

Why rewards can backfire

adapted from an article by Oliver Burkeman

- 1 Here's a story about a man with a cunning genius for 25. This man is elderly and lives near a school. Every afternoon a group of pupils subject him to merciless taunts as they walk home. So he approaches them and offers a deal: he'll give each child £1 if they come back next day to taunt him further. Incredulous but excited, they agree. They return to mock him; he pays as promised, but tells them that the following day, he'll only be able to afford to pay 25p per person. Still thrilled to be paid at all, the children are there again the next afternoon, whereupon the old man sadly explains that, henceforth, the daily reward for hurling abuse at him will be a mere 1p. "A penny?" The kids are scornful. For such pathetic money, it's not worth the effort. They stalk off, grumbling, and never bother him again.
- 2 The truth being exploited here — that rewards can backfire — isn't new. It has been studied for years, and scientists call it the "overjustification effect". The traditional assumption was always that people worked essentially like Skinner's¹⁾ lab rats: dangle a treat, and you'll train them to do what you want. But for humans, in certain conditions, the reward simply reinforces the belief that the task can't be worth doing for itself. It locates all the pleasure in the future, when the reward will be bestowed, turning the present-moment doing into a grind. From this perspective, rewards aren't the opposite of punishments, but basically the same thing: a way of pressuring people into performing activities you can't rely on them wanting to do.
- 3 This effect gets much discussed in the context of parenting and teaching (beware of giving your kids treats for doing chores, or awarding gold stars for work well done); and also sometimes personal habits (think twice before adopting a policy of rewarding yourself for going to the gym or writing the next page of your novel). But it applies more widely than that. The latest evidence, a study published in *Psychological Science*, suggests charity fundraisers bring in less money, and come across as less sincere, when they're being paid — even if they started off genuinely committed to the cause. Come to think of it, since most of us are obliged to work for money, maybe the overjustification effect is built into the economy. Does



the very fact we're paid for what we do mean we could never extract the maximum meaning from it?

- 4 Perhaps it's not even limited to money. In his recent book *The Course of Love*, Alain de Botton rails against the romantic fantasy of relationships which has us yearning for perfect soulmates who just "get" us, when real partnerships are imperfect, challenging and not always fun. The reward backfire effect adds a whole new layer to this problem: if we're constantly chasing the future moment, when everything will feel perfect, won't that make the daily grind seem even more arduous, and the relationship itself less attractive? 28

theguardian.com, 2016

noot 1 Skinner was een wetenschapper die zich bezighield met experimentele en toegepaste gedragsanalyse.