

Activity 3.1

How *Not* to Report Research Findings: The Example of Watson & Rayner (1920)

In 1920 J.B. Watson and Rosalie Rayner reported the findings of a study that has come to be known as the “**Little Albert**” *study*, and is often cited as one of the founding pieces of scientific research in psychopathology. However, despite being quoted in almost every clinical psychology textbook since that time, the original report of this research is not as clearly written as we might wish, and many subsequent studies were unable to replicate it.

After reading the [Watson & Rayner \(1920\)](#) article:

1. Can you accurately describe what they did?
2. Can you describe exactly what they found?
3. Can you describe the procedures you would use in a study designed to try and replicate their findings?

Two other articles that are instructive here are:

- Harris B. (1979). [Whatever happened to Little Albert?](#) *American Psychologist*, 34, 151-160.
- Delprato DJ (1980). [Hereditary determinants of fears and phobias: A critical review.](#) *Behavior Therapy*, 11, 79-103.

Harris (1979) describes how the Watson & Rayner study has become a well-known piece of psychological ‘folklore’ with many textbooks misquoting the details of the research because their authors have relied on secondary sources rather than reading the original article. Even Watson himself misrepresented and distorted this research in later writings.

Delprato (1980) describes a number of studies conducted in the 10-15 years after 1920 that attempted to replicate the ‘Little Albert’ findings. Many of these failed in their attempts, and as a consequence are rarely mentioned in clinical psychology textbooks.

Conclusion: Accurate descriptions of research and accurate reporting of research are essential for proper understanding. If research reports lack necessary detail or are confusing, they are not only difficult to replicate, they may also give rise to misreporting of findings.