evaluating some new puzzles. ("Deception!" I thought. "Okay, sounds like a real social psych experiment. So far, so good...") Half the kids were then promised a reward of five dollars for each puzzle they tested, and the money was placed right on the table. After the playing and evaluating were done, each child was left alone in the room for a few minutes – and secretly videotaped. It turned out that every one of the ten kids who had participated in the evaluation without any mention of payment went back to playing with at least one of the puzzles when the formal testing period was over and no one was around. But of the ten kids who had been *rewarded* for participating, nine did not touch – or even appear to look at – a puzzle when they were left alone.

Boy, was I relieved. But of course I wasn't surprised. Scores of studies (that never made it on television) have found essentially the same thing: As soon as people are offered an incentive for doing something, they tend to lose interest in that activity. In 1996, that result was shared with millions of ordinary people rather than just with subscribers of the

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

Thank you, Oprah.

* Kids, videotapes were sort of like primitive DVDs, except they were three-dimensional, rectangular, and contained actual magnetic tape. ... Wait, what do you mean “That doesn’t help”? You don’t know what a *DVD* is? Well, how do you watch movies on your TV? ... Your TV. You mean you don’t—? Oh good lord. Just ask your parents.

** The *Oprah* segments can now be viewed at <https://youtu.be/CSolTpfymCc> (on altruism) and <https://is.gd/FHZqZG> (on rewards). More important, for those willing to read rather than just watch, the new edition of *Punished by Rewards* is available wherever books are still being sold.

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