

Neutralization Theory: Learning Rationalizations as Motives

One very important element of the behavior learned in intimate social groups and considered by Sutherland was the rationalizations that accompany behavior. These rationalizations are related to Sutherland's ([1939] 1947) idea about how law violations can be defined as favorable or unfavorable, and they were especially important to Donald Cressey. Cressey (1953, 1970), in a study of the "respectable" crime of embezzlement, found that three key elements were necessary for a violation of financial trust to occur: (1) a nonsharable financial problem (meaning a problem the offenders feel embarrassed to tell others about, such as gambling debts); (2) the perception of their legitimate occupation as a solution to the problem, typically through using funds to which they have access; and (3) verbalizations, or words and phrases that make the behavior acceptable (such as "borrowing" the money and intending to pay it back). It is this third element and the possibility that such words and phrases may be found in the common culture that makes the crime possible. As Cressey (1970: 111) said: "I am convinced that the words and phrases that the potential embezzler uses in conversations with himself are actually the most important elements in the process that gets him into trouble."

For Cressey, verbalizations were not simply rationalizations occurring after the fact of crime to relieve an offender of culpability. Instead, they were words and phrases that could, as C. Wright Mills (1940) had earlier argued, be "vocabularies of motive." These could inhibit someone from engaging in a criminal act by showing the potential offender that using such excuses or justifications after a criminal act might not be honored as acceptable. Alternatively, the excuses and justifications could be honored by future questioners, allowing the potential offender a sense of "freedom" that it might be acceptable to violate the law under the particular situation or circumstances described. The most sophisticated development of these ideas came from David Matza (1964) and Gresham Sykes (Sykes and Matza, 1957; Matza and Sykes, 1961) in their studies of juvenile delinquency.

Drifting In and Out of Delinquency: Matza and Sykes's Neutralization Theory

In 1957, while at Princeton University, Gresham Sykes teamed up with his former student David Matza to develop a new theory of crime that extended Sutherland's learning theory (Sykes and Matza, 1957). The analysis originated in Sykes's studies of prison inmates and guards learning to rationalize rule breaking (Martin et al., 1990). Matza (1964) argued that existing theories, whether biological, psychological, or sociological, were too deterministic. These theories presented the adolescent as either committed to convention or committed to delinquency. Matza felt that not only was this an overstatement, but it also left out the classicist element of the choice to commit crime. He argued that existing theories predict too much crime. Most juvenile delinquents do not continue their criminal behavior into adulthood. If a biological or psychological factor "caused" crime, why would its influence diminish after adolescence? If delinquent subcultures were so compelling at socializing youths to define crime as acceptable, then what accounts for their maturational reform—the tendency for juvenile delinquents to relinquish their delinquency as they age into their twenties and thirties? Matza sought to combine these observations to explain most delinquency (which he called mundane delinquency), arguing,

The image of the delinquent I wish to convey is one of drift; an actor neither compelled nor committed to deeds nor freely choosing them; neither different in any simple or fundamental sense from the law abiding, nor the same; conforming to certain traditions in American life while partially unreceptive to other more conventional traditions; and finally, an actor whose motivational system may be explored along lines explicitly commended by classical criminology—his peculiar relation to legal institutions. (1964: 28)

How Matza sought to combine these many orientations was, in part, by making a case for soft determinism. According to Matza, positivistic criminology (the scientific study of crime that had prevailed since the late nineteenth century, as discussed in Chapter 4) "fashioned an image of man to suit a study of criminal behavior based on scientific determinism. It rejected the view that man exercised freedom, was possessed of reason, and was thus capable of choice" (1964: 5). Conversely, soft determinism argues "that human actions are not deprived of freedom because they are causally determined" (Matza, 1964: 9). The amount of freedom each person has varies. Some are more free than others and have a greater range of choices available. Moreover, this freedom varies according to circumstances, situations, and context.

Most important to understanding Matza and Sykes's argument is the concept of "subculture of delinquency," which they prefer to the idea of "delinquent subculture." As traditionally conceived, delinquent subcultures are considered separate and oppositional; their norms and values are different from those in the mainstream culture. The gang is the best example. For Matza and Sykes (1961), however, this was a false distinction. Most delinquents, they argue, are not full-fledged gang members but "mundane delinquents," who express remorse over their actions. Many admire law-abiding citizens. Furthermore, most differentiate between whom they will victimize and whom they will not. Finally, delinquents are not exclusively criminal; they also engage in many noncriminal acts. These factors suggest that delinquents are aware of the difference between right and wrong and are subject to the influence of both conventional and delinquent values.

Rather than delinquency and mainstream culture being separate, argue Matza and Sykes, mainstream culture has an underbelly of "subterranean values." These exist side by side with conventional values. Consider the example of sensation seeking: "Kicks, big time spending and rep have immediate counterparts in the value system of the law abiding" (Matza and Sykes, 1961: 717). A good illustration of subterranean values can be found in the school setting.

When a teacher presents the class material on social studies she or he teaches the knowledge content of the subject; when the teacher deals with students with favoritism, using gender or racial bias, or emphasizes grades as more important than understanding, she or he simultaneously sends a different message. Students learn how society works. They learn that there are public statements and private practices; they learn that beneath the rhetoric, what matters is getting ahead by whatever means, including cheating if necessary. This is useful knowledge, albeit informal knowledge. When these students get to the workplace, they will encounter formal rules and informal rules, such as the company policy on health, safety, and hygiene, as well as the preferred unspoken practice, which may be to cut corners and suspend rules in order to make a profit, regardless of who gets hurt. This kind of knowledge does not require the exclusivity of a gang of delinquents; it is there beneath the surface of every formal institution, policy, and practice. It is part of the subterranean subculture of delinquency.

This subterranean subculture of delinquency makes it unnecessary for adolescent youths to join gangs or other subcultural groups to learn delinquent values. Instead, simply by learning and being socialized into conventional values and norms, adolescents are simultaneously socialized into the negation of those values. Nowhere is this more evident than in legal codes.

Legal codes are inconsistent and thus vulnerable. As Matza (1964: 60) wrote, "The law contains the seeds of its own neutralization. . . . Criminal law is especially susceptible of neutralization because the conditions of applicability and thus inapplicability, are explicitly stated." This means people can claim various kinds of exemptions in the belief that they are, under certain mitigating circumstances, not bound by the law. The classic example is "self-defense." Another example is the idea that criminal intent (*mens rea*) must be present for an act to be criminal; Lorena Bobbitt, among others, used this rule to her advantage, as we illustrated in Chapter 5. Not only is this ambiguity present in the law, but in U.S. society it is reflected in contradictions resulting from trying to balance freedom of the individual and the collective interests of society. Take the example of speeding laws. It seems that only in the United States would the law ban speeding while allowing the sale of radar detectors; and these detectors are even sold by police at auctions of unclaimed recovered stolen property! Consider the laws in many states prohibiting gambling—yet Native Americans can run casinos and the states can run lotteries. Little wonder, then, that the ordinary Joe asks, "Why shouldn't I be able to utilize my local bookie to place bets? Why is that any different from the state-run lottery? I can afford it and do so to relax."

Such legal contradictions and the implicit claims for exemption that follow from them allow the possibility for choice and freedom because they render juveniles and others intermittently free to choose to commit delinquent acts. Whether youths break the law depends not so much on their being in a delinquent subculture but, first, on whether they are freed into a state of drift and released from the larger culture's moral bind, and, second, on whether they then exercise free choice: "Drift stands midway between freedom and control. Its basis is an area in the social structure in which control has been loosened. . . . The delinquent transiently exists in a limbo between convention and crime, responding in turn to the demands of each, flirting now with one, now with the other, but postponing commitment, evading decision. Thus he [or she] drifts between criminal and conventional action" (Matza, 1964: 28).

This "loosening" of control, or release from moral convention into a state of drift, may initially be accidental and it occurs through neutralization. For Matza, neutralization comprises words and phrases that excuse or justify lawbreaking behavior, such as claiming an action was "self-defense." Unlike rationalizations, which come after an act to avoid culpability and consequences, and verbalizations that come after contemplating an act to allow oneself to commit it, neutralizations come before an act is even contemplated. Thus, for Matza they are "unwitting," something that occurs to an actor that results from the unintended duplication, distortion, and extension of customary beliefs relating to when and under what circumstances exceptions are allowed: "Neutralization of legal precepts depends partly on equivocation—the unwitting use of concepts in markedly different ways" (Matza, 1964: 74; Taylor, 1972). Neutralization frees the delinquent from the moral bind of law so that he or she may now choose to commit the crime. Crucially, whether or not a crime occurs no longer requires some special motivation.

Sykes and Matza (1957) classified excuses and justifications that provide a moral release into five types, which they called "techniques of neutralization":

1. Denial of responsibility (e.g., "It's not my fault. I was drunk at the time."): Offenders may list reasons such as alcohol, peer pressure, bad neighborhood, and so on that caused them to commit the act.
2. Denial of injury (e.g., "No one got hurt."): Offenders may deny that anyone or anything was harmed by their action. For example, shoplifters might claim that stores have so much money and insurance that "They can afford it" or employee thieves may claim their company wastes so much "They'll never miss it."

3. Denial of victim (e.g., "They had it coming to them."): Some offenders may claim that although someone got hurt, he or she deserved it. For example, corporations may treat their employees badly, paying them too little or instituting a stringent dress code. Employees may pilfer goods out of resentment "to get back at the company," saying they are the real victims of the corporation's abuse. Women who harm physically or psychologically abusive spouses may claim that the "victim" was actually an offender who had therefore forfeited his rights to victimhood, and was finally getting what he deserved.
4. Condemnation of the condemners (e.g., "Everybody's crooked."): Offenders may reject the people who have authority over them, such as judges, parents, and police officers, who are viewed as being just as corrupt and thus not worthy of respect: "Even ministers steal from the collection box." The 2001 revelations of sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests and the cover-up by the Catholic Church provided considerable fuel for the denial of their moral authority to judge others.
5. Appeal to higher loyalties (e.g., "I didn't do it for myself."). Many offenders argue that their loyalties lie with their peers (homeboys, fellow gang members, fellow employees, etc.) and that the group has needs that take precedence over societal demands. Female embezzlers claim to have stolen for their families and mothers have committed arson to provide work for their unemployed firefighter sons. Drug users' higher loyalty may be to the complete fulfillment of the human spirit.

Since Matza and Sykes's original studies on delinquency, researchers have applied neutralization theory to adult crime, especially to offenders who maintain a dual lifestyle and are both part of the mainstream and yet also engage in crime, as in employee theft (Ditton, 1977; Hollinger and Clark, 1983; Hollinger, 1991) and buying and selling stolen goods (Klockars, 1974; Henry, 1978). As a consequence, at least four additional types of neutralization have been discovered (Henry, 1990; Pfuhl and Henry, 1993):

1. Metaphor of the ledger (e.g., "I've done more good than bad in my life."). This was used by Klockars (1974) to show how the professional fence believed himself to be, on the balance of his life, more moral than immoral ("Look at all the money I've given to charity and how I've helped children. If you add it all up, I've got to come out on the good side").
2. Claim of normality (e.g., "Everyone is doing it."). This suggests that the law is not reflecting the popular will and since everyone engages in, say, tax evasion, pilfering from the office, extramarital sex and so on, then such acts are not really deviant and therefore not wrong.
3. Denial of negative intent (e.g., "It was just a joke."). Henry (1990; Henry and Eaton, 1999) found this was used by college students to justify their use of explosives on campus, among other things ("We were only having some fun."). The neutralization is partial denial, accepting responsibility for the act but denying the negative consequences were intended.
4. Claim of relative acceptability (e.g., "There are others worse than me."). Unlike condemning the condemners, this appeals to the audience to compare the offender's crime to more serious ones and can go so far as claiming to be moral. For example, LAPD officers claimed that the beating of the African American Rodney King, after being stopped on a traffic violation, helped prevent him being killed by nervous fellow officers (Pfuhl and Henry, 1993: 70).

The important point about these techniques of neutralization is their timing. All could be used as techniques or devices (1) *after* an illegal act to seek to reduce blame or culpability, or (2) *before* committing the act while contemplating it in order to seek self-conscious approval that it is acceptable to go ahead. But for Matza and others (Taylor, 1972; Henry, 1976), the critical point is that they can also occur (3) *before contemplating the act*, releasing the actor to be morally free to choose the act. In the latter case, the context, situation and circumstances provide a neutralizing discourse that removes the moral inhibition releasing a person to commit criminal acts, as they would any other act.

Limitations and Policy Implications of Neutralization Explanations

The critical issue when evaluating neutralization theory is whether or not offenders are committed to conventional values and norms in the first place. If they are not committed, neutralization is unnecessary, a point made by control theory, which we discuss in the next chapter. Even Matza accepted that not all delinquents were committed to conventional values, since a minority were compulsive in their behavior, committed to unconventional values, and differed from the majority of mundane “drifters” (Taylor, Walton, and Young, 1973: 180–181).

Early empirical research found little support for the idea that delinquents share mainstream values (Ball and Lilly, 1971). Indeed, Michael Hindelang (1970, 1974) found that delinquents are committed to different values from those held by nondelinquents. Moreover, in an overview of the studies, Agnew (1994) found that most research shows that delinquents are more likely to accept techniques of neutralization than are nondelinquents. A self-report study by Landsheer, Hart, and Kox (1994) found that some delinquents viewed their acts as unacceptable, yet did them anyway, which tends to support neutralization theory, since this scenario requires some means for the delinquents to deal with their own moral objections.

Research on neutralizations also faces a causality problem, particularly in establishing when the neutralizations occur—before or after the criminal act. For Hamlin (1988), neutralizations are produced after the act as motives attributed to behavior in response to questions about why it happened. But Agnew’s (1994: 572) analysis of the National Youth Survey’s longitudinal data suggests that neutralization precedes violent acts, “may be used as both after-the-fact excuses and before-the-fact justifications,” and “has a moderately large absolute effect on subsequent violence.”

Ultimately, like Sutherland’s theory of differential association, neutralization theory does not explain how neutralization originates or who invents the extensions of the words and phrases that are learned.

Many of the studies that find relationships between neutralizations and delinquency suffer from methodological problems, such as using cross-sectional rather than longitudinal data which does not allow the researcher to know whether neutralization preceded or followed the act. Other “supporting” research has sampling problems. For example, W. William Minor (1981), whose research provided limited support, relied on college criminal justice students for his sample. In an earlier study using a better sample, he could not support neutralization theory, concluding that in many cases, “Neutralizations and rationalizations are simply unnecessary” (Minor, 1980: 115). Other studies have failed to distinguish neutralization from unconventional beliefs. By contrast, from his longitudinal study Agnew (1994: 573) found that, at least in relation to violent acts, the majority of respondents disapproved of violence and “accept one or more neutralizations for violence.” However, as one commentator recently stated, “as with techniques of neutralization, drift theory does not have a solid foundation in empirical research, and this is a serious drawback” (Moyer, 2001: 148). Part of the problem with Matza’s drift theory, says Moyer, is that it has not been possible to develop a good operational definition, and this has inhibited research. Perhaps nothing captures the concern more than the lecture given at Cambridge University in 2003 by Shadd Maruna (2003) entitled: “Excuses, Excuses: What have we learned in 50 years of testing ‘Neutralization Theory’?”

Policy Implications of Neutralization Theory

Although neutralization theory explains certain kinds of criminal behavior, it also presents difficult policy questions. It suggests that contradictions in the dominant culture, injustice, and double standards need to be eliminated to lessen the possibility of people being able to neutralize. Cressey ([1965] 1987) was one of the few writers to specify the policy implications of this theory at least at the level of institutional control. He suggested that to reduce the probability of verbalizations allowing embezzlement, employers should adopt educational programs that allow employees to discuss emerging financial problems from losses and that phrases used to excuse and justify such behavior should be repeatedly corrected to reveal their harm and crime. Some retail stores have begun to implement this suggestion through weekly meetings with sales staff, pointing out to them the precise losses from internal theft and how the company suffers. The aim is to undermine any neutralizing use of “denial of injury” by employees tempted to steal from the store.

Others have shown that it is not just the words and phrases that need constant monitoring and replacing but the conditions that give rise to them. Take, for example, the finding that employee resentment is highly correlated with employee theft and that high levels of job satisfaction are inversely correlated with employee theft (Hollinger and Clark, 1983). Research by Greenberg (1990) has shown that although rates of employee theft typically rise if wages are cut, this can be avoided if employers use words and phrases to explain why the cuts are necessary and if they involve and inform the employees about what is happening. This way, the neutralizing effect of “denial of victim” is preempted and that justification for employee theft is undermined. Of course, whether such a policy would be effective depends on whether the theory is correct. Indeed, Maruna (2003) states, “Nowhere is the influence of this theory more apparent than in correctional practice, where the notion that habitual excuse-making promotes criminal behavior is largely taken for granted. Interventions as diverse as cognitive-behavioural therapy and restorative justice conferencing are all premised explicitly on overcoming rationalisations and encouraging offenders to take responsibility for their behaviour. Yet, does the research on neutralization theory over the last 50 years justify the faith in this theory?”

It was against neutralization theory that Travis Hirschi (1969) developed his oppositional ideas about bonding and social control, described as one of the most frequently discussed and tested criminological theories (Stitt and Giacopassi, 1992). We turn to an examination of this and control theories generally in the next chapter.