

Through the Lens #2

Rewards and Punishment

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Dr. Alfie Kohn's book, *Punished By Rewards*,¹ deserves reading by every parent, teacher and employer. It serves to disabuse us of the knee jerk reaction many of us get when we don't know what else to do—that of rewards and/or punishment. “If you clean up your room now, we will go for ice cream when you are finished.” Or, “The first student to get work pages done will get a gold star.” Or, “Work groups who meet 100% of goal will get a trip to Hawaii!”

Dr. Kohn first affords us an understandable explanation of what *contingency theory* is. Simply, it is getting other people to do something by offering rewards or threats or punishment if they do or don't do what is wanted. That is, it attempts to change others' behavior on the basis of rewards (often called “positive reinforcement”) and/or punishment (often named “negative reinforcement.”). It takes for granted that changing other's behavior is legitimate. This branch of psychology does not examine whether we ought in fact to be trying to change others. Further, behaviorism, as it is also called, or Skinnerian psychology, (after B.F. Skinner) as Kohn refers to it, does not have room for a self or self determinism. Rather, we are all simply the sum total of our experiences, both positive and negative.

The Research

One of Kohn's most important contributions (besides his focused, logical approach) is his analysis, in some detail, of the accumulated scientific research on the subject done in the decades since B.F. Skinner studied, lectured on and popularized the psychology of contingency. Contingency simply means that one's rewards are contingent on doing what someone else prescribes. “Do this and you'll get that.” or “you won't get that unless you do this.” The results, as they have come in, are most interesting. It turns out that the overwhelming evidence about rewards and punishment gives evidence against their usefulness.

The research—and it is voluminous—done in the decades since B.F. Skinner popularized the psychology of contingency shows that rewards and punishment do work -- but only for the short term. If you promise people extraneous rewards for doing something, it will motivate them briefly. But. . .

Even for the short time that people are motivated by rewards, they are not motivated for the actual task itself. They are only motivated for the reward. Interest in the primary task itself (becoming a cooperative family member, learning in school or producing more and better at work) is actually *decreased*.

In the family, children will pick up their room for ice cream (or whatever) but the research shows that, while this type of reward works momentarily, it focuses attention more on ice cream than on neatness. Over the long term, these children will actually have less interest in neatness or in becoming a more cooperative family member.

In the school room, stickers and happy faces may get children to learn their tables or spelling words, but at the same time, as they focus on the rewards, they will have less intrinsic interest in learning itself, less curiosity, and are less able to take a subject and pursue it independently, simply for the enjoyment received for doing so.

In the workplace, employees who are “motivated” by extrinsic rewards, are actually less motivated. They express less interest in their work, and over time, actually produce less at a lower quality when they are working for the extras rather than for the pleasure of doing the best they can—the ideal work ethic.

Further, Kohn points out that extrinsic rewards interfere with relationships. It exaggerates the power and importance of one person (the boss, the teacher or the parent) over the other. This leads to an asymmetrical relationship that doesn't feel good.

What Works Better

Dr. Kohn wisely points out that children in families really want to learn how to cooperate socially. In the classroom, the human has an intrinsic love of learning that only needs to be allowed room and *some part in deciding what will be pursued*.. In the workplace, people actually want to be productive, especially if they find the work interesting, the relationships

cooperative and if they have a say in decision-making. Under these conditions, people can be amazingly cooperative, active, interested and productive. *There is a built-in reward in cooperating, learning and working that is interfered with by offering other rewards on the side.*

As the many, many research studies show, what offering rewards and punishment does is to squelch much that is best in the human. Those rewarded or punished become less able to be a useful part of the team, less inquisitive, creative, and they do less and less over time. Even executives, the studies show, are less competent, the more they are rewarded extrinsically.

Bowen Theory Takes it Further

Bowen family systems theory has long been predicting what the research has now demonstrated. *In relationships*, family systems theory has labeled trying to change the behavior of another, as “*overfunctioning*.” It is one of the phenomena that occur when anxiety goes up in a social group. The other will automatically *underfunction*. As a result of anxiety displaced onto one person, the underfunctioner will automatically feel worse, lose energy, and often become symptomatic. Under these conditions it will be difficult to be creative, pursue learning tasks, or produce much of worth.

Bowen theory would indicated that even more than the focus on the extrinsic reward as a distracting factor, *the relationship problem itself* is what is interfering with the developing children in families, the learners in our schoolrooms or employees (both management and workers). Whenever one person is put in charge of another’s behavior, that relationship pattern will be destructive of the underfunctioner being and doing his or her best. The overfunctioner may appear to feel good and produce more but it is at the expense of the others who don’t do as well. It is also wearing to be responsible for self and others, so that the overfunctioner can also be subject to symptoms that may be sudden, such as emotional exhaustion (“burnout”) or various unexpected physical attacks.

Trying to make a self out of two is a pretend at best.

Bowen theory describes the best, most mature part of the human as the *basic self*. *The basic self, guided by principles that have been thought through over time, can be counted on to*

initiate, activate, be curious and energized. It has integrity and loves to help in the learning, working or growing up process.

The immaturity in all of us, the *pseudo self*, on the other hand, guided by what we have been taught or absorbed without thinking it through, dominates others, gives up self to those who dominate and is easily done in, in asymmetrical relationships. It operates out of anxiety instead of principle. It is whatever is automatic in us. (It also participates in other relationship patterns that are not useful—conflict, distance and triangling.²)

Skinner's theory, by contrast does not admit of a self, and so gets trapped in a frustrating cul de sac of dominating by rewards.

Punishment, at best, simply the absence of rewards, or at worst, painful abuse show research results no better or worse than rewards. They turn out to be about the same in their effects.

Competition, often built into punishment and rewards, is seen as particularly sinister in its results. In a competition, more people will not win the reward than will. When teams are set against each other, only one team will win. Competition always leaves as many or more losers than winners and so, is seen by Dr. Kohn and many researchers, as particularly negative in its overall result if one is trying to provide an environment where people can do their best and succeed.

Kohn's book is thoughtful in describing the depth of the problem we face, having deeply entrenched ourselves into rewards and punishment for decades. He looks at ways we can consider in getting on a better track. As he looks at the phenomenon, it seems very like an addiction, complete with withdrawal pains!

Antidotes

Dr. Kohn recommends thoughtfully looking at the demands we now place on others, to see if they are useful or simply there for our own convenience. An example would be quiet in classrooms. Is this an atmosphere where active learning is taking place? He also invites parents,

teachers and managers to invite more participation in planning goals and deciding direction. People who take part in decision-making about an activity show more energy for it.

Bowen theory would predict that when relationships between people in various positions can be more separate (with well-defined boundaries³), equal and open (with good communication) learning, creativity, cooperation, innate interest and curiosity will no longer be problems in the family, the classroom or the workplace. ♦

Written in 2008

¹ Kohn, Alfie, *Punished By Rewards*, Houghton Mifflin Co. New York, Boston, 1993,1999

² Triangling, another automatic posture of human relationships, is the tendency for two, when anxious, to draw in a third, without resolving the initial difficulty or anxiety that led to it.

³ For example, "I can do this, but I can't do that," or "I can put up with this but not that," or "This is how far I can go."

If you would like to contribute questions or comments to this column for Dr. Gilbert to address, please write her at: rgoffice136@gmail.com.