Punishment Works in Ways Skinner Never Imagined

A review of

The Rewards of Punishment: A Relational Theory of Norm Enforcement
by Christine Horne
$55.00, hardcover; $21.95, paperback

Reviewed by
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In this elegant short volume, Horne exhibits a mastery of experimental methods used to evaluate theories of norm enforcement and also shows a nearly staggering breadth of reference to philosophical, literary, economic, and political theory, as well as relevant concepts from within experimental psychology. Tour de force comes to mind as an apt description of what she treats us with in The Rewards of Punishment: A Relational Theory of Norm Enforcement.

Horne is an associate professor of sociology at Washington State University and the coeditor of two books, Theories of Social Order (2003) and Experiments in Criminology and Law (2008). Drawing on interdependence theory, which deals with the ways in which two or more people’s behaviors have implications for both their own rewards and consequences and
also for the rewards and consequences for others with whom they interact, Horne is able to provide a novel theory of how social norms develop and continue to be maintained.

In the course of her theoretical development, she answers a number of questions that have puzzled social theorists since systematic theorizing began. Among these are the following: (a) Why is harmful behavior not always punished? (b) Why do group members sometimes enforce norms in ways that are actually harmful to the group? (c) Why do people enforce norms that benefit others rather than themselves? (d) Why are atypical behaviors sometimes punished and sometimes not?

The core of Horne’s theory can be stated simply:

People care about what others think of them. This concern affects not only their behavior but also their sanctioning activity. . . . They consider the likely reactions of people around them. [Consequently] they will prefer to enforce those norms that they think others want [enforced]. (p. 15)

A related crucial point is that individual behavior is embedded within a social structure such that some people’s views are more important than others’ views. In general, the more interdependent the person, the more norm enforcement increases.

Psychologists often approach punishment from the perspective of operant theory, especially the results of the hundreds of animal experiments showing that punishment in the aversive sense (painful, costly consequences) merely suppresses the behavior in question and does not extinguish it. Extinction is required to remove a behavior from one’s repertoire, and achieving it is a long-term process.

However, cognitive psychologists have shown that people have the capacity for one-trial learning and that once a means–ends relationship has been learned, neither animals nor persons forget it. Rather, they merely do not use that relationship unless it appears to have positive consequences and those with the power to punish cannot detect the behavior (Bandura, 1973). What Horne brings to bear in The Rewards of Punishment is a systematic examination of people’s concern for others with whom they interact and how those concerns shape norm enforcement. This is a major step forward toward what one might call a genuinely social cognitive, institutionally sensitive theory of norms.

To illustrate the conclusion above, let me briefly provide Horne’s answers to several of the questions raised about norms.

1. If a behavior is wrong, why is it punished only sometimes? Without a supporting social structure, norm enforcement is unlikely, so sometimes violations go unpunished. Think of government corruption in a lawless state. Where is the social support for norm enforcement?
2. Why do people sometimes enforce norms that benefit others but not themselves? Looking good in the eyes of one’s fellows has some value, so a person may do good things for others that do not benefit him- or herself directly.

3. Why are things that are, in reality, inconsequential sometimes punished? In all social relations misperception is possible, so that if you have seen $X$ as undesirable and punished it, others, with whom you are interdependent, may reinforce your sanctioning behavior and start a process that is socially self-reinforcing.

Other, more complex implications are provided. These quick answers give one a sense of the results of Horne’s sophisticated and interesting experiments. *The Rewards of Punishment* is a model of clear, jargon-free, theoretically informed social science writing.

Some minor quibbles are in order for this otherwise excellent book. First, psychologists tend to think of interdependency theory as a product of Thibaut and Kelley (1959), with elaborations by many others—for example, Berscheid, Holmes, Rusbult, and Van Lange—none of whom are cited in her otherwise extensive bibliography. Interdependency theory’s crowning glory is *An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations* (Kelley et al., 2003), which reviews in great detail the implications of 21 types of interdependency. It would have been instructive to see Horne’s analysis of the ways in which her analyses differ from or go beyond those of the Thibaut and Kelley tradition.

Second, and more significant, is the question of ecological validity of the experimental findings. Generalizing from the results of an experiment is more than a verbal exercise, for the experiments show what can happen—not necessarily what does happen—when the variety of real-world confounds are in operation. Horne’s citation of relevant cases and Zelditch’s (1969) argument for the utility of experiments makes it clear that she has thought about this issue (see pp. 16–19), but it remains to be established just how much power relative to other factors the relational theory of norm enforcement has in a variety of real-world settings. The prospects that her theory will have genuine power should be enough to motivate some granting agency to put up the major funding needed to test the theory in the field.

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**References**


