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Extended Exposure to Environmental Cues, but not to Sucrose, Reduces Sucrose Cue-reactivity in Rats

John H. Harkness, Jason Wells, Sierra Webb, and Jeffrey W. Grimm

Western Washington University

Abstract

The present study examined the effect of extinction of sucrose-predictive contextual cues and/or sucrose satiation on the expression of sucrose cue-reactivity in a rat model of relapse. Context extinction was imposed by housing rats in their home cage or in the operant conditioning chamber for 17 hours prior to testing. For sucrose satiation, rats were allowed unlimited access to water or sucrose for 17 hours prior to testing. Cue-reactivity was assessed after either 1 (Day 1) or 30 (Day 30) days of forced abstinence from sucrose self-administration. An abstinence-dependent increase in sucrose cue-reactivity was observed in all conditions (“incubation of craving”). Context extinction dramatically reduced lever responding on both Day 1 and Day 30. Sucrose satiation had no significant effect on cue-reactivity in any condition. These results demonstrate that the context in which self-administration occurred maintains a powerful influence over cue-reactivity even after extended forced abstinence. In contrast, the primary reinforcer has little control over cue-reactivity. These findings highlight the important role of conditioned contextual cues in driving relapse behavior.

Keywords

context; cue-reactivity; extinction; relapse; satiety

Relapse is a major limitation in treating addictions. Craving induced by contact with cues previously associated with food or drugs (“cue-reactivity”) is an important factor in promoting relapse. In rodents, cue-reactivity has been demonstrated extensively using operant and Pavlovian conditioning procedures (Rescorla, 2003; Robbins, Ersche, & Everitt, 2008) and these behaviors have been used to model human relapse (Preston et al., 2009). The role of context in relapse has been explored previously. For example, in the “ABA” renewal procedure (Bouton & Bolles, 1979; Crombag, Grimm, & Shaham, 2002; Todd, Winterbauer, & Bouton, 2012a, 2012b) responding is first reinforced in the “A” context, then extinguished in “B”. Context-dependent cue-reactivity is subsequently demonstrated as a reinstatement of responding in the “A” context. “A” comes to signal reinforcer availability

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Jeffrey W. Grimm, Ph.D., Department of Psychology and Program in Behavioral Neuroscience, Western Washington University, 516 High Street, Bellingham, WA 98225-9172, USA, jeff.grimm@wwu.edu.

John Harkness is now at Department of Behavioral Neuroscience, Oregon Health and Science University. Sierra Webb is now at Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, University of California, Santa Barbara.

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and “B”, non-availability (Crombag & Shaham, 2002). This context-dependent cue-reactivity reveals powerful occasion-setting properties of the operant conditioning chamber context. Targeting the occasion-setting properties of a food or drug-predictive context may be a useful clinically. For example, exposure to a reward-paired context in the absence of the reward may benefit those recovering from drug dependence by reducing the power of the context to trigger relapse (Bedi et al., 2011). Exposure therapy has received attention in both food (Dagher, 2009) and smoking (Freeman, Morgan, Beesley, & Curran, 2012) literature as a possible relapse prevention approach.

In the present study we examined the importance of the self-administration context in a rat model of relapse (Shalev, Grimm, & Shaham, 2002) by exposing subjects to the context for an extended period (overnight) following 10 daily self-administration training sessions. Relapse, or cue-reactivity, was operationally defined as rats responding for a discrete tone + light stimulus paired with sucrose delivery during training. Utilization of sucrose as a reinforcer models reward-circuitry activations and addiction behaviors common to drugs of abuse and food (Volkow & Wise, 2005). Furthermore, this relapse model allows examination of “incubation of craving”, an abstinence-dependent increase in cue-reactivity that has recently been demonstrated to have translational significance (Bedi et al., 2011; Li et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014), as cue-reactivity may be assessed any number of days into abstinence from self-administration.

In summary, after 10 days of sucrose self-administration, some rats underwent extinction in the self-administration context overnight. Some rats were also satiated to sucrose as a means to compare the relative effectiveness of prolonged exposure to the primary reinforcer as opposed to the context of reinforcement on reducing subsequent cue-reactivity. These manipulations occurred immediately prior to cue-reactivity testing 1 or 30 days into forced abstinence from sucrose self-administration.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 66 male Long-Evans rats (Simonsen-derived, Gilroy, California, USA), 419.8 ± 7.1 g (mean \pm SEM) and at least 3 months-old at the start of the study. The rats were bred in the Western Washington University Psychology Department vivarium. Rats were weighed each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for the duration of the experiment. The rats were given *ad libitum* access to Purina Mills Mazuri Rodent Pellets (Gray Summit, MO, USA), and water was provided *ad libitum* except where noted in General Procedures. Food and water were also available *ad libitum* in the operant conditioning chambers except where noted in General Procedures. All subjects lived singly-housed in the vivarium except during daily training or testing sessions when they were brought to the operant conditioning chambers. The rats were maintained on a reverse 12:12 hour light-dark cycle with lights off at 7 AM. All procedures followed the guidelines outlined in the “PHS Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals” (PHS, 2002) and were approved by the Western Washington University Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee.

Apparatus

Med Associates (Georgia, VT, USA) operant conditioning chambers (30 × 20 × 24 cm) were controlled by Med PC software (Med Associates) and were enclosed in sound-attenuating chambers with ventilation fans (Western Washington University). Operant conditioning chambers were outfitted with two levers 11 cm above the floor, a red house light, a 7.5 W white stimulus light, an infusion pump, and a liquid drop receptacle for delivery of sucrose. Each chamber was also equipped with four infrared photobeams (Med Associates) that crisscrossed the chamber. Locomotor activity was recorded as number of beam breaks per session.

General Procedures

A Training or Testing session began with extension of the active lever and illumination of the house light. Presses on the active lever delivered 0.4 ml of a 10% sucrose solution into the liquid drop receptacle on a “fixed-ratio 1” (FR1) schedule. This response also activated a 5-s compound stimulus consisting of a tone (2 kHz, 15 dB over ambient noise) and illumination of the white stimulus light. A response on the inactive (non-retractable) lever was recorded, but did not have a programmed consequence. The experiment consisted of four phases: Training, Forced-abstinence, Exposure, and Testing (Figure 1).

Training phase—Rats were water deprived in their home cages 17 h before the first training session and until they reached > 20 sucrose deliveries/day or after the second day of self-administration training. Water was not initially available in the operant conditioning chamber, but was added once water was returned to the home cage. Training was conducted in 10 consecutive daily 2-h sessions under a continuous reinforcement schedule (FR1) on the active lever. Rats were placed in the same particular operant conditioning chamber for all Training, Exposure, and Testing conditions. Each presentation of the compound stimulus was followed by a 40-s time out, during which presses on the active lever were recorded but had no programmed consequence. The time out did not add excess time to the 2-h session. At the end of each session, the house light was turned off and the active lever was retracted. There was no limit to the number of reinforcers earned, other than that imposed by the length of the session (180 reinforcers maximum).

Forced-abstinence phase—At the end of the training phase, subjects were randomly assigned to one of the forced-abstinence periods (1 or 29 days) with the subsequent test session referred to hereafter as Day 1 or Day 30 of forced abstinence. The rats lived in the vivarium for the duration of forced abstinence.

Exposure phase—Rats in each forced abstinence period condition were divided into four treatment groups: home cage + water, home cage + sucrose, operant conditioning chamber + water, operant conditioning chamber + sucrose. 17 h prior to testing, subjects were left in the home cage or placed in the operant conditioning chamber according to their assignment and provided with a bottle of either 200 ml sucrose (10% solution) or 200 ml water. Subjects in the operant conditioning chamber condition were placed there without the presence of the house light, active lever, or compound stimulus. Doors of the sound-attenuating chambers were left slightly ajar to allow ambient light to penetrate (lights on at 7 PM, off at 7 AM).

Ventilation fans were on during the chamber exposure period. Food was available in all conditions. Plain water was not provided during the 17-h sucrose satiation period. At the end of the satiation period, both water and sucrose bottles were removed and their contents measured and recorded.

Testing phase—Testing was identical to Training, except sucrose was not delivered for active lever presses. At the conclusion of the Testing phase, subjects were returned to the home cage.

Analyses

Training Phase—Active lever presses, inactive lever presses, sucrose deliveries, and photobeam breaks were analyzed separately using repeated measures (RM) ANOVA, with days 7–10 of training as a within-group variable. Forced-abstinence day and exposure conditions (housing and liquid assignment) were between-group factors. These between-group factors were included at this point to verify that groups were similar in response rates prior to being assigned to experimental conditions.

Exposure phase—17-h consumption of sucrose and water was analyzed using ANOVA with the between-group factors of forced-abstinence day, housing, and liquid assignment. All dependent measures were analyzed separately.

Testing phase—Response data (active lever presses, inactive lever presses, and compound cue deliveries) and photobeam breaks were analyzed using ANOVA with the same between-group factors identified above.

Statistics—Sources of significant two-way interactions were examined by main effect analysis. F-values are only reported for significant interactions and main effects, unless non-significant main effects or interactions are necessary to illustrate a relevant lack of significance. Effect sizes of significant ANOVAs are reported as partial eta squared (η^2_p). The Neuman-Keuls test was used for post-hoc comparison of means where appropriate. The alpha level was set at 0.05. All statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistica 12 software package (StatSoft, Inc., Tulsa, OK, USA). Figures were made using the SigmaPlot 8.0 software package (SPSS, Chicago, IL, USA).

Results

Training phase

There was a significant main effect of training day (days 7–10) on active lever pressing [$F(3,195) = 10.2, \eta^2_p = 0.14, p < 0.0001$], and sucrose deliveries [$F(3,195) = 9.0, \eta^2_p = 0.12, p < 0.0001$] with active lever responding increasing over these days. Inactive lever responding did not change over these days [$F(3,195) = 2.0, \eta^2_p = 0.03, p = 0.1$]. There were no significant interactions between housing condition, sucrose satiation group, or abstinence group and the number of active lever presses, inactive lever presses, or sucrose deliveries on training days 7–10. Values were (mean day 7–10 \pm SEM) active lever, 115.8 \pm 6.5; sucrose deliveries, 59.6 \pm 2.8; inactive lever, 4.5 \pm 0.5). Locomotor activity did not differ between groups, but

did significantly decrease 2.5% from day 7 through day 10 of training [$F(3,174) = 4.7$, $\eta^2_p=0.07$, $p < 0.01$]; photobeam breaks averaged over days 7–10, 1438.4 ± 424.0 .

Exposure phase

Sucrose or water consumption measured in either the operant conditioning chamber or the home cage during the 17 h prior to testing is indicated in Figure 2A. Overall, rats drank significantly more sucrose than water (4–5 times more, depending on the condition) [$F(1,64) = 251.5$, $\eta^2_p=0.8$, $p < 0.0001$]. There was also a significant interaction of fluid type and forced-abstinence period [$F(1,62) = 7.1$, $\eta^2_p=0.1$, $p < 0.01$], but not housing condition and forced-abstinence period. As shown in Figure 2B, rats that underwent 30-days of forced abstinence drank significantly more sucrose, but not water, than rats tested on the first day of forced abstinence (incubation of sucrose consumption).

Testing Phase

Analysis of compound cue presentations revealed a significant interaction between forced-abstinence period and housing condition [$F(1,62) = 11.8$, $\eta^2_p=0.16$, $p < 0.005$], and main effects of both forced-abstinence period, [$F(1,64) = 20.3$, $\eta^2_p=0.24$, $p < 0.0001$] and housing condition, [$F(1,64) = 29.1$, $\eta^2_p=0.31$, $p < 0.0001$]. Rats housed in the operant conditioning chamber for 17 h prior to the beginning of the Testing session responded for significantly fewer cue presentations than rats housed in their home cages prior to testing (Figure 3A). This effect was significantly greater following 30 days of forced abstinence indicated by a larger difference in cue presentations between housing groups at Day 30, than at Day 1 (Figure 3B). Similar to the incubation of sucrose consumption shown in Figure 2, rats in the 30 day forced-abstinence condition received more cue presentations than those tested on the first day of forced abstinence, regardless of housing condition (Figure 3A). Access to sucrose did not affect compound cue presentations, [$F(1,64) = 0.7$, $\eta^2_p=0.01$, $p = 0.39$]. Thus, our attempt to satiate sucrose craving with sucrose was not effective at reducing responding for cue presentations, but extinction of the testing environment was (Figure 3A).

Similar to cue presentations, analysis of active lever pressing revealed a significant main effect of housing condition during the exposure period [$F(1,64) = 16.2$, $\eta^2_p=0.2$, $p < 0.0005$], and a significant main effect of days of forced abstinence [$F(1,64) = 21.9$, $\eta^2_p=0.26$, $p < 0.0001$]. However, unlike the statistically significant interaction between abstinence period and housing condition seen with cue presentations, the interaction for active lever presses was only nearly statistically significant [$F(1,62) = 3.4$, $\eta^2_p=0.05$, $p = 0.07$]. Extinction of the operant conditioning chamber reduced active lever pressing regardless of forced-abstinence period, yet active lever pressing increased over days of forced abstinence (Figures 4). Also similar to cue presentations, access to sucrose during the exposure period was without effect on active lever pressing, [$F(1,64) = 1.6$, $\eta^2_p=0.02$, $p = 0.21$].

Inactive lever pressing was not found to differ between rats tested after 1 or 30 days of forced abstinence, or between groups offered sucrose or water during the exposure period. We found a main effect of housing condition during the exposure period on inactive lever pressing, [$F(1,64) = 20.6$, $\eta^2_p=0.24$, $p < 0.0001$]. However, no interaction was found

between housing condition and days of forced abstinence [$F(1,62) = 0.8$, $\eta^2_p=0.01$, $p = 0.37$], or housing and sucrose satiation [$F(1,62) = 0.3$, $\eta^2_p=0.01$, $p = 0.56$]. Mean inactive lever responding was significantly reduced by extinction of the operant conditioning chamber on the 1st day of forced abstinence (home cage, 4.5 ± 1.7 and operant conditioning chamber, 1.2 ± 0.4 lever presses/2 h) and on the 30th day of forced abstinence (home cage, 6.8 ± 1.2 and operant conditioning chamber, 1.9 ± 0.4 lever presses/2 h; post-hoc p 's < 0.05). Locomotor activity was greater after 30 days of forced abstinence [$F(1,64) = 4.4$, $\eta^2_p=0.06$, $p < 0.05$] and was reduced by extinction of the operant conditioning chambers [$F(1,64) = 6.1$, $\eta^2_p=0.09$, $p < 0.05$]. There were no significant interactions for locomotor behavior between abstinence period, housing condition, and/or liquid available during exposure. Photobeam breaks for the conditions according to the significant main effects were Day 1, 904.9 ± 62.3 , Day 30, 1171.3 ± 108.4 , home cage, 1197.6 ± 69.2 , operant conditioning chamber, 886.6 ± 104.6 .

Discussion

Context extinction attenuated lever pressing for a sucrose-paired cue in rats extinguished to the operant chamber compared to the home cage (Figure 4). We also observed increases in both sucrose cue-reactivity and sucrose consumption after a 30-day period of forced abstinence, similar to previous reports of incubated responding and consumption (Harkness, Webb, & Grimm, 2010; Grimm et al., 2013). In contrast to context extinction, sucrose satiation did not reduce cue-reactivity when rats were provided sucrose in either home cages or operant conditioning chambers. Therefore, satiation of the primary reinforcer did not reduce responding for a cue previously associated with sucrose. These results suggest that contextual cues may have a greater influence on responding for a sucrose-paired cue than sucrose itself.

We previously demonstrated that satiety of sucrose consumption, by 17-h access to a sucrose solution immediately before operant testing, only slightly reduces extinction responding; there is no effect of sucrose satiation on responding for a sucrose-paired discrete cue after either 1 or 30 days of forced abstinence (Grimm, Fyall, & Osincup, 2005). In our previous report, we speculated that satiety to sucrose does not greatly affect the conditioned motivation that underlies relapse. The present findings support this hypothesis. Rats consumed 3–4 times more sucrose solution by volume than water controls during exposure (Figure 2), yet their sucrose cue-reactivity was similar to controls (Figures 3, 4).

Extinction of contextual cues, on the other hand, reduced lever responding for the cue previously associated with sucrose. One explanation for this effect is that the excitatory power of the chamber, due to its past association with sucrose self-administration availability, was reduced by prolonged exposure of the subject to it without the availability of self-administration cues (response-contingent sucrose and associated cues including the lever and tone + light cue). Therefore in the test session rats only showed behavior elicited by the sucrose self-administration cues. Another explanation is similar, but emphasizes the connections between stimuli in the self-administration context. Bindra (1972) suggested that the entirety of the conditioning context functions as a “complete CS” and therefore omission (or extinction) of an element would reduce the overall power of the complete CS to elicit

responding. That is, lever pressing following context extinction may represent the remaining portion of responding engendered by the tone + light discrete cue alone. Marlin & Miller (1981) and Marlin (1982) proposed a similar idea, but emphasized the role of context as an especially important CS. In addition, they provided evidence supporting the idea that the motivational valence of CS elements are linked. For example, they described how extended exposure (habituation) to a shock-predictive context (argued to be a CS itself) led to decreased fear elicited by the shock-associated CS. It is interesting to note, however, that inasmuch as satiety should have decreased motivation to seek sucrose, the satiety manipulation was only marginally effect (see next paragraph) and only on Day 1 of forced abstinence. Therefore, if CS elements are tied to motivational state, the present results indicate that the ability to observe the impact of the associations depends on length of abstinence. This being said, discerning which of the above explanations best fits the present data is not possible without further experimentation.

Incubation of craving (Grimm, Hope, Wise, & Shaham, 2001) is described as an abstinence-dependent increase in responding for a cue associated with food or drug (Grimm et al., 2011) and, recently, has been reported with the non-food or drug reinforcer saccharin (Aoyama, Barnes, & Grimm, 2014). Incubation of craving has been observed in human addicts (Nava et al., 2006; Bedi et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2013; Li et al., 2014) and may be a key factor in high rates of relapse to drugs and food in humans. In the present study, sucrose cue-reactivity was also significantly greater after one month of forced abstinence. Only context extinction significantly interacted with incubation, reducing lever pressing by operant conditioning chamber-housed animals to a greater extent on Day 30 vs. Day 1 of forced abstinence (Figure 3B). Figures 3A and 4 illustrate apparently reduced responding on Day 1 for sucrose satiated subjects, yet the interaction between Day and Liquid was not statistically significant (see Results). To test for an effect of sucrose satiation, exploratory Bonferroni-corrected t-tests were performed for cue presentations and active lever responses comparing water vs. sucrose. We found that the sucrose satiation manipulation reduced responding and cue presentations on Day 1 (p 's < 0.01). With increased statistical power (i.e., larger group sizes), we may have detected this effect in the ANOVA. Regardless, the t-test results confirm our previous finding that sucrose satiation decreased initial extinction responding (essentially the cue-reactivity Testing in the present study), but not responding for a discrete cue (Grimm et al., 2005). As noted above, neither Grimm et al. (2005) or the present study found that sucrose satiation reduced sucrose cue-reactivity after one month of forced abstinence.

In a previous study, we observed a time-dependent increase in sucrose consumption between Day 1 and 7 of forced abstinence, but not between Days 1 and 30 (Grimm et al., 2005). However, we have since consistently observed incubation of sucrose consumption over 30 days, either in the home cages (present study) or in the operant conditioning chamber (present study; Grimm et al., 2013). Procedural differences may account for the discrepancy between Grimm et al. (2005) and these two more recent studies. For example, rats self-administered sucrose for 6h/day in Grimm et al. (2005), vs. 2h/day in the present study and Grimm et al. (2013). This inconsistency between studies indicates that incubation of sucrose consumption is not necessary for incubation of sucrose-cue reactivity. In addition, self-administration cues are not necessary for incubation of sucrose consumption as incubation

of consumption occurred in the home cage (Figure 2A home cage extinction sucrose groups, and Figure 2B).

Future studies could examine neurobiological substrates of the extinction effect we observed, in particular brain regions that might have mediated the observed dissociation between primary and secondary reinforcement. Targets for future investigations might therefore include the nucleus accumbens (primary reinforcement; Wise, 2004), hippocampus (conditioned context; Marchant, Kaganovsky, Shaham, & Bossert, 2014), and the basolateral amygdala (conditioned discrete cue; Weiss et al., 2000). Finally, although a 10% sucrose solution is one of the most widely used concentrations for rodent self-administration studies, and was used by both Grimm et al. (2005) and the present study, others have used solutions as low as 4% (Galarce, Crombag, & Holland, 2007), or as high as 20–75% (Samson & Chappell, 1999), either of which extreme could have resulted in different levels of cue-reactivity following the exposure manipulations used in the present study. Examining the potential role of magnitude of reinforcement in this cue-reactivity could be a manipulated variable in future studies.

Conclusion

The present results indicate that context extinction reduces cue-reactivity. These results support the conclusion that the self-administration context, including discrete cues paired with self-administration, maintains a powerful influence on conditioned responding even after extended forced abstinence. In contrast, the primary reinforcer itself has little control over conditioned responding, especially after extended forced abstinence. Craving and relapse can be triggered by exposure to stimuli previously associated with drugs or food (Carter & Tiffany, 1999; Childress et al., 1999; Jansen et al., 2003; Sobik, Hutchison, & Craighead, 2005; Epstein et al., 2009). Based on our findings reported here, extinction of drug- or food-associated contexts may be an effective tool for reducing craving and relapse in human addicts.

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	Forced Abstinence	
Training	Exposure	Testing on Day 1
10 days SA	17h	2h

	Forced Abstinence		
Training	Home Cage	Exposure	Testing on Day 30
10 days SA	Until 4PM 29 th Day of Forced Abstinence	17h	2h

Training

2h daily sucrose self-administration (SA)

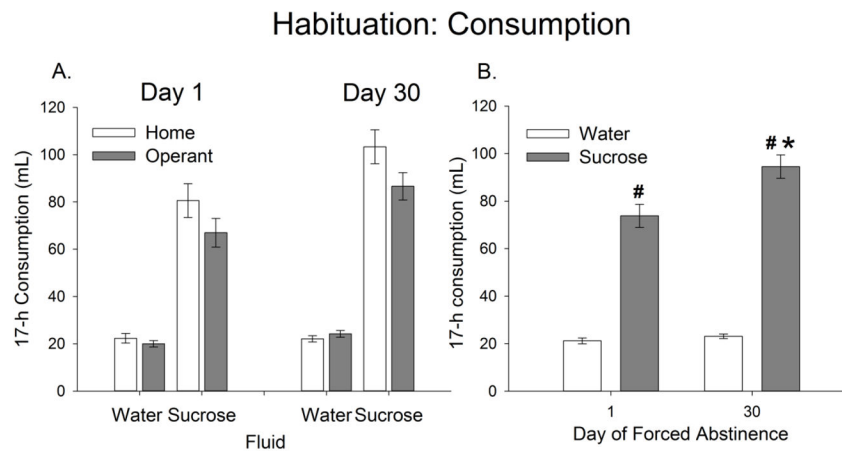
Exposure

Housed in either Home Cage or Operant Conditioning Chamber (extinction) with bottle of either water or sucrose (satiety)

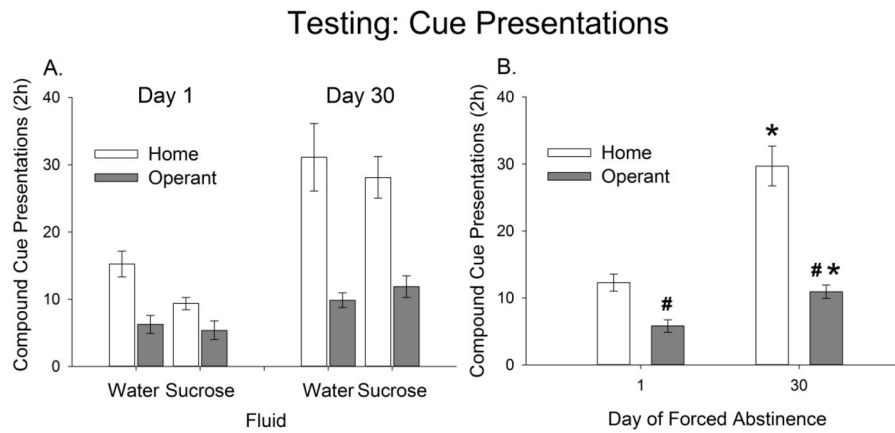
SA and Testing

Occurs in Operant Conditioning Chamber

Figure 1.
General Procedure

**Figure 2.**

Consumption of water or sucrose (satiation manipulation) during the 17-h exposure period. Forced abstinence conditions are shown, indicated by “Day 1” or “Day 30”. (A) All groups shown. Mean consumption (\pm SEM) of either water or sucrose in home cage (Home) or operant conditioning chamber (Operant) at each time point in forced abstinence. (B) Data collapsed by housing condition. Fluid type (water or sucrose) during satiation significantly interacted with length of forced-abstinence. Sucrose consumption was greater than water consumption at both time points, and sucrose consumption at Day 30 was greater than Day 1. This increase indicates an “incubation” of sucrose consumption. # Overall significant effect of fluid type, $p < 0.05$. * Significant difference in sucrose consumption between Days 1 and 30 of forced abstinence, $p < 0.05$.

**Figure 3.**

Compound cue presentations resulting from active lever presses during Testing. (A) All groups shown. Mean cue presentations (\pm SEM) of rats given access to either water or sucrose, in either the home cage (Home) or operant conditioning chamber (Operant) during the 17-h exposure period. (B) Effect of housing on cue presentations. Data collapsed by fluid type, showing a significant interaction of housing by day of forced abstinence. Rats housed in the operant conditioning chamber during the 17-h exposure period responded for significantly fewer compound cue presentations than rats housed in home cages during this period. Rats tested after 30 days of forced abstinence responded for significantly more cue presentations than rats tested after 1 day, indicating an incubation of responding.

*Significant effect of length of forced-abstinence, p 's < 0.05 . # Significant effect of housing condition on that day of forced-abstinence, $p < 0.05$.

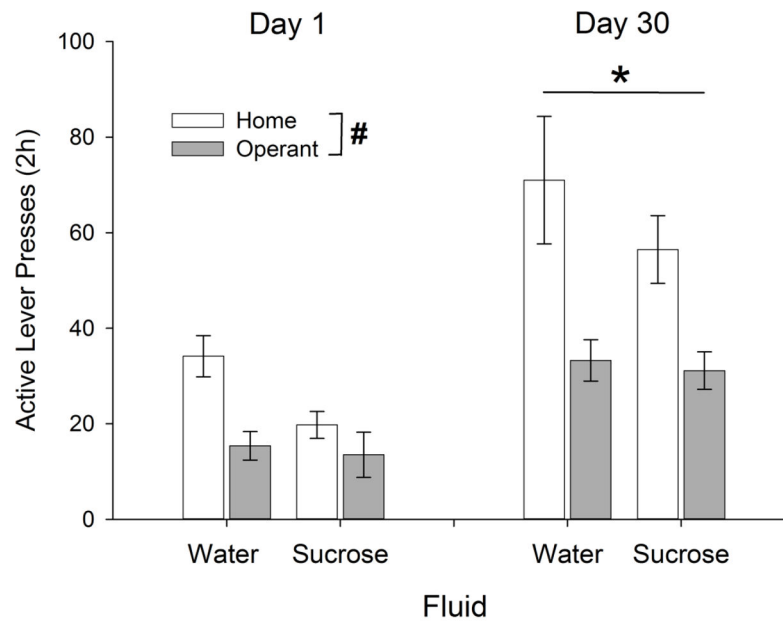


Figure 4.

Active lever presses during Testing. Mean active lever presses (\pm SEM) of rats given access to either water or sucrose in either the home cage (Home) or operant conditioning chamber (Operant) during the 17-h exposure period. Rats that underwent 30 days of forced abstinence made significantly more active lever presses than rats tested immediately after training. Rats housed in the operant chamber during the exposure period were found to make significantly fewer active lever presses than rats housed in their home cage, regardless of length of forced abstinence. * Main effect of forced-abstinence period, $p < 0.0001$. # Main effect of housing condition, $p < 0.0001$.