

# Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

## Sykes, Gresham M., and David Matza: Techniques of Neutralization

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory  
Chapter Title: "Sykes, Gresham M., and David Matza: Techniques of Neutralization"  
Pub. Date: 2010  
Access Date: September 12, 2014  
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.  
City: Thousand Oaks  
Print ISBN: 9781412959186  
Online ISBN: 9781412959193

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n254>

Print pages: 920-927

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n254>

Many theories of crime suggest that one of the most important elements in the process of criminal engagement is the psychological process of sanitizing the conscience so that it can be accomplished without suffering guilt. For this reason, much has been written about the ways that offenders make sense of or account for their criminal acts and related behaviors. Perhaps the most well-known explanation of this process was proposed by Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza with what is now referred to as *neutralization theory*. According to Sykes and Matza, when offenders contemplate committing criminal acts, they use linguistic devices to neutralize the guilt of committing crime. By doing so, they can commit crime without serious damage to their self-concept. This simple explanation of crime has had a tremendous impact on criminological theory. This essay describes the theoretical foundation of the theory and its place in the history of criminology. It then discusses several of the lingering issues about neutralization theory and how the theory has withstood empirical evaluations. It concludes with a discussion about how the theory has been applied in criminal justice policy.

## Theoretical Foundation

Sykes and Matza's influential article began with a critique of subcultural theorists of the time. Subcultural theorists argued that delinquent boys rebelled against the dominant social order by [p. 920 ↓ ] rejecting middle-class standards and replacing them with a new, often delinquent, set of values. Sykes and Matza disagree, contending that subcultural theorists overstated the extent to which delinquents rejected conventional values. They argue that everyone, even lower-class delinquent gang members, retains some commitment to the dominant value system of society.

They base their argument on four key points. First, if delinquent subcultures do exist, then delinquents should view their criminal behavior as morally correct. Therefore, they should not experience guilt or shame for engaging in the act or for being caught doing so. Second, delinquents should value the opinions and lifestyles of those promoting similar delinquent lifestyles and dismiss the opinions of conventional others. Third, if offenders unconditionally accept crime, then it would be expected that they would treat all victims equally. Fourth, offenders should be immune to the demands of conformity. Critiquing each of these claims, Sykes and Matza argue that delinquents do often feel

guilt and shame for participating in illegal behaviors; show respect and admiration for honest, law-abiding others; make clear distinctions about who can and cannot be victimized; and still participate in the same social functions that law-abiding citizens do (including church, school, and family activities). Together, these factors suggest that delinquents are able to distinguish between right and wrong and are subject to influences of both conventional and delinquent subcultures. That is, young offenders are well aware of the wrongfulness of their actions.

Yet, if delinquents maintain at least minimal commitments to the dominant social order, then how are they then able to violate its norms? If people are committed to the social order, they typically experience guilt or shame for violating, or even contemplating violating, social norms. This guilt, and its potential for producing a negative self-image, helps to dissuade most people from engaging in criminal or deviant acts. Therefore, in order to participate in deviant behavior under such conditions, people must find ways to rationalize their actions or to neutralize the guilt associated with them. People do this by relying on linguistic devices that when invoked, blunt the moral force of the law and neutralize the guilt of criminal participation. Through the use of these techniques social and internal controls that serve to check or inhibit deviant motivational patterns are blocked, allowing individuals to engage freely in delinquency without serious damage to their self-image. In this way, offenders can remain committed to the dominant normative system and interpret their deviant actions as acceptable or proper.

All of these neutralization techniques emerge from thoughts and beliefs that are widely prevalent in society and not something created anew. In fact, delinquent neutralizations are legitimated by the juvenile justice system itself. For example, when agents of convention, from social workers to judges, argue that delinquents are the helpless products of their environment, they unwittingly contribute to the internalization of neutralizing excuses. What delinquents hear in these cases confirms their viewpoints that their behaviors are acceptable and beyond their control. The mitigation procedures built into the legal machinery itself lends credence and support to adolescent interpretations of delinquency being excusable.

Sykes and Matza outline five techniques of neutralization that allow offenders to engage in wrongdoing (i.e., denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of condemners, and the appeal to higher loyalties). First, offenders can

rid themselves of negative self-images through the *denial of responsibility*. Offenders deny responsibility by claiming that their behaviors are accidental or due to forces beyond their control. They see themselves as victims of circumstance or as products of their environment. A second technique is the *denial of injury*. Here, the wrongfulness of one's behavior is determined by whether anyone was hurt and by whether the actor intended to do any harm. Offenders can excuse their behaviors if they believe that no one was truly harmed. Offenders who use these techniques may claim that their behavior is inappropriate in general but in this particular instance it is acceptable because no real harm was caused by their actions. Sometimes offenders admit that their actions cause harm but neutralize moral indignation by *denying the victim*. This can be done in one of two ways. First, they may contend that some victims act improperly and thus deserve everything that happens to them. Offenders define their own actions as a form of rightful retaliation or punishment, thereby claiming the victim does not deserve victim status. Denial of [p. 921 ↓ ] the victim also occurs if the victim is absent, unknown, or abstract. In these situations, the offender can ignore easily the rights of victims because the victims are not around to stimulate the offender's conscience. A fourth technique is the *condemnation of the condemner*. Instead of focusing on their own actions, delinquents focus on the motivations or behaviors of the people who disapprove of them. Offenders claim that their condemners are hypocrites or "deviants in disguise." The importance of this technique is that the offenders shift the focus to the actions of others while making their behavior seem less important. The final technique described by Sykes and Matza is the *appeal to higher loyalties*. Offenders shield themselves from internal and external controls by claiming that their behavior is consistent with the moral obligations of a specific group to which they belong. Here the offender acknowledges the conventional norms of society, and may agree with them, but chooses to violate the law because other norms are thought to be more pressing.

Sykes and Matza's original list of five offender justifications is not the last word on offender accounts. Their theory has subsequently been expanded to different types of offenders and offenses, and new techniques appear to emerge with each new exploration into a deviant group. For instance, qualitative studies of white-collar offenders have produced several new techniques including the defense of necessity, the claim of normality, and the claim of entitlement. Studies of property offenders have introduced the techniques of the metaphor of the ledger, justification by comparison,

and postponement. It is almost certain that this list of additional neutralizations will grow as research in the area continues.

## Neutralization Theory's Place in Criminology

The influence of neutralization theory is unquestionable. Sykes and Matza's short article is one of the most frequently cited and influential explanations of criminal behavior through the first part of the 21st century. According to the Social Science Citation Index, the article has been cited over 900 times between the time it was published and the end of 2009. Perhaps the greatest testament to the importance of neutralization theory is the fact that it is no longer confined to the study of juvenile delinquents, or even adult offenders. Neutralization techniques are used universally in response to inconsistencies between one's actions and one's beliefs. Not only has neutralization theory been used to help understand issues as serious as rape, murder, and genocide, but also it has been used to explain participation in less serious deviant behaviors such as playing bingo, Sunday shopping among Mormons, and entering pre-teen daughters into beauty pageants. Neutralization theory has also been used to explain how survivors of domestic violence cope with their victimization. Finally, neutralization theory has found a receptive audience in studies of organizational and white-collar crime.

Neutralization theory is usually understood as a single component of a larger theory. Alone, the theory provides insufficient explanation for differences in crime across cultures, groups, genders, or the like. As such, the theory's value is rightly understood as enhancing or developing existing theoretical frameworks for understanding offending. Indeed, neutralization theory has been linked to almost so many different wider traditions of criminological thought over the years that it is difficult to know how to classify it in the criminological canon. Introductory textbooks consider it variously as a part of control theory, psychological theories, learning theory, and subcultural theory. In addition, neutralization techniques have been incorporated into reintegrative shaming theory, rational choice theory, and even as a small component of life-course theory, leaving very few areas of contemporary criminological theory untouched by its reach.

As initially proposed, neutralizations were an extension and refinement of Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory. Sutherland argued that, through interacting with others, offenders learned not just the techniques of crime, but also the definitions (i.e., motives and rationalizations) favorable to crime. Sykes and Matza argued that up until that time researchers had ignored the content of what was learned, preferring instead to focus on the process by which delinquency was learned. Thus, techniques of neutralization were thought to make up a crucial component of Sutherland's definitions favorable to violation of law. Eventually, neutralization theory began to be viewed as more than a refinement of differential association theory and became an independent theory of crime and deviance. Matza's [p. 922 ↓ ] drift theory was instrumental in this process as neutralization took a primary role in the theory.

The incorporation of neutralizations into Matza's theory of delinquency and drift led others to classify neutralization theory as a component of control theory. For instance, neutralization theory can be considered as one component of containment theory. Containment theory argues that refraining from criminal behavior requires a blend of self factors (inner containment) and social factors (outer containment). Strong inner and outer containments insulate individuals from becoming involved in crime. In addition, norm erosion—ignoring the moral significance of norms, the neutralization of what ought to be done, and emancipation from internalized norms—is an important factor in the breakdown of inner containments.

To a lesser degree, neutralization theory has been incorporated into the writings of rational choice theorists. Contemporary rational choice theorists have moved away from early economic models, preferring models of behavior that recognize bounded decision-making processes. Rational choice theorists now devote much of their time to modeling the various stages of criminal decision making, including initiation, continuance, and desistance. Neutralization is thought to play a significant part in the decision-making process at each of these stages, and therefore investigators frequently take them into account when modeling criminal decision making and devising crime prevention programs.

The theory is also firmly established within the canon of work dealing with account-making in sociology. The sociology of accounts borrowed heavily from neutralization theory. Accounts can also be seen as an important refinement of the original

neutralization formulation, although it is not always incorporated into contemporary discussions of neutralization theory. Similar to the techniques of neutralization, accounts are meant to verbally bridge the gap between action and expectation when an individual behaves in a way that is inconsistent with normative expectations. Accounts can be justifications or excuses. Justifications are accounts where actors accept responsibility for their actions, but deny the pejorative quality associated with it. Excuses, on the other hand, are accounts where the actor admits that the act in question is bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility.

The techniques of neutralization make up a large part of justifications. For instance, denial of injury, denial of victims, condemnation of condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties can be viewed as a tentative list of types of justifications. The remaining (and probably most central) technique, denial of responsibility, is incorporated into the appeal to defensibility as one of many excuses. Subsequent research suggests that actors use justifications and excuses depending on the deviant act they are engaging in. For example, actors tend to provide justifications for violent offenses, but excuses for property crimes. Violent crimes are often the product of a dispute between two parties, and offenders frequently interpret their role as one of self-defense or a reasonable reaction to hostile provocation. Property crimes, on the other hand, can rarely be interpreted in this way, and so are more frequently excused.

## Theoretical Issues

In their original formulation of theory Sykes and Matza state that techniques of neutralization must precede deviant behavior in order to make such behavior possible. This statement makes two crucial claims about the techniques of neutralization that are often overlooked in empirical work using neutralization theory. First, there is a specific chronological sequence of neutralizations and delinquent behavior. Neutralizations are not just a posteriori rationalizations as they precede delinquency. Without them, guilt and negative self-images would prevent people from engaging in crime. It is this aspect of the theory that is the most significant stumbling point for neutralization theory. Sykes and Matza are clear in their contention that neutralizations precede delinquency; otherwise, delinquents could not free themselves of the potential harm to their self-

concept. Critics argue that neutralizations are simply after-the-fact rationalizations meant to justify wrongdoing. This debate has continued essentially unabated ever since.

Second, and just as important, Sykes and Matza emphasize that this order is not meant to imply a deterministic or causal relationship. Neutralization techniques enable crime but do not require it. Matza develops this argument much more explicitly with his concept of “drift,” which is defined as a temporary period of irresponsibility or an episodic [p. 923 ↓ ] relief from moral constraint. Neutralization enables drift by freeing the individual from the moral bind of law and order. Once set in a state of drift, a young person is likely to willfully choose to commit a crime under circumstances of preparation (or familiarity with the particular offense type) or desperation. Matza's concept of desperation is linked to the delinquent's central neutralization technique, the denial of responsibility, or what is referred to as a “mood of fatalism.” In the mood of fatalism, common to the experience of drift, delinquents believe that they have been uncontrollably thrust into new situations like a billiard ball. This feeling of helplessness simultaneously relieves the individual from the binds of morality and also encourages the delinquent to want to take control of his or her situation and prove that he or she can make something happen. Considering the limited options available to adolescents, this frequently means committing a new type of offense in order to regain a sense of being in control of their environment.

Another issue with the theory involves who will and will not use neutralizations. Sykes and Matza made explicit that only those actors who are committed to conventional norms rely on neutralization techniques to protect their self-concept when committing crime or delinquency. It is because of their commitments that they experience guilt or shame for engaging in deviant behaviors. Recent research suggests that the assertion that all people are committed to the dominant culture is overstated. For example, many offenders are committed to their misdeeds and need not take effort to justify them. A small proportion of people becomes highly committed to delinquent values. Since these individuals are relatively unattached to mainstream values, there may be nothing for them to neutralize. For instance, persistent street offenders do not experience guilt about engaging in serious forms of crime and thus often do not neutralize their criminal actions. They do, however, need to neutralize when they violate subcultural norms that oppose doing “the right thing” in their social world, like snitching or failing to retaliate when wronged.

There is also evidence that those who have a strong commitment to conventional norms do not employ neutralizations. Youths who have strong attachments to family are less likely to accept neutralizations than those with weaker familial attachments. The high levels of moral commitment are thought to create too much guilt to be overcome by simple neutralization techniques. Therefore, only less committed individuals would have the need and ability to use them effectively.

Research suggests that there is a curvilinear relationship between use of neutralizations and commitment to conventional norms. Neutralization use is most commonly associated with individuals who either identify as members of mainstream society or who are in a state of drift: partially committed to conventional values and to a certain lifestyle or set of behaviors that is labeled as deviant. An absence of neutralization is associated with people and groups who are either hypercommitted to dominant moral values or else strongly committed to a subcultural frame of reference. For those who are strongly attached or who exaggerate conventional morals (e.g., adult virgins), neutralizations are simply ineffective. For those who are weakly committed (e.g., persistent offenders), neutralizations are simply not needed because these individuals are strongly committed to a subcultural lifestyle. Thus, it is only those whose commitments fall somewhere in the middle who both accept and rely on neutralizations to excuse their behaviors.

## Critiques and Evaluations

Empirical assessments of the theory typically use cross-sectional survey designs to test the core assumptions of the theory by locating a sample of known offenders and a control group sample of “innocents,” then asking respondents in both groups to agree or disagree with a list of neutralizations (often in relation to hypothesized scenarios). One research strategy is to compare a sample of known delinquents with a sample of non-delinquents to determine if the delinquents are more accepting of neutralizations than are non-delinquents, as predicted by neutralization theory. The second way this question has been addressed is by using measures of neutralization acceptance to predict self-reported delinquency in a single sample. Both designs have been used to examine the correlation of neutralization scores and relatively minor deviant acts such as college cheating, workplace deviance, drinking behaviors, shoplifting, and

minor delinquency. Overall, this research has found positive but weak effects of neutralizations on deviance. Unfortunately, the bulk of this research has utilized [p. 924 ↓ ] cross-sectional designs, which are unable to disentangle the sequential relationship of neutralizations and deviance. Without the benefit of longitudinal designs, there is no way to determine if neutralizations precede criminal behavior or if they are merely after-the-fact rationalizations. For the most part, findings show that excuse acceptance is related to future participation in minor deviance. Even the few longitudinal designs produce weak, mixed support for the theory.

Despite this mostly underwhelming empirical support for neutralization theory, criminologists have not given up hope on the theory. Researchers have offered a variety of explanations for the mixed findings, and they argue that most studies have been limited in their ability to support or disprove the theory with certainty. In general, although survey research has provided a great deal of information regarding the use of neutralizations, this line of research suffers from several seemingly insurmountable methodological limitations.

First, Sykes and Matza's seemingly uncomplicated theory is often misrepresented in this evaluation research. For instance, except for the few longitudinal designs, survey research has been unable to accurately determine if neutralizations precede criminal behavior. Many tests of neutralization theory are actually testing whether people who have been convicted of a crime tend to score higher on neutralization-like measures than young people who have not. This, of course, is not a test of the rationalization process.

Likewise, neutralization research often fails to distinguish between beliefs that serve to neutralize conventional bonds and beliefs that simply show unconventional commitment. In typical neutralization measurements, respondents are asked if they agree with statements such as, "People should not blame Marcus for stealing if this was the normal thing to do where Marcus lived" or "Suckers deserve to be taken advantage of." Acceptance of these statements is subject to multiple interpretations. They could mean that respondents thought this was a good excuse or else they could have thought stealing or taking advantage of others was morally acceptable regardless of whether an excuse was used or not. Thus, they can be interpreted as acceptance of unconventional values rather than neutralizations.

Fundamental flaws in most research on neutralization may be responsible for the mixed results showing links between neutralization use and criminal behavior. Most tests presume a causal relationship between neutralizations and offending that misrepresents the contention that neutralizations only allow for delinquency. Therefore, neutralizations are only likely to lead to delinquency among those who are in situations in which the neutralizations are applicable; encounter opportunities for delinquency; and have a strong need or desire to commit the offense. For example, college students who think it is acceptable to cheat on exams if other people around them are cheating must believe that people around them are actually cheating. This same explanation can be used to explain the findings that females accept the same number of, if not more, neutralizations than males, but commit far less crime and delinquency. This reformulation of neutralization theory may explain the contradictory findings of other researchers.

Researchers also frequently rely on inappropriate samples. For instance, several of the most frequently cited tests of neutralization theory utilize all-too-convenient samples of university students enrolled in criminology or sociology courses. Generalizing from such samples to the population of typical interest to criminologists (e.g., street offenders) is problematic. Using non-criminal samples means that findings must be questioned, regardless of whether they offer support or not for the theory.

Neutralization research relies heavily on incarcerated samples, where a person's incarcerated status is used as evidence of deviance. The many problems with using incarcerated samples are magnified in cognitive research, where familiar findings of low self-efficacy, weak locus of control, and overall levels of frustration and hostility are quite obviously magnified or distorted by the deprivations of liberty associated with incarceration. Such prison-based cognitions may have no relevance to the same person's thinking patterns outside of such a total institution. Furthermore, there are countless situational demands inherent in the prison setting that can magnify the possibility of response bias.

The conflicting results of previous research may be due to several methodological problems. First, there has been an over-reliance on quantitative techniques. Typical tests of the theory rely on survey measures that were not originally designed to measure neutralization concepts. There are few empirical tests of the theory that have

used qualitative [p. 925 ↓ ] methods. When qualitative methods are used, investigators typically describe the neutralizations used by offenders to neutralize a specific form of deviance without testing or expanding the theory. Researchers use the theory only as a conceptual tool to understand participation in crime or deviance.

Finally and most importantly, survey research on neutralizations suffers from a fundamental artificiality problem. As opposed to the exploratory studies that have uncovered neutralizations in spontaneous explanations of deviant behavior, survey-based studies measure neutralizations almost exclusively in the abstract. Typical neutralization items on a survey include questions like, "It's alright to physically beat up people who call you names." Questioning a respondent's approval or disapproval of criminal behavior—even in select, hypothetical situations like this—treats neutralizations as generalized beliefs rather than personal reconstructions of events from a person's own life.

Yet Sykes and Matza argued that neutralizations matter because these cognitive beliefs protect an offender from serious damage to his or her self-image. They are techniques for preserving a non-criminal self-concept, despite the commission of criminal acts. If an act has never been committed, and is therefore not a threat to the person's identity, it requires no neutralization in the formal sense. This logical argument has in fact been empirically demonstrated in several studies that indicate that offenders tend to subscribe primarily to neutralizations relating to offenses they had personally committed.

Pencil-and-paper questionnaires regarding abstract neutralizations may be missing the real cognitive insight of neutralization theory: the way people reconstruct and schematize their *own* past lives can have an important impact on their future behavior. Causal schemata like explanations and accounts are highly personalized phenomena based in salient episodes in a person's own life experience. Moreover, cognitive psychologists argue that our causal beliefs are storied; that is, they take the form of narratives and depend upon a person's lived context and perspective. People use rationalizations to provide their often chaotic lives with a sense of meaning, control, and predictability. Abstract questionnaire items may not be able to tap into this aspect of a person's identity in a meaningful way.

# Implications of Neutralization Theory on Criminal Justice Policy

Neutralization theory is intended to help explain the occurrence of certain kinds of deviant and criminal behavior; as such, it is perhaps natural that its adherents would see implications in the theory for criminal justice or correctional policy. For instance, neutralization theory has been used in developing crime prevention programs. The idea here is that by learning the linguistic devices that offenders use to make their crimes palatable, program designers can actively attack these belief systems. By neutralizing the neutralizations, potential offenders would not be able to define their actions as non-criminal and thus would refrain from criminal behavior. True to situational crime prevention's roots, "removing excuses" in this way does not entail making long-term changes in the disposition of the offender. Instead, situational crime prevention theorists argue that programs geared toward removing excuses should still focus on highly specific forms of crime and should be presented at the time criminal decisions are being made. For instance, organizational managers are encouraged to openly discuss the neutralizations that wayward employees use. Bringing these neutralizations into the open is thought to force employees to consciously consider their actions when stealing from the company.

Likewise, restorative justice interventions, such as family group conferencing—where offenders sit down with family members, community elders, and their victims in a reintegrative shaming process—are largely premised on social-cognitive principles, with the explicit aim of undermining offender neutralizations. In fact, nearly every form of offender treatment—from the 12 Steps model of Alcoholics Anonymous to the confrontational techniques of therapeutic communities—involves some strategies for overcoming denial and challenging offender rationalizations. In fact, the ascendancy of cognitive-based treatment programs in correctional settings has triggered a new generation of research into the role of offender excuses and justifications in criminal behavior. After all, the premise behind much of this cognitive programming owes a considerable debt to the neutralization idea: Offending is partially facilitated by a cognitive mind-set that justifies and rationalizes criminal behavior.

[p. 926 ↓ ]

Finally, around the same time that criminologists were exploring how offenders made sense of their crimes, law enforcement personnel began developing interrogation techniques involving offering justifications to suspects to obtain confessions. This interrogation technique, known as the Reid Technique of Interviewing and Interrogation, made use of similar concepts that criminologists were discovering, specifically that offenders relieve their feelings of guilt about their criminal behavior by utilizing specific linguistic techniques (i.e., neutralizations). The Reid Technique consists of a series of behavior-provoking questions that assist interrogators in determining a suspect's truthfulness. Once an interrogator has enough information to believe that the suspect committed a crime, the interrogator verbalizes moral justifications to the suspect to explain why the interrogator thinks the suspect committed the crime. Law enforcement practitioners can improve their interrogation techniques by understanding the mind-set and justifications offenders use both prior to their involvement in crime and following the event.

It should be pointed out, however, that these various applications are a long way from the origins of neutralization theory in criminology. Sykes and Matza hoped that rather than pathologizing offenders, neutralization theory would do the opposite: demonstrating how similar juvenile delinquents really were to the rest of us. Indeed, the wider research on excuse-making in social psychology suggests that they were probably right in this regards. Psychologists argue that not only is it perfectly normal to offer up excuses and justifications for one's shortcomings, that doing so is socially expected and rewarded.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n254>

*See also*

- [Benson, Michael L.: The Collateral Consequences of White-Collar Offending](#)
- [Braithwaite, John: Reintegrative Shaming Theory](#)
- [Cognitive Theories of Crime](#)
- [Matza, David: Delinquency and Drift](#)

- [Sutherland, Edwin H.: Differential Association Theory and Differential Social Organization](#)

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