CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES OF NEUTRALIZATION
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TECHNIQUES

In 1957, Gresham Sykes and David Matza published an article in the American Sociological Review entitled "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency." In this seminal article, Sykes and Matza argued that potential delinquents learn a vocabulary of excuses which are unrecognized extensions of defenses implied in situational ethics. That is, a part of what delinquents learn involves rationalizations or justifications for their deviant actions which become what Sutherland called "definitions favorable to the violation of law." The authors insisted that a juvenile becomes delinquent by learning values, moral imperatives, or attitudes standing in direct contradiction to those dominant in middle class society (Sykes & Matza, 1957: 667-668).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the possiblity that certain criminological theories attempting to explain deviance may in fact be used as "excuses" or neutralizations for lawbreaking behavior. By offering a stock of knowledge with primary emphasis on social structure, cultural and environmental determinations, social class, official labeling, and so on, some sociological theories have this potential effect of offering denials or rationalizations for an individual's behavior. If we allow the idea that theoretical views can influence trends in thought as suggested by the development of diversion programs as a result of labeling theory, then we must allow the possibility that sociological theories can be utilized to neutralize individual responsibility for choice and decision making.

DENIAL OF RESPONSIBILITY

The first technique of neutralization presented by Sykes and Matza (1957:668) was termed "the denial of responsibility" whereby an individual asserts that his or her acts are due to forces outside personal control such as "unloving parents, bad companions, or a slum neighborhood." The delinquent develops a billiard ball self concept by viewing the self as helplessly propelled into various situations thus excusing individual responsibility. The authors themselves pointed out the similarity between this kind of rationalization and a sociological frame of reference or "human jurisprudence" in law. In a footnote, Sykes and Matza (1957: 668) noted that many delinquents seem to be surprisingly aware of sociological as well as psychological explanations for their actions and are quick to point out their poor environment as a "cause" of their behavior.

Two general theoretical views in deviance, social disorganization and Robert Merton's work on anomie, emphasize cultural and structural determinants of behavior. Proponents of social disorganization, although somewhat out of fashion today, focus on urban areas said to be characterized by conflict, decay, family disorganization, weak conventional controls, and shifting populations of heterogeneous racial and ethnic groups. Such places were considered the breeding grounds of deviant and delinquent behavior.

Similarly, anomie as formulated by Merton (1957) also characterized lower class members of society as being victims of unequal opportunities to utilize legitimate societal means to achieve cultural goals. This structural theory allows for little input from the individuals involved other than perhaps choosing among several deviant modes of adaptation to this disjuncture between means and goals. While this description is but a sketch of the general approaches in strain and other anomic conditions used in sociological theory, it serves the purpose of pointing to the lack of concern with the interactional and individual levels of analysis.

Sykes and Matza pointed out that as the delinquent learns to view the self as more acted upon than acting, deviance becomes more likely. Such theories as social disorganization and anomie do indeed present a picture of people as solely acted upon. While each theory has offered valuable insights into deviant behavior, an unintended consequence of such a theoretical approach is the "excuse" conveniently offered to the lawbreaker who will nevertheless be held legally responsible for his or her acts. In addition, such theoretical views may influence one to view the self as controlled by outer forces and perhaps create a kind of fatalism for some individuals.

CONDEMNING CONDEMMNERS

Another technique of neutralization was termed "the condemnation of the condemners" and it involves as a shift of attention away from the individual's deviant act to the motives and behavior of social control agents who disapprove of the violation. The delinquent using this technique may claim that the condemners are hypocrites, closet deviants, or are motivated primarily by personal revenge or personal gain. For example, a police officer may be accused of being corrupt, stupid, bigoted, or excessively brutal. Teachers may be accused of showing favoritism and having "pets" while parents may be accused of being unfair, unfit, or spiteful. Taking these lines of thinking one step further, material possessions, rewards, and high social status may be seen as a matter of pull or luck decreasing still further the stature of those who enforce laws behavioral norms. Most importantly, by attacking those in authority, the deliquent attempts to deflect judgments about his or her own behavior or the deliquent attempts to define their judgments as unfair or undeserved.

The similarity between "condemnation of the condemners" and both the conflict and labeling perspective in criminological theory is rather obvious. The labeling perspective is similar to the conflict approach in stressing the formation and application of social definitions with regard to deviance. The two perspectives have become closely identified with the argument that social reactions to deviance are unequally applied to the less powerful and influential groups in society. The major premise of labeling theory is that deviance is not a personal quality nor is it created by the individual's acts. Rather it is created by group definitions and reactions. Is the implication that the individual and the behavior of that individual are important? It appears that they are unimportant until some societal defining agent enters the picture. Becker (1975: 174) at least admits that the individual may act as labeling agent. Nevertheless, the implication is that outside defining agents create the deviant and that the individual's personality, motivations, self concepts as well as interaction situations are basically unimportant.

Akers (1977: 33) has an interesting point on labeling theory:

One sometimes gets the impression from reading the literature on labeling that people mind their own business until bad society comes along and slaps a stigmatized label on them. Thus forced into the role of deviant, the individual has little choice but to be deviant.

Labeling theorists imply an acquiescence to the label as suggested by Akers which tends to negate individual responsiblity. However, more recently, works by Rogers and Buffalo (1974) and Levitin (1975) point out that the person often takes an active role in fighting back, rejecting, neutralizing, denying, or otherwise negotiating the labeling process.

A "condemnation of the condemners" is explicit in conflict theory and implicit in labeling theory. As such, Gouldner referred to them as "underdog" theories. Akers (1977: 29) stated that both perspectives are notable for insisting that we shift our attention from exclusive concern with the deviant to include a major concern with the process of applying deviant labels. In fact, both theories have been notably successful in creating such awareness and have been very beneficial to criminological theory. However, the possiblity remains that these approaches inadvertently provide the deviant with rationalizations as well as resentments in facing the legal system.

APPEAL TO HIGHER LOYALTY

The last technique of neutralization to be discussed, is the appeal to higher loyalties. it refers to a situation where an individual may be caught between two conflicting demands, those of society or the legal system and those of his or her friends. Internal as well as external social controls may be neutralized by sacrificing the demands of the larger society for the demands of the smaller social groups to which he or she belongs such as brothers, sisters, the gang, or the group of friends. When an individual resolves the dilemma by breaking the law, a higher loyalty to friends or neighborhood may be claimed in an attempt to neutralize the negative aspects of the deviant behavior (Sykes and Matza, 1957: 669).

Sykes and Matza pointed out that perhaps the delinquent is unusual in that he or she sees that one acts in behalf of the smaller social groups to which one belongs and uses this as a justification for behavior. However, this may

not be so unusual when one looks at the large body of literature on delinquent subcultures and delinquent gangs.

Typically, the subculture and gang theories of deviance deal primarily with the lower class. Miller (1976: 144) characterized the lower class community as having a long established distinctively patterned tradition of its own which did not arise through conflict with middle class culture. The dominant motivation to delinquency, as conceived by Miller, involves an effort to conform to lower class values and norms which may be in conflict with the law or with middle class standards of behavior. The "higher loyalty" then becomes the juvenile gang characteristic of some lower class areas having distinct values or "focal concerns." Adherence to highly meaningful group standards of toughness, smartness, excitment, and so on are seen as the "deepest and most compelling components of motivation" (Miller, 1976: 155). Individuals then act in order to achieve what is valued by the actor's most immediate and significant reference group.

Albert Cohen (1976) viewed the delinquent subculture as a "reaction formation" to the strains and stresses imposed upon lower class youthful males by the social class system. This negativistic and malicious subculture according to Cohen, provides a sense of status and self worth which could not be achieved in middle class terms. Cloward and Ohlin (1976) presented a similar point of view except that they emphasized the varieties of delinquent subcultures based on the availability of various illegitimate means.

DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATION

Although not necessarily a subcultural theory, Sutherland's differential association theory holds that if an individual is subjected to an excess of law violating definitions over law abiding definitions, one is likely to become more criminal. The balance of criminal and anti-criminal definitions determines whether or not one will be conforming or deviant. These definitions are supposedly learned in a process of symbolic interaction with others, mainly those in primary groups (Akers, 1977: 41). However, Sutherland's thesis is not really one if interaction because no real role is given to the learner. Instead, the learner is pictured as a generally passive receiver of knowledge

and if the knowledge recieved leans toward law violation, then the individual becomes deviant. Again, the "higher loyalty" belongs to the definitions received from others. In addition, such views can be used by lawbreakers to claim lack of responsibility or to neutralize guilt.

As Nettler (1974: 196) pointed out, the neglect of individual differences is common to most if not all sociological explanations of deviance. Such neglect may not be a disadvantage if one is interested only in aggregates of people and crime rates over time. Yet this neglect makes it difficult to understand the "bad boy", raised in a "good" environment or the nondelinquent who lives in a highly criminal neighborhood. It appears that sociologists continue to ignore such cases whereby people make choices, reject dominant definitions, and insist on being different. The sociological literature on juvenile gangs and subcultures perpetuates, perhaps unintentionally, the notion that the social actor is propelled primarily by the environment, the peer group, and the prevailing social norms.

CONCLUSION

The thesis of this paper is that sociological theories of deviance may have the effect of "neutralizing" the individual's input as well as responsibility in social behavior with an overemphasis on the social structure, the labeling process, the subculture, the group, and other outside determinants of behavior. Without a corresponding recognition and emphasis on the level of the social actor, sociological theories will remain at best incomplete.

As a by-product of our emphasis on outside determinants of behavior, we are in a sense producing a stock of knowledge that can be used to neutralize, rationalize, justify or otherwise absolve individual responsibility. Our theories can be thrown back by those who say "it's not my fault."

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CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This research sample does not represent the whole Vietnamese student population throughout the United States, but it can give a limited understanding of the problems of Vietnamese students in American society. Alienation is a psycho-social phenomenon that prevents people from participating fully in their society. Vietnamese students need to be prevented from becoming victims of alienation. Social workers, teachers and parents should encourage Vietnamese students to organize their own groups to help them avoid feelings of isolation. Vietnamese students also need to be introduced to American culture by participating in more social activities at their schools, churches or other social organizations in their communities. If they cannot overcome their feelings of alienation, they will never become integrated into American society. More research should be conducted to study the variety of problems experienced by Vietnamese people in American society.

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