
Book Review: Criminal Behaviour: A Psychological Analysis, by Philip Feldman

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Book Review

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CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR: A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS, PHILIP FELDMAN, Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1977. Pp. 330.

What is the degree of morality possessed by the average adult in the face of an opportunity to make an illegitimate gain with little risk of detection? Income tax evasion is rampant and even admired. Politicians are *expected* to be less than truthful. If one were to stop people on the street and hand them a wallet with the statement, "Here, you dropped this," how many would keep it? Twenty percent? About half? It may come as a surprise to learn that an astounding eighty-five percent will keep the wallet! It is no surprise to those who are familiar with Lawrence Kohlberg's research on moral development. Kohlberg devised a six-level scale of moral development, but the highest level, that involving principled moral decision-making and conduct, is one that the originator himself is on the verge of abandoning because he has found so few people whose thinking is principled in this way. Self-interest and conformity explain almost all "moral" behaviour.

This book by Philip Feldman, who teaches in the Psychology Department at the University of Birmingham, is, for the most part, a useful review of psychological research in criminal behaviour. Among other things, it deals, in the first chapter, with an aspect of crime that is seldom mentioned outside professional criminological circles: the dark figure of unreported crime. There is a wealth of data to indicate a clear and regrettable correlation between socioeconomic status and "official" convictions. Clearly, poor people and those from lower educational groups swell the ranks of convicted criminals. On the other hand, people who get away with crimes demonstrate quite a different pattern. Here, the influence of social class is not nearly so pronounced. It is reasonable to believe that middle class adolescents commit more thefts than are reflected in official statistics; the difference is that they are not prosecuted as often as lower class offenders, and it is well established now that a form of discrimination is at work here. Feldman speculates about another possibility, namely, that the middle class delinquent may actually be more skilled both at crime and at evasion!

Authoritarianism is an important personality variable that has been neglected in much criminological research. It is the authoritarianism of the Canadian people that leads them to cry for longer sentences and more severe punishment; it also accounts for the broad community support for repressive procedures such as the *War Measures Act*, and, more recently, for illegal acts committed by that bastion of national security in Canada, the RCMP. Feldman cites interesting research that demonstrates how authoritarianism in the personality of jury members affects even their recollection of evidence. They are so concerned with social class that they virtually exclude from their consciousness much of the evidence presented if the accused's social class is higher than their own; they become positively deferential to such persons and, alternatively, antagonistic to defendants whom they see as subordinates and social inferiors. The effect is so pronounced that the authors of this study advocate total exclusion of high authoritarians from jury membership.

It is lamentable that Feldman, who considers himself a behaviourist and who emphasizes a behavioural view of crime, should, like so many investi-

gators who have been drawn to B. F. Skinner's work from the periphery, perpetuate a misconception about the meaning of "negative reinforcement." The cessation of an aversive stimulus has the power to make a response persist. It is thus termed "negative reinforcement" to distinguish it from a very similar reinforcing property that resides in the positive application of a stimulus such as a reward. Feldman erroneously defines it as "the withdrawal of positive reinforcement." It is disappointing to see this bit of carelessness in a work that is otherwise meticulously scrutinized (with the exception of a shocking number of typographical errors, another minor but persistent irritant).

In general, Feldman's treatment of the systematic learning literature is weak. For example, he cites only Penny's findings of 1967 that punishment for undesirable conduct in children is more effective as a socialization procedure than the sole use of positive reinforcement for good behaviour. This represents a selective and biased reading of this literature since there are many studies with findings that favour the use of modelling with positive reinforcement. Both Feldman's prior work in the field of aversion therapy and his current interest in punishment seem to reflect a curious preoccupation with eradicating undesirable conduct rather than building and strengthening constructive response patterns. The use of aversive stimulation as the primary means of behaviour modification has been roundly criticized and is now rejected by most psychologists and behaviour therapists, including the present reviewer in a previous incarnation.

Feldman's selective use of the literature is also manifest in his choice of only one approach to child training practices; not the most enlightened approach since, again, it deals primarily with techniques of punishment. When Feldman does refer to the use of "love-orientated techniques" he does not mean anything so positive as teaching through loving example; rather, he is referring to the use of withdrawal-of-love as a *disciplinary* method.

Feldman cites cross-cultural research demonstrating that the influence of the father is primary in preventing crime even in simple pre-literate societies. In primitive societies in various parts of the world, the investigators found that as opportunities for contact with the father decrease, the frequency of crime increases. This squares with anecdotal literature in the field of juvenile delinquency showing that mothers, as single parents, often have trouble "controlling" their male offspring.

A sure way to precipitate violence in prison is to insult the inmate's manliness. Verbal disparagement, obviously, is highly effective in unleashing aggression and this principle is helpful in explaining police violence as well. It has been found that those policemen who are prone to using violence in the course of their duties are the very ones who show a tendency to use strong verbal threats very early in their confrontation with a suspect. If these gestures prove ineffective, overt physical violence may be the only step remaining; on the other hand, if the policeman begins with less aggressive verbal communications in his initial contact with a subject, subsequent responses can always be escalated if necessary and still remain within the verbal realm.

Impulsiveness is a favourite personality characteristic to be associated with criminality and Feldman has unearthed a good study supporting the

association. It is a uniquely designed study since it was longitudinal, dealing with measures on a psychomotor task taken in public school long before the subjects actually became offenders. Only after they had become offenders were the findings examined, and they demonstrated clearly that the offending group had made many more "impulsive" errors on this task than the control cases. Feldman points out, quite correctly, that "impulsiveness may simply predict getting caught," and he returns to a theme running throughout this text, the distinction between official offending, where the impulsive person may be overrepresented, and self-reported "unapprehended" offending.

Feldman favours the theory of delinquency advanced by H. J. Eysenck of the University of London; it centres on neurosis and introversion-extroversion as the major personality traits. Extroverts condition less readily than introverts because of the hypothesized lower cortical arousal that allows a greater build-up of inhibition in extroverts and this interferes with any and all conditioning or learning processes. "According to Eysenck, socialized (that is, rule-keeping) behaviour rests on childhood conditioning . . . through punishment not to perform behaviours considered undesirable by parents and teachers. . . . With equal opportunity to acquire avoidance conditioning, it is predicted that extroverts will respond less well than introverts, hence they will perform more illegal acts. . . ."

Eysenck's theory of personality has not found acceptance on this side of the Atlantic and Feldman's interpretation will find equally hard-going among North American psychologists. Here, most psychologists would probably agree that extroverts do show more idiosyncrasies in their learning of simple and primitive conditioning tasks, but they probably would resist the idea that serious deficits in the acquisition "of all types of conditioning and learning" characterize the extrovert.

Feldman does us all a service by directing our attention to the importance of situational factors in the interplay among the three relevant personality variables (extroversion, neuroticism, and psychopathy-psychoticism) with the environment. "Those who score high, particularly on all three dimensions, would be expected to break rules and cause harmful consequences to others" even in the absence of extremely stimulating or intense temptations toward offending, whereas those who score low on the three traits would be expected to avoid offending except perhaps in especially provocative situations such as those involving high potential gains and mild punishment if detected. It is a welcome change to see careful attention being paid to situational factors in the study of criminal behaviour.

Feldman cites the research of Eysenck and his co-workers to demonstrate that offenders indeed differ from non-offenders in the predicted direction on several of the above personality variables. However, a crucial failing in this research is the omission of control groups composed of persons with other personality disturbances. As it is, we do not know whether the findings relate to delinquency in particular, or to psychological disorder in general.

As one gets caught up in Feldman's interpretation of Eysenckian theory, one is impressed with the apparent rigour of the system. However, there is no escaping the cold-blooded, mechanistic quality that emerges when the author

prescribes disciplinary techniques for parents (withdrawal of love, physical punishment, and induction) to fit the particular measured personality characteristics of the child. Perhaps it is best, after all, if parents muddle their way through, loving their children and doing their conscientious best to socialize them according to standards and methods that they believe in. The conscientious ones, in any case, are not the ones that we have to worry about; they do not produce delinquents. It is the careless parent and those who are delinquent themselves (usually "unofficially") who produce society's future offenders.

Feldman's review of the sociological theories of crime is concise but thorough and, therefore, very useful. Unfortunately, he asserts, in a shamelessly parochial manner, the superiority of psychological theories, in particular Eysenckian personality theory and Skinnerian learning theory. Sociology has pioneered in the study of crime and psychology still has a long way to go to catch up. The social class system that is so much in evidence in England and the Western world is under heavy attack by sociologists as the force that creates crime and other social evils through the injustices inherent in it. Feldman seems so committed to the task of proving that crime is *not* concentrated in the lower levels of society, that his effort smacks suspiciously of an ideologically motivated attempt to "exonerate" the class system. We should not too soon forget that Sir Cyril Burt, a psychologist member of England's upper class, was led into an intellectually and scientifically corrupt manoeuvre in his research on intelligence by his own class preconceptions.

In discussing the effect of various penal measures, Feldman adds to our knowledge by pointing to a similarity between Bergin's psychotherapy research orientation and the effect of penal treatments. Just as psychotherapy helps some people while at the same time significantly worsening others, certain penal measures may deter some offenders while others may actually be more likely to re-offend following the penal experience. This effect masks the fact that *some* offenders actually are being helped.

It is disappointing to see evidence toward the end of the book of something that was hinted at earlier in Feldman's attitude toward Eysenck. Feldman accepts uncritically the validity of Eysenck's attack on psychotherapy. Eysenck's criticisms have been repeatedly demonstrated by North American investigators¹ to have been based on an inadequate sampling of psychotherapy research studies. If Feldman is ignorant of these criticisms, this is bad enough, but if, as seems likely, he is aware of the work and has suppressed it out of deference to Eysenck, then this is even worse. Feldman adopts precisely the same strategy as Eysenck toward psychotherapy; he quotes a few studies demonstrating the ineffectiveness of psychotherapy in reducing rates of recidivism among offenders and quotes many more behavioural therapeutic studies, paying particular attention to favourable outcomes whenever they are found. The fact of the matter is that behavioural approaches fare no better than any other attempt at modifying the behaviour of delinquents.

¹ J. Meltzoff and M. Kornreich, *Research in Psychotherapy* (New York: Aterton, 1970).

Little stands between us and criminal behaviour, if we define the term broadly enough. What prevents us from engaging in the more obvious forms is our milieu, among other things. We surround ourselves with people who do not commit crimes. When we are surrounded by people whose standards of morality and conduct are very different from our own, it is only the few well-endowed among us who can resist contamination, as has been tragically demonstrated in Hitler's Germany. If we could create the proper milieu for our offenders and for our children, delinquency could be eradicated. Behavioural science has matured to the point where we now know the child-rearing conditions that will lead to more or less satisfactory social and moral development. The mechanics for creating these milieux are still beyond us.

This is an uneven work. On the one hand, it is a good source book, even an excellent source book. It is carefully reasoned in many places and it breaks some new ground in interpreting crime. On the other hand, it is so marred by errors and biases that it presents a significant risk to the uninformed reader.

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