

## Whatever Happened to Baby Albert?

Albert was an adorable baby, just under a year old. Cute, lively, bright, he was a very fast learner. That is probably why they chose him, and that is why he suffered. Actually, they might have chosen him also because he was an orphan. In those days, children—especially those up for adoption—hadn't many rights or protections. There probably wasn't much fuss about it. Someone in authority in the foundling hospital where Albert lived simply gave permission for the experiment. After all, the experimenter was already one of the most respected psychologists of his day. It is doubtful that many questions were asked or even that any permission forms had to be filled out. Baby Albert was turned over to the professor, and his ordeal began.

It started out innocently enough. The professor and his female assistant put Albert in a small room without any furniture, and they gave him a delightful pet to play with. It was a tame white rat. Although playing with a rat may not appeal to a teenager, if you are a baby—with no prejudices and an awesome sense of curiosity—it is a wondrous pet. It scurries around the room; it twitches its nose; it has a coat of soft, warm fur. Albert loved it, and he showed that he loved it by petting it, cooing over it, and following it around the room.

After the professor and his assistant had proven to their satisfaction that Albert adored his pet rat, they carried out the crucial part of their experiment. One of them stood behind Albert with a sounding bar that would make a loud, unpleasant noise when struck with a hammer. As soon as Albert reached out and touched the white rat, the loud noise sounded sharply and Albert jumped—his face contorted with fear—and he began to howl.

When Albert had calmed down, the procedure was repeated. It did not take him long to realize that whenever he reached for his white rat, the noise would sound. However, since he was only an infant, he never caught on that the professor and his assistant were responsible. Instead, he became afraid of the rat. As the rat would approach, Albert would back off with a look of terror, and he would cry.

The experimenters were not finished with Albert, though. They wanted to test the extent of his fear. They put Albert back into his little room, and instead of the rat that he had become frightened of, they put another tame white rat in with him. Even though it was easy to distinguish between the two animals, Albert was terrified by that one also. Another time, they let loose a furry white rabbit in the room; Albert backed off from it and cried. They tossed a small section of white fur at him; he shrieked and crawled into a corner. Last, one of the experimenters put on a Santa Claus mask—with its white flowing beard—and came at Albert. At the sight of it, Albert howled and hid his face.

## Whatever Happened to Baby Albert? (continued)

During the course of the experiment, Albert, a handsome and healthy baby, was finally adopted. When his new mother heard of the mysterious goings-on involving her son and the psychologists, she demanded the right to take him home. In those days—the early 1920s—people knew little about the roles of psychologists. Therefore, they mistrusted them.

The psychologist and his assistant never had a chance to complete their experiment. Albert's mother removed him from the orphanage and took him to his new home. Albert's mother never did bring him back to the psychologist, and the professor never bothered to trace Albert down. Albert began his new life terrified of white rats and cats and bunnies and puppies, of ladies in white fur coats and men with flowing white beards, of Santa Claus himself.

Critics of the professor's experiment accused him of callous indifference for not removing Albert's fear. The psychologist replied that Albert would lose his fear naturally as soon as he ran into something white and furry that did not make a loud, frightening noise. That is not necessarily true. People tend to avoid the things they fear. It is possible that, with the help of his concerned parents, Albert managed all his life to stay away or run away or hide away from all that was white and furry. Since Albert was so young when the experiment happened, he would never remember why he was afraid of such things. His mother couldn't have told him, since she didn't understand, and the psychologist never did inform his family. So it is possible that Albert's fear of white fur was never removed and even that it degenerated into anxiety (a vague, generalized apprehension). It is even possible—not likely, but possible—that anxiety plagued Albert's life, making him neurotic and unhappy.

The psychologist who performed the experiment repeated it many times with other babies. After Albert, though, he took care to remove the fears that he had instilled. Because of this experiment and his other research, he has been called the "Father of Behaviorism," which is the most influential school of psychology in the United States today. His name was John B. Watson. Despite his discoveries and his fame, he eventually lost his professorship at his university. It was not because of the accusations of mistreatment of Baby Albert. The cause was something that Watson's generation thought was a greater sin: he was divorced from his wife. He left teaching and research to start a new career at which he used his genius in a way that affects us all every day.

Albert might still be alive, an older man, perhaps afraid of anything that reminds him of white fur, maybe even of his own head of white hair. We probably never will find out whatever happened to Baby Albert.