

Alfie Kohn's Attacks Rewarded with Money, Praise and Recognition

by

Martha Peláez-Nogueras

In his recent book titled "Punished by Rewards" (1993) Alfie Kohn is belittling of, hostile to, and wrong about the conceptions of behavior analysis. He dismisses the overwhelming scientific evidence that accumulated over the last 50 years--evidence that has resulted from properly designed studies conducted to test the effectiveness of reinforcement ("rewards"). Throughout his book, Kohn's goal is to convince the reader that rewards are "rarely productive and harmful." Further, he argues that rewards are destructive to humans. Ingeniously, Kohn offers research "evidence" (some published in obscure journals or trade books, and others not given citations) in his plan to destroy the behaviorist tradition, the prevalence of behaviorism in our society, and its widespread acceptance and applicability.

As often happens, popular newspapers and journals publish critiques of scientific positions without having the expertise to evaluate what they are publishing. An example is the publication last August in "Nature" of Stuart Sutherland's review of "B. F. Skinner: A Life" by Daniel W. Bjork (1993). Sutherland does a disservice to Skinner's contributions by completely misrepresenting Skinner's work and by discrediting his personal life.

Last Oct 17, again, Kohn attacked behaviorism and "rewards", this time in The New York Times in an article titled "For Best Results, Forget the Bonus" (Viewpoints, Business Section). On October 31, several replies to Kohn's article were published. Two of these letters are reprinted here:

Alfie, Oh Alfie, What Can We Do With Ye?

To the Editor:

In "For Best Results, Forget the Bonus" (Viewpoints, Oct 17), Alfie Kohn suggests that rewards are dangerous. Extrinsic rewards such as money, praise and recognition will, according to him, undermine intrinsic interest in rewarded activity. If this is so, it is strange that his own attacks on rewards persist, since they have surely earned him money, praise and recognition.

Fortunately, his thesis is false. I say "fortunately" since this country is a meritocracy--a social and economic system that values talent and hard work and has generally rewarded them. Where the system has been most faithfully implemented, America is a world leader. Where rewards have not

been closely related to performance, as in much to education, America has fallen behind.

Do rewards really undermine interest? Rupture relationships? Deter risk taking? There are studies that show negative effects from rewards, just as there are studies that show negative effects of aspirin. But the vast majority of studies show that rewards, properly used, result in better performance, more productivity and even more creativity--without adverse side effects.

Mr. Kohn argues that our society should abolish the reward system that recognizes sustained effort and the productive use of knowledge. Ironically, one can obtain money, praise and recognition for arguing against those rewards for others.

Sigrid S. Glenn
Denton, Texas

Dr. Glenn is an associate professor at the State University of North Texas. She is the current president of the Association for Behavior Analysis.

To the Editor:

There are two big problems with Alfie Kohn's recent work on rewards. A warning label is in order.

First, despite all the talk about research, the essence of Mr. Kohn's work is not science at all, but rather a moralistic polemic. He tries to prove that the angels are on his side. He says that anyone who makes any reward contingent on performance is guilty of "bribery" and suggests that anyone who works for extrinsic reward is behaving like "the family pet." He taboos not only disproportionate, unearned and ill-gotten rewards, as well as rewards that "make winners and losers," but also sincere praise for a child's homework, celebrations of group achievements, rewards that everyone can earn non-competitively, rewards for helping the chances of others--rewards for good leadership and teaching. Perhaps even the angels wouldn't but into that.

Second, Mr. Kohn's work is a hopeless conceptual muddle which grossly misrepresents the state of scientific knowledge about rewards. He says "the evidence"--about two dozen studies...in social psychology"--shows all rewards are ultimately detrimental to performance in business and education.

Both quality and quantity of studies are available, in behavior analysis and many allied areas of biological, psychological and social science. Our "short list" of applied studies has three times the number cited by Mr. Kohn. Because our interest is in an "intrinsic motive" called promoting science, and our relative disinterest in "extrinsics" like money, we

are also willing to discuss a modest charitable wager (at the same ratio) with Mr. Kohn.

Sherman D. Roberts
Cambridge, Mass.

Dr. Roberts is deputy director of the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies.

It is well known that the principles of behavior analysis--developed through systematic and empirical laboratory research and confirmed with humans (including infants) have been successfully applied to almost any area of human experience. My only hope is that the contingent rewards that have maintained Kohn's detrimental behavior--misrepresenting a whole scientific field--will either cease or modify Kohn's criticisms into more constructive writings.

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