

# Self-Report Justifications for Serial Sex Murder: An Exploratory Study of Neutralization Techniques

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## ABSTRACT

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Thirty-eight out of seventy-five convicted serial sex murderers returned a survey which asked them to indicate their reasons for committing the crime of first degree murder along with at least one sexual act. Matza and Sykes' theory on the techniques of neutralization was then applied to their answers. Their responses are highlighted here in this article. This brief exploratory, qualitative pilot study revealed that most of the subjects excused their behavior by indicating that they were not responsible for their crimes (denial of responsibility) given the wide array of sociological and psychological tragedies that they had suffered while growing up. Other rationalizations for this crime indicate that there was no real victim since the victim's gender and/or lifestyle made them undesirable of society (denial of the victim) and appealing to a higher authority.

Although rare, multiple sexual homicides committed by one individual or a team are horrifying. Still, these serial killers have continued to intrigue us since the later part of the 1970's [1]. People may ask how any perpetrator can offer explanations for their own serial sex killings. Serial killers responded to a survey which asked convicted serial sex killers to give a reason (s) for why they committed lust murder(s) in the first degree. The preliminary results of this study are significant and attempt to link the article literatures on the nature and theory of crime with the crime of repetitive first degree sex murder.

A serial killer is a person, typically a male, who kills three or more victims with a cooling off period in between (Protection of Children from Sexual Predator Act of 1998). The FBI [2] further defines serial murder as killings that occur in separate events and during separate times. More inclined to seek out strangers, sexual killers are notably referred to as sexual lust killers [3].

### Types of serial sex murders

As noted above, the subject's included in this study were chosen based upon evidence in their case files of killing repeatedly for sexual purposes in attempt to gain physical and sexual gratification and/or to fulfill sexual fantasies. Holmes and DeBurger [4] have identified two types of serial murders: The mission oriented and hedonistic types. The mission oriented serial murderer kills to rid society of certain types of people who society looks down upon, e.g., the homeless, prostitutes or any one he believes to be undesirable e.g., women. The hedonistic type kills for sexual pleasure [1].

## Techniques of Neutralization

The Techniques of Neutralization theory was developed in 1957 by Sykes and Matza in response to Cohen's theory of sub-cultures. Sykes and Matza: 666) argued that, "... much delinquency is based on what is essentially an unrecognized extension of defenses to crimes, in the form of justifications for deviance that are seen as valid by the delinquent but not by the legal system or society at large".

Sykes and Matza posit that criminal behavior is learned, and delinquents are not inherently bad people. Delinquents actually possess conventional beliefs and require neutralizations or justifications in order to commit delinquent acts. Since the offenders possess conventional beliefs, which would cause them to feel guilt if they became delinquent, neutralizations are developed before the delinquent act occurs so as to minimize the guilt the offender feels after committing the act. Sykes and Matza believe that learning these techniques and how to appropriately use them causes juveniles to become delinquents, rather than the juvenile actually learning and fully subscribing to values and beliefs that contradict social norms.

Sykes and Matza have created five types of techniques frequently used by offenders to neutralize their behavior. These five types are presented as follows:

**1. Denial of Responsibility:** This type posits that delinquent acts are caused by forces beyond the delinquent's control (i.e. unloving parents, bad partners, living in a slum neighborhood, to name a few), which causes the delinquent to feel "hopelessly propelled" into situations [5].

"By learning to view himself as more acted upon than acting, the delinquent prepares the way for deviance from the dominant normal system without the necessity of a frontal assault on the norms themselves" [5].

**2. Denial of Injury:** This type takes into consideration the types of decisions the offender has already made regarding delinquent acts. The delinquent has already made a distinction between *mala in se* and *mala prohibita* crimes, and he has made decisions regarding the wrongfulness of his actions Sykes & Matza. When interpreting the wrongfulness of the act, the delinquent may question if anyone will be clearly hurt by his actions. This type leads to the use of neutralizations such as, "It's a victimless crime", "Nobody got hurt, so why should I care?"

Although the delinquent act clearly violates the law, the delinquent can feel less guilty about committing the act because he has already reasoned that since no one will actually get hurt before, during, or after the commission of the act. The delinquent neutralizes the act by reasoning that the act will not cause any great harm.

Society's perceptions of crime also have a great impact on a delinquent's choices. "Since society sometimes agrees with the delinquent, e.g. in matters such as truancy, 'pranks', and so on, it merely reaffirms the idea that the delinquent's neutralization of social controls by means of qualifying the norms is an extension of common practice rather than a gesture of complete opposition" [5].

**3. Denial of Victim:** By using this technique of neutralization, the delinquent fully believes that the injury to the victim is more of a rightful retaliation than an actual injury. In this sense, the delinquent attempts to put himself in the place of the avenger and places the blame of wrong-doing on the victim. Sykes and Matza use the examples of attacking homosexuals, suspected homosexuals, or minority groups [5]. Denial of victim can also be utilized when the victim is physically absent or the delinquent is not aware of the victim while the delinquent act is occurring. Sykes and Matza state that, "Internalized norms and anticipations of the reactions of others must somehow be activated, if they are to serve as guides for behavior; and it is possible that a diminished awareness of the victim plays an important part in determining whether or not this process is set in motion" [5].

**4. Condemnation of the Condemners:** This technique is also referred to as the rejection of the rejectors. In this technique, the delinquent attempts to change the focus of attention from his delinquent acts to the "motives and behavior of those who disapprove of his violations" [5]. The delinquent may claim that those who condemn him are "...hypocrites, deviants in disguise, or impelled by personal spite" [5]. The delinquent may view the police as being stupid and brutal, teachers as always showing favoritism (towards others and not the delinquent), and parents as always taking things out on their children.

In order for this technique to work, the delinquent has to, "...change the subject of the conversation in the dialogue between his own deviant impulses and the reactions of others; and by attacking others, the wrongfulness of his own behavior is more easily repressed or lost to view" [5]. Sykes and Matza stress that the function of this technique in deflecting negative sanctions attached to violations of the norms is far more important than the valid.

**5. Appeal to Higher Loyalties:** Sykes and Matza describe this technique as, "...internal and external social controls may be neutralized by sacrificing the demands of the larger society for the demands of the smaller social groups to which the delinquent belongs such as the sibling pair, the gang, or the friendship clique" [5]. In this sense deviation from societal norms is not considered a true deviation because the delinquent instead believes that other norms (specific to his social group) are more pressing and, therefore, take precedence over societal norms. Sykes and Matza believe that the delinquent does believe both sets of norms, but he will often choose the one set he feels more closely associated with (usually the norms of his social group). They state that, "For our purposes, however, the most important point is that deviation from

certain norms may occur not because the norms are rejected but because other norms, held to be more pressing or involving a higher loyalty, are accorded precedence. Indeed, it is the fact that both sets of norms are believed in that gives meaning to our concepts of dilemma and role conflict" [5]. Finally Sykes and Matza argue, "Techniques of neutralization may not be powerful enough to fully shield the individual from the force of his own internalized values and the reactions of conforming others, for as we have pointed out, juvenile delinquents often appear to suffer from feelings of guilt and shame when called into account for their deviant behavior. And some delinquents may be so isolated from the world of conformity that techniques of neutralization need not be called into play. Nonetheless, we would argue that techniques of neutralization are critical in lessening the effectiveness of social controls, and that they lie behind a large share of delinquent behavior" [5].

Sykes and Matza realize that there is a need to further their research and provide suggestions for future social scientists that wish to empirically validate or disprove the theory. First, they contend that there is a need for more "knowledge concerning the differential distribution of techniques of neutralization by age, sex, social class, ethnic group, etc" [5]. Second, they feel there is a need for a better understanding of the actual structure of the techniques of neutralization. They contend that, "Certain techniques of neutralization would appear to be better adapted to particular deviant acts than to others, as we have suggested, for example, in the case of offenses against property and the denial of the victim" [5].

### Application, critique and revisions of the theory

The following populations have been asked about justifications for their criminal behavior with the idea in mind that techniques of neutralization may be revealed: undergraduate college students, convicted middle class bankers, reform school detainees, juvenile delinquents, adult street criminals, prisoners, parolees, and probationers [6,7].

*The following critiques of the theory state:* Denial of the victim was given dual meaning. The denial of victim does not only apply to those who the delinquent believes got what they had coming, but also includes victims that are absent or simply unknown to the delinquent [8]. There may be other techniques of neutralization that were not defined by Sykes and Matza, but do exist in the real world, such as the defense of necessity. Delinquents are less likely to feel guilty about an act if they consider it necessary to their safety, survival, or well-being [8]. "A more critical problem arises from the heart of the theory itself, particularly the implication that the willingness to neutralize is the only important difference in the value structure of delinquents and non-delinquents" [8]. Minor feels that Sykes and Matza have overstated the similarities between delinquents and non-delinquents. Agnew and Peters [9] hypothesize that in order for neutralization to allow delinquents to commit a criminal act; the delinquent must accept the neutralization and be in a situation where the neutralization can be applied. Without having both conditions met, the act is less likely to occur (however, this does not apply to those delinquents that have little conventional beliefs and are more inclined to a life of crime.)

Topalli [10] argues that Sykes and Matza's sample was too narrow and did not take into consideration street criminals. Topalli (2005) believes that previous studies on the techniques of neutralization use the wrong populations (i.e. college students and incarcerated offenders). "Because middle class non-offenders (such as college students) generally live in environments where only conventional norms are valued, they may be inappropriate subjects for an analysis of the cognitive proclivities of violent street offenders" (801). Topalli (2005) believes that to form a truer picture of the process of delinquent decision making, the researcher needs to be able to assess those who are not confined by the criminal justice system.

*Revisions of this theory include the following:* W. William Minor [8] proposed a revision to neutralization theory in which, "...neutralization is viewed as a process compatible with – rather than in opposition to – sub cultural explanations of delinquency". Minor (1981) believes that not everyone who commits crimes needs to use neutralizations. Those delinquents that do not hold conventional values or have low moral inhibitions will not need to use neutralizations because they are already inclined to commit crime without feeling guilty about it. Minor [8] has suggested that, "...neutralization may be one factor (among others) that influences changes in one's moral evaluations over time". Minor [8] believes that neutralizations are used greatly by those delinquents who are new to committing delinquent acts so as to lessen the guilt they feel. However, after they have become more accustomed to committing the acts they will begin to feel less guilty and stop using the neutralizations. Minor believes that techniques of neutralization should not be viewed as a theory on its own, but rather as a component of a general control theory of deviance.

Agnew and Peters [9] attempted to revise the techniques of neutralization by adding the knowledge that in order for a neutralization to lead to crime, the delinquent must (1) accept the neutralization and (2) be in a situation where the neutralization is applicable. Agnew and Peters [9] believe that "Distinguishing between these two dimensions of the neutralization process not only allows us to explain the mixed results of past research, but it also allows us to improve the predictive power of neutralization theory".

Agnew and Peters [9] state that, "...those who accept neutralizations believe that deviance is acceptable in some situations but not in others. Because the behavior of the individuals is situationally determined to a large degree, they are likely to be sensitive to environmental variations...Those who do not accept neutralizations, however, tend to believe that deviance is not acceptable in any situation. Variations in the environment are therefore less relevant to those individuals and are more likely to be ignored" (86).

Agnew and Peters [9] found that, "...the data indicate that the acceptance of neutralization leads to deviance only when individuals believe that they are in situations where the neutralizations are applicable" (p. 93). Topalli (2005) attempts to revise the techniques of neutralization by assessing how street criminals use these techniques. Topalli presents a series of interview excerpts to describe how street criminals use neutralizations:

"Many street offenders, particularly those whose day-to-day lives are focused on drug dealing and violence, encounter instances where they are faced with a choice of following the code of the street or not. As with snitching, in those cases where they chose to deviate from the unconventional ethic they often are forced to employ neutralization techniques to preserve their self-image as truly hardcore" [10].

Topalli (2005) introduces the technique of Denial of Seriousness (819-822). This technique allows street offenders to show mercy to those who have wronged them while keeping their reputation intact. For example, if a drug dealer is robbed by a crack head who is going through withdrawal symptoms, the dealer can employ the denial of seriousness by saying the person did not know what they were actually doing and that harming them would not have much of an effect because the crack head would not know who is harming them and probably would not remember the incident. Topalli (2005: 893) found that "...neutralization theory can be applied to all types of offenders regardless of the degree to which conventional or unconventional values are important to them".

"The potentially critical consequence for the explanation of criminal behavior is twofold: first, that there may be no clear separation between conventional and nonconventional (that is street-oriented) cultural values and, second, that allegiance to a given value system need not be absolute or exclusive. It makes more sense to conceive of value systems as lying along a continuum that allows for simultaneous, differential attachment to conventional and unconventional rules of behavior" [10].

Matza and Sykes' theory states that delinquents swing back and forth between illegitimate and legitimate behaviors. It does appear that serial murderers lead lives for some time without detection. Most serial murderers have girlfriends and/or wives. Most have held jobs. All of these activities continued while they were in the depths of their killing. Matza and Sykes' [5] theory assumes that offenders justify their crimes before they act on them and feel remorse. Other literatures on lust murder depicts that most serial killers have anti-social personality disorders and cannot feel compassion Hickey [1]. But as Hickey (2013) suggests it may be possible for a serial murderer to rationalize their behaviors after their crimes have been committed.

Therefore, this theory will be preliminarily tested and will provide a starting place for more in-depth testing in the future.

Research Questions:

Are the justifications offered by serial sex murderers for their crimes consistent with any of the techniques of neutralization described by Matza and Sykes? And, if so which ones?

## Methodology

Seventy-five serial sex murderers were purposively selected from a list of convicted serial murderers generated by in Hickey's [1,3,11,12] books about serial killers, generally. Hickey does not proclaim that his list is of all serial murderers nor serial sex murderers are exhaustive. The selection of serial sex or lust murderers came from reading case histories, biographies, media accounts and court records of the 75 serial murders listed by Hickey. These seventy-five murderers were sent a confidential mail survey (see Figure 1) asking them to answer the following question.

Figure 1: Question asked of serial sex murderers.

Hello. I am asking for your participation in a research study about multiple murders. Please rank order the five statements below in terms of which ones would be legitimate reasons for someone to commit repetitive murder to satisfy sexual urges. A '1' is ranked the strongest reason for this type of murder and a '5' is reserved for the least strong reason for this type of murder. Feel free to elaborate upon your answers in the additional spaces provided.

Upon receipt of the results of your survey, I will send you one dollar for your time. This is a confidential survey. All data will be presented in summary form. You will not be identified by name and no personal information will be gathered or reported.\*

- \_\_\_\_\_ : These low-life's have brought what has happened to them on themselves.  
**(DENIAL OF THE VICTIM)**
- \_\_\_\_\_ : No one really cares about them anyway. No one gets hurt it is a victimless crime.  
**(DENIAL OF INJURY)**
- \_\_\_\_\_ : It was not my fault. I was the victim of my own upbringing.  
**(DENIAL OF RESPONSIBILITY)**
- \_\_\_\_\_ : A lot of people think of committing multiple murders; I just did it.  
**(APPEAL TO HIGHER LOYALTIES)**
- \_\_\_\_\_ : Rejection of the rejecters  
**(CONDEMNATION OF THE CONDEMNERS)**

**\*None of the titles in bold were listed on the instrument**

The subjects of this survey were in the unfortunate position of having to interpret the meaning of the question. There were no interviewers present who could have explained the questions in more detail or picked up on any non-verbal behaviour. On the other hand, there was no interviewer bias resulting from the presence of an interviewer.

## Results

All responders were male. Thirty-eight of the seventy-five completed surveys were returned which resulted in a 51% response rate. Eleven of the 75 responses to the survey were received but the subject refused to answer because the intention of the results implied that he was guilty. Four responders reported that none of the five neutralizations were rationales for serial sex murders. Twenty-two surveys were never returned.

Thirty-percent (n=15) of those who completed the survey (38) indicated that someone would rationalize their commission for their serial sex murders by denying the victim. Twenty-six percent (n=13) indicated that someone would rationalize their serial sex murders by denying responsibility for the crime. Eighteen percent (n=9) of the responders indicated that 'a lot of people think of committing multiple murders; I just did it' (appeal to higher loyalties). No one indicated that a rationalization for committing their serial sex murder was to deny neither injury nor condemnation of the condemners'.

## Discussion

Although this is a preliminary study, the results serve as a starting place for more rigorous analyses in the future. Although the numbers are small, three of the rationalizations developed by Matza and Sykes (1957) were reported by serial sex offenders: denial of responsibility, denial of the victim and appeal to higher loyalties.

### Denial of the victim

Fifteen respondents in this current study indicated that they have dehumanized their victims. Several serial sex killers have indicated that they did not want to know their victims' names nor spend too much time casually conversing with them. Reports of blaming the victim have been apparent in certain group membership by serial sex killers who might have rationalized their killing by indicating that homosexuals, prostitutes, the homeless, females got what they deserved.

### Denial of responsibility

Thirteen of the reports from serial sex killers in this study indicated the denial of responsibility. This rationalization focuses on the belief that it was not the serial sex killers fault. He was the victim of his own upbringing. A number of serial sex murderers have suffered biological, psychological and/or sociological trauma [11]. Head trauma and genetic malformations, toxic poisoning, vitamin deficiencies, chromosomal imbalances, to name a few, have also been assessed in the literature as possible causes of serial sex offending [13]. Psychological dispositions such as personality disorders and antisocial personality disorder fill the pages of research findings involving causation [14]. Research literature is also replete with a number of social risks [15,16]. A few of the sociological variables from the research literature include child abuse, and neglect, substance abuse, poverty, witnessing violence, the lack of social bonds, population density and have been linked to serial sex killing. However, none of the variables discussed in prior research has ever been shown to be direct link to serial sex killing. Currently, our literature suggests that we have a constellation of factors shown to be related to serial sex killing.

## Appeal to higher loyalties

Nine respondents indicated that there are a lot of people who think about killing. I just did it. These respondents appear to be acting out to satisfy a higher calling. A few serial killers have claimed that they were doing Satan's work. However, these serial sex murderers were never members of any organized group [1].

## Conclusion

One drawback of the theory of Techniques of Neutralization assumes that serial sex murderers feel guilt or shame. Future studies might want to assess variations based upon age, race, social class and indicators of anti-social personality disorder. While there is a need for more comparison data, a larger sample and an application of the various types of serial killer, this preliminary study provides a starting place for more detailed and rigorous research in future studies involving serial murderers.

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