

FACTS &amp; ARGUMENTS » BY DAVID L. CLARK

# My life as a lab rat

I've always been sickened by experimentation on animals. Maybe that's because I have some idea of how they feel

Somewhere in a laboratory, a rat with sleek white fur and a little pink nose peers out from behind the bars of a metal cage. Its eyes are small yet they contain worlds. Without saying anything, they tug at my conscience: "Why am I here? Why are you doing this to me? Stop. Please stop."

Since my student days, I have felt a strong revulsion for the experiments on animals that go on at universities. As a humanities professor who writes about what it means to fall under the gaze of animals, I am sickened by the thought that creatures are being hurt and humiliated on campus.

Where did my profound sense of injustice begin, I wonder. Perhaps it was in graduate school, when a friend ushered me into a nondescript office, empty of furniture but full of kittens that had been blinded by psychologists doing experiments on the development of vision. Knowing that professors were robbing kittens of their sight left a deep impression on me.

Or perhaps my feelings about experimentation can be traced back farther, to my days as an undergraduate student. You see, I was myself the subject of animal experimentation.

I was a freshman and I was hungry. I lived in a student residence nicknamed, for good reason, "The Zoo," where my meal plan did not cover weekends. So from Friday night to Monday morning I lived on dinner rolls and fruit smuggled out of the cafeteria during the week. I decided I had to find work to keep body and soul together.

Work found me in the form of a little poster outside my calculus class. "Subjects Needed for Motion Sickness Experiments," it said. "Cash Reimbursement."

Now, when you are a starving



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teenager, you see the world in a particular way. My eyes grew large at the sight of the word "Cash." I didn't pay much attention to the "Motion Sickness" part, and by the time I did it was too late. I had already signed up.

For more than a year, I was a modestly-paid guinea pig in an experiment testing the effectiveness of various drugs for motion sickness.

Every Friday morning, before physics class, I trooped over to the

university hospital where the lab was located. Under the watchful eye of a guy in a white coat, I was given a breakfast of crackers and jam. He wasn't much for conversation. He was just "lab guy" to me, and I was "experimental subject" to him. He would hand me a glass of orange juice and a pill of some sort. I say "some sort" because neither lab guy nor I knew what the drug was. I just took the pill and headed off to class. An hour later, I returned so the experiment could begin.

Testing for motion sickness is a very odd thing. The basic idea is to put you into a complicated machine whose purpose is to make you feel so ill you want to vomit. Each week, I was escorted into a darkened room at the centre of which stood a chair mounted on a motor that rotated it at astonishing speed. I was strapped into the thing like one of those chimpanzee astronauts. Electrodes were attached to my face and chest. I was then blindfolded and told to relax.

For a minute or so, while my vital signs were being monitored, I listened to a Carpenters song, *Top of the World*. Elevators have music, and, it turns out, so do experimental laboratories.

"Okay, David, just relax," lab guy would say over a loudspeaker as the motor silently started up and began spinning the chair. The thing was diabolical in design, geared in such a way that I had no sensation that I was in motion. Although I couldn't see him, I always felt lab guy's knowing eyes peering at me. After a few minutes, his voice came over the speaker again, more imperious this time.

"Subject, bring your head out of the plane of rotation!" he would bark. Then: "Tilt your head to the left. To the right."

A strange sensation of helplessness overtakes you when you are addressed as "subject." It's as if you've been emptied out at the hands of another. But when you're hungry, you obey. And I did, crashing my noggin back and forth into metal brackets bolted into the headrest, presumably to prevent me breaking my neck. Round and round I went, week after week.

Some days I didn't feel sick at all. Other days I was so unsteady I had to be helped out of the chair. But I never actually vomited, though I came close several times. This seemed at first to puzzle, then excite, and then exasperate lab guy, who grew more and more determined to make me throw up. It never happened, and I suppose that is why my life as a lab rat came to an end.

So, this animal was released back into the wild. But I can tell you this: Forty years later, the word "subject" still has the strangest resonances for me. If I had to describe them, I would say they are like the sensation of being stripped bare by another.

To be a lab animal means being treated not as a fellow creature, but as an inert thing. *Subject*. The very word makes me feel sick. The effects last forever for those animals lucky enough to walk away.

To this day, if I hear the opening bars of *Top of the World* my stomach flips. Lab guy didn't need all that expensive equipment. The Carpenters would do the trick just fine.

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