

Animal Farm must give way to doublethink when studying addiction

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Letter to the Editor

A recent editorial in *Nature* titled ‘Animal Farm’ argued against a lobbying campaign that aims to prevent animals from being used for addiction research¹, rebutting the view from the lobbyists that ‘addiction is a social problem’ and claiming instead that it is a ‘brain disease’. It seems to us that the authors of the editorial mirrored the mistake being made by the lobbyists in ignoring a large body of research that does not fit their world view: evidence showing that addiction is socially patterned, and that prevalence responds to influences that do not need to assume pathology, such as social marketing campaigns (in the case of smoking), price rises (tobacco and alcohol), recovery without treatment arising from a change in personal circumstances, and restrictions on availability².

Readers of *Addiction* will be familiar with the perennial debate about the extent to which addiction is a brain disease.³⁻¹² After many decades of research in this area, it must be preferable to frame the problem in terms that permit the gamut of potentially effective interventions to be harnessed, not just those that focus on pathological failures in choice or executive control mechanisms or powerful acquired drives¹³.

George Orwell coined the term ‘doublethink’ to refer to the act of holding contradictory views in different contexts. When it comes to a socially defined construct such as addiction, where definitions serve a utilitarian function, this is no bad thing. In fact, there are well-articulated models that can explain addiction in terms that permit a focus on biological, psychological and social aspects depending on the context. These models (e.g. PRIME Theory²) bring together such apparently diverse zeitgeists into coherent explanations that make predictions for effectiveness of interventions that are borne out by the evidence^{2,13}. It would be helpful if people working in the field across the spectrum from basic to social science would set their research agenda within these integrative approaches so that we can make faster progress and apply the knowledge gained more effectively.

Competing interests

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