Failure to Find Altruistic Behavior in Rats

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Prior research has found that one rat will release a second rat from restraint in the presence of food, thereby allowing that second rat access to food. Such behavior, clearly beneficial to the second rat and costly to the first, has been interpreted as altruistic. Because clear demonstrations of altruism in rats are rare, such findings deserve a careful look. The present study aimed to replicate this finding, but with more detailed methods to examine more systematically if, and under what conditions, a rat might share food with its cagemate partner. Rats were given repeated choices between 5 pellets of food and 10-s social access to familiar rat in an open economy, with free access to food and the social partner outside the 60-min sessions. Social access was arranged by lifting a door to a restraint, within which the partner rat was held. Rats responded consistently for both food and social interaction, but sharing occurred at very low levels across sessions and conditions (mean < 1%, across subjects and conditions), even under conditions in which the rats were satiated. The results are therefore inconsistent with claims in the literature that rats are altruistically motivated to share food with other rats.