

PREVALENCE OF SYKES AND MATZA'S TECHNIQUES OF NEUTRALIZATION
IN A SAMPLE OF CONVICTED TEXAS INTIMATE
PARTNER VIOLENCE OFFENDERS

by

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DEDICATION

To my biggest fan and guardian angel, this is for you. I will always strive to make you proud and will always be your Special.

“You are not the darkness you endured. You are the light that refused to surrender.”

-John Mark Green

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
IO	Other Involved
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
IR	Incident Report
NVAW	National Violence Against Women Survey
NISVS	National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey
OF	Offender
VI	Victim

ABSTRACT

As of 2011, an estimated 9.6 million women and 6.8 million men in Texas experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime (Busch-Armendariz, Cook Heffron, & Bohman, 2011). This equates to approximately 32% of all persons who reside in Texas in 2011 (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2011). In previous research, Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization have been relied on to explain various criminal behaviors including theft, sexual violence, and serial murder. Based on prior research conducted by James and Gossett (2018) that applied neutralization to serial killers and Dutton's (1986) study that explored the neutralization of self-punishment in wife assaulters, the current study sought to determine the prevalence of these neutralization techniques across family violence offenses in adjudicated intimate partner violence offenders in one Texas county. Here, a content analysis of 23 incident reports was conducted. It was found that all offenders within the sample used at least one neutralization technique to justify the offense. *Denial of the victim* was the most employed technique of neutralization, followed by *denial of injury*. Foundation for denial of responsibility, denial of incident, prior history/behavior, and other relevant information were inductively identified. Four patterns of specific neutralization techniques also emerged within the sample: (1) the victim instigated the incident; (2) the reaction was in self-defense; (3) an incident was only considered abuse if a physical component was present; and (4) there was no assault if there was no proof of physical harm (e.g., bruises). These findings provide insight into how a person who has committed intimate

partner violence attempts to neutralize his/her offenses and can be utilized as a proactive assessment tool in response to domestic violence and offender treatment options.

I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 1990s, victimization by an intimate partner was considered a private matter that was only addressed within the home. Since then, intimate partner violence (IPV) has been recognized as a public health problem that impacts millions of Americans every year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Victims face various obstacles when it comes to escaping a violent relationship including fear of escalation, lack of accessible resources, and financial circumstance. Societal barriers can also prevent a victim from leaving, including being made to believe that they are responsible for making the relationship work, or that the relationship has good and loving times mixed with the intimidation and fear (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2020). These barriers can also be reinforced by a perpetrator's promise of changed behavior or justifying their actions. The present study seeks to identify the prevalence of neutralizations used by those who have committed IPV across felony offenses, as it has yet to be identified.

Intimate Partner Violence: Scope of the Problem

Data sources on self-reported IPV, such as the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAW) and the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), have identified alarming numbers of the IPV epidemic in the United States. It is estimated that over two million people annually, predominately women, are sexually and/or physically assaulted by an intimate partner (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Victims of IPV are often victimized repeatedly. Including the repeated victimization accounts, it is estimated that 4.8 million intimate partner physical and/or sexual assaults are committed against women, and 2.9 million physical and/or sexual assaults are committed against men annually (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). It is also estimated that women (6.9 million)

experience more chronic and serious physical assaults in comparison to men (4.4 million). Women are also significantly more likely than men to report being victims of IPV (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

In the 2015 NISVS, 43.6 million women reported experiencing sexual violence, stalking, or physical violence in their lifetime. Of those respondents, 30 million reported some form of IPV including physical violence, such as slapping, pushing or shoving (30.6%) and serious physical violence, including hitting with fists, choking or suffocating, and use of a knife or gun (21.4%) (Smith, Zhang, Basile, Merrick, Wang, Kresnow, & Chen, 2018). Those who experienced IPV reported their first victimization having occurred before the age of 25, while 11.3 million (1 in 4 women) reported their first experience before the age of 18 (Smith et al., 2018).

Male respondents also reported similar experiences: 37.5 million men experienced sexual violence, stalking, or physical violence in their lifetime (Smith et al., 2018). Approximately 12 million (31%) of those respondents reported experiencing some form of IPV including physical violence and serious physical violence (14.9%) (Smith et al., 2018). Among the male respondents who experienced IPV, 20.8 million reported their first victimization occurring before the age of 25, and 5.4 million reported that the victimization occurred before the age of 18 (Smith et al., 2018).

IPV is a public health concern both nationwide and in Texas. In a study conducted by the Institute of Domestic and Sexual Assault, 9.6 million women (37.7%) and 6.8 million men (26.8%) in Texas reported experiencing IPV in their lifetime (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2011). This equated to approximately 32% of all Texas residents in 2011 (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2011). More disturbingly, in 2018, 211 men and women

along with and 24 of their associates (i.e., family, friend, coworker) were killed (Texas Council on Family Violence, 2018). Though most research focuses on the victim's perspective, this study seeks to assess the offender's justifications for perpetrating IPV.

Techniques of Neutralization

Sykes and Matza (1957) identified five neutralization techniques in delinquent¹ behavior: *denial of responsibility*, *denial of injury*, *denial of the victim*, *condemnation of the condemners*, and *appeal to higher loyalties*. By learning these techniques, one becomes delinquent and develops ideas and attitudes that contradict societal norms (Sykes and Matza, 1957). Neutralization theory, in terms of assessing IPV, is an interaction effect that diminishes the bond between societal norms and IPV (Tomita, 1990). An example of this is if a person was to commit physical violence against a partner but is only given a warning due to mitigating circumstance (i.e., law enforcement failed to investigate further mutual combativeness), the offender could use the lack of punitive measures as justification to continue the violence. Identifying the prevalence of these neutralization techniques may aid in identifying treatment options for a person who has committed intimate partner violence. Existing literature on neutralization rehabilitation in offenders, particularly IPV, shows that cognitive behavioral therapy can reduce recidivism (Cotti, Foster, Haley, & Rawski, 2020). Cognitive behavioral therapy forces offenders to identify and address the errors in thinking before acting on emotions induced by the thought.

¹ Justice-involved is the more common term for practitioner use.

Research Focus

The current study sought to determine the prevalence of neutralization techniques among a sample of all usable incident reports² of adjudicated IPV offenders in one county in the southern region of Texas in 2015. This study also aimed to determine the prevalence of neutralization techniques across six types of family violence offenses: (1) assault causes bodily injury (family violence), (2) assault family/household member with previous conviction, (3) aggravated assault date/family/household w/weapon, (4) assault family/household member impede breathing/circulation, (5) assault intentional/reckless impede breathing/circulation (family violence), and (6) assault bodily injury family/household member 2+ w/in 12 months. The similarities and differences across offenses with regard to the type and prevalence of Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques, if any, are identified. Patterns and themes, if any, are also identified through an inductive process.

² Usable incident reports are defined as an incident report from the sample year, 2015, that include a statement from the perpetrator and did not involve a child.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of the literature that is relevant to evaluating the prevalence of neutralization techniques among a sample of IPV incident reports. Central to this discussion is Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization; however, other learning theories such as differential association and social learning theory are identified with a focus on the relevance of assessing techniques of neutralization as they relate to IPV incidents. Additionally, research conducted on neutralization techniques in various types of delinquency and IPV are reviewed.

Theoretical Background

Sociological theorists suggest that delinquency is not an innate behavior (i.e., one is not "born" criminal; see Lombroso, 1954), but is learned (Akers, Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce, & Radosevich, 1979; Burgess & Akers, 1966; Cressey, 1954; Leader & Sutherland, 1941; Sykes & Matza, 1957). Delinquency, including IPV, is believed to be a learned behavior, which typically occurs when one is exposed to violence via a close peer group or in one's home. Learning theories, such as differential association and social learning theory, are applicable to IPV because offenders, and often victims, vicariously experience violence during their childhood and adolescence, which can affect subsequent behaviors in other relationships, especially romantic ones (Cochran & Sellers, 2011).

Vicarious learning refers to the acquisition of behaviors by observing others engage in that behavior (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). These observed behaviors are dependent on either positive or negative reinforcement. If the behavior is not corrected post-observation, it is positively reinforced and is likely to be repeated. Alternatively,

experiential learning is the process by which knowledge is grasped and cultivated by actively participating in an experience (Kolb, 1984). A delinquent could commit a crime and not only reoffend more frequently but could become a more skilled criminal by reoffending. For example, a bank robber may become skillful at committing the offense if they rob more banks. Through experiential learning, a criminal would become more skilled the more they reoffended.

Differential Association Theory

Developed by social learning theorist Edwin Sutherland, differential association theory is a sociological explanation of criminality asserting that techniques, motives, and attitudes are learned through interacting with those who commit delinquent acts (Sutherland, 1939; Vinney, 2019). According to Vinney (2019), Sutherland's differential association theory was influenced by sociologists such as Shaw and McKay (1942), who examined the geographic distribution of crime in Chicago. Differential association emerged from Sutherland's own research of thieves who learned from groups of other thieves (Vinney, 2019). Differential association theory assumes that behavior, regardless of whether it is deviant, is learned from social interactions, and is not innate. Although Sutherland developed his theory by incorporating ideas from Shaw and McKay, and his own research on thieves (Vinney, 2019), differential association is applicable to IPV in that a process of learning—vicarious and experiential—appears to occur among such offenders. These offending behaviors can be fostered by witnessing a violent encounter and/or participating in a violent encounter.

Sutherland proposed that crime is learned from peers (i.e., family and/or close friends), where deviants learn both the commission of crime and rationalizations to

excuse the crime itself (Boyle & Walker, 2016; Sutherland, 1939; Tittle, Burke, & Jackson, 1986). Sutherland's theory is comprised of nine assumptions that assert criminality is learned from interacting and communicating with peers. These communications can include how to commit a crime, where a crime could favorably be committed, or support why a crime is justified. If an individual feels that the benefits of committing a crime outweighs the costs, they will likely follow through. Not all differential associations, however, are the same. Associations may vary in duration, intensity, frequency, and priority. Criminal behavior could express values or needs, but values and needs do not explain the behavior (Sutherland, 1939; Vinney, 2019).

Differential association acts as a two-prong function: learning and rationalizations (Akers et al., 1979). Delinquency does not occur without both prongs, meaning that one must learn the delinquent behavior and also rationalize the behavior. Rationalizations, in particular, are of importance when attempting to examine how one can diffuse feelings of guilt when actions do not coincide with the societal norm.

The two-prong function of differential association theory can be relied upon to demonstrate various forms of delinquency, including IPV. An alleged offender could have grown up in a home where violence is present, and therefore is learned. Each time violence within the home is not diffused (i.e., law-enforcement involvement), it is positively reinforced and becomes an acceptable learned reaction. A potential suspect can exhibit the same violent behavior in an intimate relationship and rationalize the behavior based on the positive reinforcement that they previously experienced. According to differential association theory, IPV would not occur if a partner does not learn violent behavior or if the violent behavior is not positively reinforced.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory is a commonly cited criminological theory developed by Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers based on modifications that built upon Sutherland's differential association theory. Social learning theory is comprised of four components: (1) differential association, (2) definitions, (3) differential reinforcements, and (4) imitation (Akers, 1998; Burgess & Akers, 1966; Cochran, Maskaly, Jones, & Sellers, 2017).

Differential association, in regard to social learning theory, refers to the exposure to conditions that are favorable or unfavorable to delinquency, such as spending consistent time with peers who deem delinquency as appropriate (Akers, 1998; Burgess & Akers, 1966; Cochran et al., 2017). Definitions refer to how an individual attaches meaning or significance to a specific behavior. If an offender defines a delinquent behavior as appropriate, they are more likely to neutralize any negative connotation of the behavior that positively reinforces the definition further. Imitation is mimicking an observed behavior that one adopts themselves (Akers, 1998; Burgess & Akers, 1966; Cochran et al., 2017), such as using violence as a punishment against a spouse if the dynamic is reflective of one that the offender witnessed as a child. Differential reinforcement is the positive or negative attributions to one's behavior, such as partner violence. For example, an offender's violence can be positively or negatively reinforced based on outside involvement. If a neighbor hears a dispute and the police are called, the behavior is negatively reinforced and has a reduced likelihood of occurring again in comparison to not notifying law enforcement, which acts as a positive reinforcement.

Neutralization Theory

Sykes and Matza (1957) developed the theory of neutralization in response to a belief that offenders followed a code of values and beliefs that deviated from the general population (Moore & McMullan, 2009). Sykes and Matza instead argued that a delinquent would adhere to societal norms until they committed a criminal act, in which they would drift from law abider to law breaker (Moore & McMullan, 2009; Sykes & Matza, 1957). This theory concentrates on the rationalizations described previously in Sutherland's differential association theory. Sykes and Matza (1957) reported the following:

The delinquent represents not a radical opposition to law-abiding society but something more like an apologetic failure, often more sinned against than sinning in his own eyes. We call these justifications of deviant behavior techniques of neutralization. (p. 667)

The goal of neutralization is to decrease the severity of one's act by forming a justification that the deviant believes is accepted by society (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Once neutralization is formed, however, it is posited that it becomes easier to commit crimes due to the reluctance to learn and adopt societal morals. These neutralizations are used to alleviate guilt (Christensen, 2010). Neutralization theory was selected to assess IPV in this study because it accommodates rationalizations outlined in differential association theory, while acknowledging the possibility of adapting the behaviors from vicarious and experiential learning.

It is important to note that the theory of neutralization, in terms of assessing IPV, is not a direct cause but rather an interaction effect that diminishes the bond between societal norms and IPV (Tomita, 1990). For example, once a person commits physical violence against a partner, yet is “let off the hook” with a warning due to mitigating circumstance (i.e., law enforcement failed to investigate further mutual combativeness), they could use the lack of punitive measures as a justification to reoffend. These justifications, in this case, neutralizations, would be used before and after the offense is committed and, in theory, would worsen with lack of punitive measures.

Sykes and Matza (1957) identified five neutralization techniques in delinquent behavior: *denial of responsibility*, *denial of injury*, *denial of the victim*, *condemnation of the condemners*, and *appeal to higher loyalties*. It is believed that by learning these techniques, one becomes delinquent and develops ideas and attitudes that are contradictory to societal norms (Sykes & Matza, 1957). These techniques have been identified when people commit various types of crime including theft (Copes, 2003; Moore & McMullan, 2009), sexual violence (Boyle & Walker, 2016), and serial murder (James, 2019; James & Gossett, 2018; Pettigrew, 2020).

Denial of responsibility is defined as delinquent acts that are due to forces outside of the individual (Sykes & Matza, 1957). *Denial of responsibility* abdicates offenders from guilt as they believe the event was out of their control or that they were not at fault. Those who deny responsibility feel that something has happened to them and that they are a victim of circumstance rather than a perpetrator. A common example of this is the commission of a delinquent act while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. An offender may feel that they are not responsible for their actions while drunk or high

because they “don’t remember” or “would not have committed the offense if they were sober.” Poor parenting and bad childhood influences are also commonly used when denying responsibility.

Denial of injury is defined as whether anyone has clearly been hurt by the deviance (Sykes & Matza, 1957). *Denial of injury* gives an offender the illusion that they have caused no direct harm to another (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003). If harm was present, it was nullified because the victim could afford the injury; therefore, there was no true injury inflicted (Moore & McMullen, 2009). This neutralization can be observed in cases of assault, specifically if the victim has no apparent marks and/or bruising. Without visible proof of harm, an offender can outrightly deny that any form of assault or injury occurred.

Sykes and Matza (1957) define *denial of the victim* as an injury that is not wrong in the light of circumstances. *Denial of the victim* justifies harm to another based on the offender’s perception of the victim’s character. An offender may not feel that a victim is truly a victim if they “had it coming” and “deserved it.” This neutralization can be applied across various crime types including robbery and assault. An offender may not feel that the person they assaulted or robbed is a victim if the offender perceives that they had “crossed” them or instigated the situation.

Condemnation of the condemners refers to the notion that the offender is no worse than anyone else, such as hypocrites or compelled by personal spite (Sykes & Matza, 1957). *Condemnation of the condemners* displaces the guilt from the offender onto anyone who disagrees or frowns upon the criminal behavior. This neutralization can typically be seen in response to law enforcement involvement or any other persons who

work within the criminal justice system. Those who utilize this neutralization will shift the blame to the system for being the cause of a problem instead of themselves. The offender feels that the rules should not be upheld by condemners who are perceived to not follow them and consider the condemners to be hypocrites.

Appeal to higher loyalties is defined as following the demands of the smaller social group, rather than society at-large (Sykes & Matza, 1957). *Appeal to higher loyalties* alleviates the negative connotation of the behavior by associating it to an undesirable social bond. An example of this neutralization a gang member who supports the deviant behaviors of the gang in lieu of abiding by existing laws. Those who try to work their way up the ranks of a gang may be forced to commit various offenses to earn the gang's respect—thus appealing to what they consider to be a higher loyalty.

Research on Neutralization Theory

Sykes and Matza's techniques of neutralization theory has been relied upon to explain a wide variety of criminal behavior, including theft and robbery (Copes, 2003; Moore & McMullan, 2009; Nelson & Desroches, 2014), sexual violence and abuse (Boyle & Slattery Walker, 2015; Spraitz & Bowen, 2016; Spraitz, Bowen, & Arthurs, 2017), and serial murder (James, 2019; James & Gossett, 2018; Pettigrew, 2020). In general, neutralization theory has received a moderate amount of empirical support and has been consistently considered to influence and promote continuous delinquent behaviors (James & Gossett, 2018; Maruna & Copes, 2005; Nelson & Desroches, 2014).

Theft and Robbery

In Copes (2003) study of theft, neutralization techniques were prevalent in over half of the sample of 42 probationers and parolees in Tennessee. Two-thirds of the offenders in the study displayed one technique of neutralization while eight offenders displayed multiple techniques. The most common neutralization technique was *denial of the victim*, followed by *appeal to higher loyalties* and *denial of responsibility* (Copes, 2003). A notable difference in attachment to society across ages led to the researcher's observation that neutralizations may increase in intensity over time, meaning that younger offenders are less likely to justify their actions compared to older offenders (Copes, 2003).

In another study, neutralization techniques were identified in 44 university students that committed digital piracy to obtain copyrighted products and illegal files (Moore & McMullan, 2009). Out of 10 identified neutralizations, *denial of injury* was the most frequently used technique followed by *denial of the victim* (Moore & McMullan, 2009). Participants justified that obtaining copyrighted files through illegal means is a victimless crime that does not directly harm an individual. University students may also have neutralized the piracy because of the financial constraints from higher education (Moore & McMullan, 2009).

Nelson and Desroches (2014) found that, in a sample of 80 bank robbers, robbery was a victimless crime unless someone in the bank was physically injured during the commission of the robbery. The bank robbers deemed the banks as an entity, essentially unidentifiable, and felt that they deserved victimization for being avaricious (Nelson &

Desroches, 2014). The temporal order of neutralizations was noted as the offenders posed that the robberies were miniscule in comparison to the punishment.

Sexual Violence and Abuse

In a study of neutralizing rape on college campuses, 1,198 students responded to an online survey regarding perceptions of sexual assault and the parties involved. Researchers found that half of respondents indicated that neutralizing rape on college campuses is a problem, but students who attended fraternity and athletic parties were more likely to excuse or neutralize the rape with *denial of responsibility* (Boyle & Walker, 2016). An important limitation to note of this study is that only 6% of the university's sample pool responded to the online survey, meaning that it may not be representative of the college campus.

Neutralization has also been identified in sexual abuse perpetrated by monks and clergy. Within a sample of 18 priests, 106 instances of neutralization were identified with *condemnation of the condemners* being the most frequently used followed by *denial of responsibility* (Spraitz & Bowen, 2016). *Denial of responsibility* was repeatedly attributed to alcohol or self-diagnosed mental illness. A notable stance from the researchers was that the priests used some techniques to improve public image to produce a sympathetic response (Spraitz & Bowen, 2016). Similarly, Spraitz et al. (2017) found 17 instances of neutralization in a sample of 5 monks with the most common being *condemnation of the condemners*.

Serial Murder

When investigating neutralization in serial murderers, James and Gossett (2018) analyzed multiple sources (i.e., podcasts, transcripts, textbooks) regarding 40 serial killers from 1900 to 2018 and identified at least one neutralization technique in all offenders within the analysis. Twenty-five of the offenders in the sample were found to have relied upon more than one technique. The most frequently noted technique used was *denial of the victim*, which was present in 77.5% of the sample that felt the victim either deserved their fate or caused it (James & Gossett, 2018). The second-most frequently used technique was *denial of responsibility* followed by *condemnation of the condemners*, *appeal to higher loyalties*, and *denial of injury*. A limitation of this study in particular, however, is that the information was gained second-hand rather than from the offenders (James & Gossett, 2018).

James (2019) found that well known serial killers Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and Jeffrey Dahmer utilized neutralization techniques to improve their portrayal of a “normal” self. All three attempted to neutralize the offenses to keep the presentation of normal and that they were, instead, the product of circumstance and victims themselves (James, 2019). Gacy and Dahmer also neutralized the offenses by denying the victim, stating that they did them a favor based on the victim’s condition when taken (James, 2019). The undermining of victims was also noted in Pettigrew’s (2020) content analysis of a serial killer. The subject would deny the victim, most commonly, to portray as though the victim deserved the injury (Pettigrew, 2020). As with most studies pertaining serial killers, an important limitation is the rarity of serial killers and obtaining first-hand information. The aforementioned research was compiled by conducting content analyses

of secondary data including case histories, interviews, and available documentation to identify patterns that would indicate the use of neutralizations (James, 2019; James & Gossett, 2018; Pettigrew, 2020).

Overall, neutralization theory has received moderate empirical support across various offense types and has been considered as an important attribute in explaining delinquent behavior (James & Gossett, 2018; Maruna & Copes, 2005; Nelson & Desroches, 2014). Although prior researchers have not examined the prevalence of Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralization techniques among offenders who have committed IPV, it is worth examining its prevalence, as it can have an impact on prevention and treatment efforts.

Intimate Partner Violence

Research on IPV has grown in recent years. Nevertheless, research focusing specifically on the offenders who IPV is lacking (Dichter, Crits-Christoph, Ogden, Thomas, & Rhodes, 2018). Existing research on those who have committed IPV focuses on the classifications of these offenders, which typically overlap on aggression issues the offender may have (Azam Ali, Dhingra, & McGarry, 2016; Farzan-Kashani & Murphy, 2017). Anger problems have been shown to influence IPV, particularly in men with extensive aggression issues (Jennings, Okeem, Piquero, Sellers, Theobald, & Farrington, 2017). These offenders have also been found to break protection orders and were charged more frequently with violent offenses (Farzan-Kashani & Murphy, 2017). Negative emotions, such as anger and fear, have also been found to be a determining factor in an offender's cost analysis of crime commission, meaning the offender was less likely to

take the cost of an action into consideration when under negative emotional duress (Bouffard, 2015).

Arguably, the worst-case scenario among IPV incidents is homicide. Though research on partner violence incidents that result in homicide is even more scarce, the existing literature indicates that those who committed IPV and kill their spouses are “less likely to come to the attention of the criminal justice system...and they may not be classified as ‘high risk’” (Eriksson, Maserolle, Johnson, Wortley, & McPhedran, 2018, p. 1). Add neutralization to the equation of a violent offender and anger issues, and a recipe for disaster ensues.

Limitations of Previous Research

Though Sykes and Matza’s (1957) techniques of neutralization are found to be applicable for delinquency, they do not go without critiques or weaknesses. One weakness of this theory is that neutralizations may be applicable to only the offenses that the offenders are committing. For example, an offender may only accept the neutralization for crimes they commit, but not crimes committed by others (Maruna & Copes, 2005). Another criticism of Sykes and Matza’s theory is that neutralization may be crime specific. It is argued that an offender will use a technique that will be accepted by themselves and others, which is largely dependent on the offense itself (Maruna & Copes, 2005). Another criticism of Sykes and Matza’s neutralization theory is the inability to determine the temporal order in which the neutralizations occur. It is difficult to determine if a rationalization is formed before the commission of the offense to

alleviate guilt or if a justification is formed after the offense to prevent questioning of morality.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

The current study takes into account the gaps and limitations of prior research in developing the research questions for this project. One of the limitations of prior research that has relied upon Sykes and Matza's techniques of neutralization to explain criminal behavior is that prior research has not been applied to IPV. Thus, it is not known to what extent the techniques of neutralization explain IPV in comparison to other crimes. Moreover, there is also no known existing research that involves a content analysis of information acquired pre-conviction; current literature relies only upon multiple post-conviction qualitative interviews (Cavanagh, Dobash, Dobash, & Lewis, 2001). Pre-adjudication information is beneficial for this research as it provides statements from the offenders immediately following the commission of IPV rather than trial or sentencing, in which the offender's statement may change. This study is designed to expand the literature with regard to the relationship between IPV and neutralization while exploring the prevalence, if any, of neutralization techniques. A content analysis is also beneficial in identifying patterns and themes within offender statements to determine what treatment option is viable for offenders and what proactive approaches can be taken to aid in IPV prevention. This is accomplished by examining a sample of incident reports of IPV. This chapter describes the methods of the study, which includes the research questions, expected findings, study sample, procedure, and analysis. Critical to the analysis are considerations of inter-rater reliability, ethics, recognized limitations, and implications; these are also discussed in this chapter.

The current study relies upon both an inductive and deductive approaches. A deductively approach is relied upon in that the study begins with Sykes and Matza's

neutralization theory and subsequently assesses their prevalence among a group of offenders. Inductive methods were used to generate categories and identify neutralizations. Using a qualitative approach, the prevalence of neutralization techniques is assessed with a content analysis of incident reports, which includes offender statements to law enforcement, to determine if Sykes and Matza's (1957) theory is supported.

Research Questions

This study seeks to determine the prevalence of neutralization techniques among a sample of 23 usable incident reports (IR) of adjudicated IPV offenses in one county in the southern region of Texas in 2015. Specifically, the current study seeks to answer the questions listed below.

RQ1. How prevalent are each of Sykes and Matza's techniques of neutralization (*denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties*) within incident reports among the adjudicated offenders of IPV in the targeted sample?

RQ2: How prevalent are Sykes and Matza's neutralization techniques, if any, within incident reports among the adjudicated offenders across six family violence offense types: assault causes bodily injury (family violence), assault family/household member with previous conviction, aggravated assault date/family/household w/weapon, assault family/household member impede breathing/circulation, assault

intentional/reckless impede breathing/circulation (family violence), and assault bodily injury family/household member 2+ w/in 12 months?

RQ3: What themes, if any, can be identified within the sample of incident reports?

Expected Findings

Based on James and Gossett's (2018) findings of neutralization techniques in serial murderers, and Dutton's (1986) analysis of wife assaulters, it is hypothesized that more than half of the offenders in the sample will have at least one neutralization technique prevalent in their statements to law enforcement. It is hypothesized that *denial of the victim* will be more prevalent in offenders charged with assault family/household member with previous conviction based on findings that offenders who commit intimate partner homicide had a history of serious, repeat violent abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 2011).

It is anticipated that findings from the present study will confirm the hypothesis that over half of the offenders will have at least one neutralization technique prevalent in his/her statements to law enforcement. Alternatively, the results could show little to no indication of neutralization techniques in the statements. In such a situation, the study could be replicated using a different sample (i.e., different county) of adjudicated IPV offenders to determine whether the study itself was faulty due to confounds, such as coerced or suggestive questioning, or if it needs to be restructured in any way.

Sample

All adjudicated IPV incident reports from 2015, which are referred to as family violence incidents in Texas, were obtained by contacting the county's District Attorney's office and were received through the Assistant District Attorney. The stated calendar year, 2015, was chosen because it is the most recent year that does not have any ongoing investigations that the research could unintentionally hinder. It was also chosen to ensure that all applicable cases, regardless of offender gender or severity of offense, were included. This county was selected due to convenience; the researcher had knowledge of personnel in the county and that the information was attainable in a relatively easy manner. The offenses committed included assault causes bodily injury (family violence), assault family/household member with previous conviction, aggravated assault date/family/household w/weapon, assault family/household member impede breathing/circulation, assault intentional/reckless impede breathing/circulation (family violence), and assault bodily injury family/household member 2+ w/in 12 months. As noted in Table 1, the most commonly identified family violence offense among the those who committed IPV was assault causes bodily injury (family violence), followed by assault family/household member w/previous conviction. It is imperative to note that offenders can be charged with multiple offenses within an incident report.

Table 1. Description of Offense Types

Offense Type	Number of Offenses
Assault Causes Bodily Injury Family Violence	10
Assault Family/Household Member w/Previous Conviction	7
Aggravated Assault Date/Family/Household w/Weapon	4
Assault Family/Household Member Impede Breath/Circulation	3
Assault Intentional/Reckless Impede Breath/Circulation	2
Assault Bodily Injury Family/Household Member 2+ w/in 12 Months	1

Family violence records are sorted based on the district court number rather than the offense or degree of severity. The names of offenders in adjudicated cases in Texas are public record. The personal information was redacted from the reports analyzed in the study to protect the identity of the victims and offenders. Removing personal report information aids in upholding the anonymity of the involved parties. Reports from the pilot study were excluded from the sample.

Although the focus of this research is on the offender, the unit of analysis is the incident reports. These reports were completed by the reporting law enforcement officer³ on the date of the offense when the person who has committed intimate partner violence was taken into custody. Any incident report that did not include a statement from the perpetrator was excluded from the study, as those reports do not contain the information needed for coding purposes. Out of 102 adjudicated cases, 11 were excluded because a

³ Law enforcement officer is used as an umbrella term to encompass police officers, sheriff's deputies, and state troopers.

child was involved. Of the remaining 91 cases, only 23 contained a statement from the perpetrator. The 23 reports ranged from 5 to 30 pages in length.

Procedure and Analysis

To better assess the reliability of coding for this study, a pilot study was conducted on 10 cases ranging from 2005 to 2013 provided by the county. All applicable cases were inputted into a random number generator to select 10 random reports involving family violence. A coding scheme was created based on the pilot study and used to code the sample in the current study. Statements were coded by hand to identify any of the five neutralization techniques developed by Sykes and Matza (1957) and additional neutralization techniques. Given the comparatively small sample size ($n = 23$), qualitative analysis software was not deemed necessary. Inductive methods were used to generate categories and identify neutralizations by reading through each incident report and coding the categories and/or neutralizations as they arose.

Examples of codes used in the guide include but are not limited to: *“I didn’t know what was happening”* or *“I didn’t mean it (denial of responsibility),”* *“They deserved it (denial of the victim),”* *“They were fine (denial of injury),”* *“If they didn’t talk to me that way (condemnation of the condemners),”* and *“I didn’t do it for me (appeal to higher loyalties).”* Additional examples of each technique of neutralization were based on Vollum and Longmire’s (2009) study that assessed techniques of neutralization among written last statements made by death row inmates in Texas prior to his/her execution. During the pilot study, additional techniques of neutralization examples were developed to code the incident reports within the study (see the Appendix Section).

Inter-rater Reliability

An external coder was given the 10 cases (selected randomly) and asked to code in accordance with coding protocol to determine reliability. By clearly defining and describing the five neutralization techniques and examples, the goal was to make analyzing the incident reports less interpretive and more objective. The external coder was given the definitions of each neutralization technique, inductively identified themes, and examples of each technique and theme (as presented in the Appendix Section). The goal, relied upon in previous studies (e.g., Vollum & Longmire, 2009), was to achieve a 90% inter-rater reliability level between the researcher in this study and an external coder. This was met in this study.

Ethics/IRB

IRB approval was applied for earlier and received an “exempt” status for several reasons. First and foremost, the incident reports obtained for the study are public record because the cases resulted in deferment or convictions. Because the reports are public record, consent was not required to obtain them from the alleged offenders or victims. Cases that are active are not public record and were consequently not used for the study. The county used for the sample and the identities of alleged offenders and/or victims in the transcripts were omitted to ensure confidentiality and to aid in reducing the researcher’s bias against those who have committed intimate partner violence. There is no direct interaction with the offenders or victims; therefore, non-obtrusive measures were relied upon.

Implications

Implications for the present study appear to be impactful for both offenders and for those affected by IPV. If the findings coincide with the hypothesis and are replicated with similar results, results can be studied further to investigate a potential relationship between those who have committed IPV with present neutralizations and recidivism. Findings could also be used as a comparison to other formats of reporting such as self-report surveys to explore similarities or variation in statements. Law enforcement could utilize findings in lethality assessments to identify precursors to severe offenses and how an offender neutralizes a situation to determine a course of action, such as an order of protection. Victims, though generally aware of their situation, can be informed of the concern with neutralizations to understand the severity of the offenses against them.

Treatment options for a person who has committed intimate partner violence can also be influenced by the present study. Existing literature on neutralization rehabilitation in offenders, particularly IPV, shows that cognitive behavioral therapy can reduce recidivism (Cotti et al., 2020). Batterers are given a needs assessment to identify specific problem areas and then they are treated using cognitive behavioral group therapy. Problem areas include anger management, stress, and conflict resolution (Cotti et al., 2020). The critical components of cognitive behavioral therapy focus on the offenders to identify and address the criminogenic thinking errors before acting on the emotions that are induced, and therefore, breaking the cycle of stressful triggers that lead to uncomfortable feelings and subsequently, inappropriate (i.e., violent) behavior.

IV. RESULTS

This study assessed the prevalence of neutralization techniques developed by Sykes and Matza (1957) among 23 incident reports of adjudicated offenders of IPV in one county in the southern region of Texas in 2015. This study also investigated the prevalence of Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralization techniques across six family offense types to determine what themes, if any, could be identified among the sample. It was proposed that more than half of those who have committed an intimate partner violence offense in the sample would have at least one neutralization technique present in his/her incident report. The findings indicate that all offenders in the sample of incident reports ($n = 23$) used at least one technique of neutralization and the majority of the sample ($n = 17$) used multiple techniques. Foundation for denial of responsibility, denial of incident, and other themes were inductively identified within the incident reports. The findings and technique-specific descriptions are discussed in this chapter.

Overview of Findings

The techniques most commonly employed by offenders were *denial of the victim*, *denial of injury*, and *denial of responsibility*, and *denial of incident*. *Condemnation of the condemners* and *appeal to higher loyalties* were not found to neutralize an offense within the sample. It is important to note that neutralization techniques often overlapped, meaning that multiple techniques were applicable to the same statement (Table 2).

Table 2. Prevalence of Techniques of Neutralization Used by Each Offender

Incident Report Number	Denial of Responsibility	Denial of Injury	Denial of the Victim	Denial of Incident	Foundation for Denial of Responsibility
1	1	0	3	0	0
2	1	0	1	0	0
3	0	1	2	1	0
4	0	0	0	1	0
5	0	0	0	0	0
6	0	1	0	1	0
7	1	0	2	0	1
8	0	1	0	0	0
9	2	2	3	0	2
10	0	0	0	2	0
11	0	0	0	0	0
12	2	2	2	0	0
13	0	3	2	0	0
14	3	2	3	0	0
15	0	1	1	1	0
16	1	1	1	0	0
17	1	1	1	0	0
18	0	1	0	2	0
19	1	1	2	0	0
20	2	1	2	1	0
21	0	2	1	0	0
22	0	0	0	0	0
23	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Total</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>3</i>

The following table (Table 3) depicts the prevalence of each neutralization type across the six types of family violence offense types: assault causes bodily injury (family violence), assault family/household member with previous conviction, aggravated assault date/family/household w/weapon, assault family/household member impede

breathing/circulation, assault intentional/reckless impede breathing/circulation (family violence), and assault bodily injury family/household member 2+ w/in 12 months.

**Table 3. Prevalence of Neutralization Techniques
Across Family Violence Offense Types**

Offense Type:	Denial of:				Foundation for:
	Responsibility	Injury	Victim	Incident	Denial of Responsibility
Assault Causes Bodily Injury/Family Violence	4	8	10	1	1
Assault Family/Household Member w/Previous Conviction	4	4	8	5	0
Aggravated Assault Date/Family/Household w/Weapon	7	6	8	0	2
Assault Family/Household Member Impede Breath/Circulation	0	2	2	2	0
Assault Int/Reck Impede Breath/Circulation	0	2	1	0	0
Assault Bodily Injury Family/House Member 2+ within 12 months	0	1	0	2	0

Denial of the Victim

The most frequently utilized neutralization technique within the incident reports was *denial of the victim*. *Denial of the victim* refers to any situation where the offender's perception of the victim's character (Sykes & Matza, 1957). An offender may not feel that a victim is truly a victim if he/she "had it coming" and "deserved it" (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Across 14 incident reports, *denial of the victim* was indicated 26 times. Of

the 23 incident reports included in the sample, 14 offenders neutralized his/her offense using *denial of the victim* (60% of the sample). *Denial of the victim* was used when an offender perceived that the victim had crossed a line or instigated the situation.

For example, the offenders in incident reports (IR) 1 and 9 exhibited this perception in the following statements.

“[The victim] immediately began to argue with me [the offender], telling me obscenities.” (IR1)

“[The victim] then punched me [the offender] to the left side of my face for no reason.” (IR9)

In the offender statements above, what is noteworthy is that the offender insinuated that the victim deserved the abuse or “had it coming” by indicating that the victim precipitated the event through verbal and physical abuse.

Offenders in IR9, IR12, and IR19 justified the assaults by stating that the injury was not wrong in light of the circumstances, and specifically used a “self-defense” response to the victimization.

“[The offender] threw the bottles in self-defense.” (IR9)

“[The offender] committed all actions in self-defense.” (IR12)

“[The offender] bit [the victim] in self-defense to [the victim] strangling [the offender] before [the offender and the victim] entered the vehicle at the nightclub.” (IR19)

In the above-mentioned offender statements, it appears that the offender insinuated that the injury to the victim was not wrong because the victim escalated the incident from verbal to physical. The offenders implied that his/her reaction (i.e., self-defense) was in response to the victim's precipitating actions.

Based on the aforementioned examples, a few summary observations might be made regarding the use of this neutralization technique. The responses appear to indicate that those who have committed intimate partner violence readily utilized *denial of the victim* to justify the offense. Although there is evidence for the use of this neutralization technique, offenders were inclined to use it in a specific approach. Among these offenders, two patterns emerged: (1) the victim instigated the incident and (2) the reaction was in self-defense. The offenders admitted to an incident but argued that his/her reactions were grounded on the actions of the victim. The offenders also acknowledged the injury but purported that it was not wrong in light of the circumstances (i.e., self-defense). This neutralization was also utilized in conjunction with *denial of responsibility* across 10 incident reports (Table 2). *Denial of the victim* was most employed in assault causes bodily injury (family violence) and aggravated assault date/family/household w/weapon offenses (Table 3).

Denial of Injury

The second most frequently utilized neutralization technique, *denial of injury*, was identified 20 times across 14 incident reports. Reflective of *denial of the victim*, *denial of injury* was also employed by 14 offenders within the sample (60% of the sample). *Denial of injury* gives an offender the illusion that he/she did not harm the victim. Offenders may

also deny that physical harm or assault occurred, with or without visible proof of harm. Offenders in IR3, IR6, IR8, IR20, and IR21 reported the following.

“[The offender] did not assault [the victim] and [the victim] did not assault [the offender].” (IR3)

“[The offender] did not physically assault [the victim].” (IR6)

“No assault took place and [the offender] only had a verbal altercation with [the victim].” (IR8)

When the officer asked VI-01 [the victim] if there was an assault that occurred during the argument, OF-01 [the offender] stated that there was no assault. (IR20)

“[The offender] was unaware of any bruising to the victim and did not know how [the victim] sustained the [listed] injuries.” (IR21)

In the offender statements above, what is noteworthy is that the offenders denied the injury to the victim, but did not view the incident as abuse due to lack of a physical component. An interesting note can be made regarding the offender in IR21 who appears to define abuse as the presence of bruising or lack thereof.

An offender can also employ *denial of injury* by acknowledging the injury but lessening the severity.

“[The offender] tried to hit [the victim] back but was unable to.” (IR9)

“[The offender] was trying to leave the residence when [the offender] cut [the victim].” (IR12)

In the abovementioned statements, the offenders lessen the severity of the incident by claiming that he/she was unable to inflict the intended injury and introducing mitigating circumstances. For example, the offender in IR12's initial statement to law enforcement was that the victim had precipitated the assault and was not allowing the offender to leave the residence. In this statement, the offender lessened the severity of the incident by stating that he/she was attempting to leave the residence and denied the victim by stating that he/she reacted in response to the victim's actions and only acted in self-defense.

Denial of injury was employed by those who have committed intimate partner violence to invalidate the victim's injuries. Offenders utilized this neutralization by denying that any physical harm or assault occurred. Offenders also neutralized the offense by lessening the severity of the injury. In some instances, *denial of injury* was utilized in conjunction with *denial of the victim* and *denial of responsibility* (see Table 2). *Denial of injury* was also most employed in assault causes bodily injury (family violence) offenses (Table 3).

Denial of Responsibility

Although not the most frequently used neutralization technique, *denial of responsibility* was identified 15 times within 10 incident reports. Out of 23 incident reports in the sample, 10 offenders neutralized the assault using *denial of responsibility* (43% of the sample). *Denial of responsibility* abdicates offenders from guilt as they believe the event was out of his/her control or that they were not at fault (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Those who deny responsibility feel that something has happened to him/her and

that he/she is a victim of circumstance rather than a perpetrator. Most offenders applied *denial of responsibility* by shifting the blame. The following offenders stated that he/she was the victim and not the perpetrator.

“[The offender] hit me with a plastic cup on my nose.” (IR1)

“[The offender] was the one that got assaulted by the [the victim] and [the offender] had several scratches.” (IR2)

“[The victim] kicked [the offender] which caused me [the offender] to drop my [the offender] phone.” (IR7)

“[The offender] was initially punched, kicked, and grabbed by her throat area by [the victim].” (IR12)

“[The offender and victim] were fighting each other in the vehicle and [the victim] had assaulted [the offender] first.” (IR14)

In the offender statements above, it is noteworthy that the offender not only shifted the blame to the victim but also claims that the victim instigated the physical abuse. This is an example of neutralization techniques (*denial of responsibility* and *denial of the victim*) overlapping within the same statement. Another interesting note is that some offenders, like the offender in IR14, did not consider an argument as verbal abuse. This is consistent with offenders who utilize other neutralization techniques to justify the offense. These findings are consistent with patterns identified in *denial of the victim*: (1) the victim instigated the incident, and (2) the reaction was in self-defense.

Denial of responsibility was utilized by those who have committed intimate partner violence to shift the blame, making him/her the victim of the offense. Offenders utilized this neutralization by stating he/she was a victim of the circumstance rather than a perpetrator. Offenders also neutralized the offense by stating that he/she was not at fault. In some instances, *denial of responsibility* was utilized in conjunction with *denial of the victim* and *denial of injury* (see Table 2). *Denial of responsibility* was also most employed in aggravated assault date/family/household w/weapon offenses (Table 3).

Inductive Themes Identified

In addition to deductive assessment of the incident reports for the five techniques of neutralization, other themes were inductively identified within the sample: foundation for denial of responsibility, denial of incident, prior history/behavior, and other relevant information. Themes and patterns were identified in the pilot study. Reoccurring, and seemingly relevant to Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralizations, themes were included in the coding scheme. These themes are discussed here.

Foundation for Denial of Responsibility

Several statements made in the incident reports appeared to serve as a precursor to *denial of responsibility*. Specifically, foundation for denial of responsibility codified statements that indicate the use of drugs and/or alcohol. The researcher felt that these statements were important to note based on the frequency of alcohol-involved incidents while developing the coding scheme. The following statements are examples of foundation for denial of responsibility.

“[The victim] was drunk and upset.” (IR7)

Officers met with OF-01 who advised that VI-01, involved other (IO) 01 and IO-02 were inside of the residence talking and drinking while sitting at the dinner table. (IR9)

“[The victim] left to the bathroom to do cocaine.” (IR9)

In these above statements it is noteworthy that the offender does not state if he/she was using drugs and/or alcohol. Instead, the offender mentioned the use of drugs and/or alcohol by the victim and other involved parties. This may suggest that the offender not only shifted the blame to the victim because of substance use, but implied that he/she is not responsible for the incident that followed because of the substance use.

Denial of Incident

Denial of incident was codified as statements that the offender denies involvement or presence during the offense. This neutralization was created to account for statements in which the offender denies total involvement which is not described within Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralization techniques. The subsequent statements are instances of offenders applying denial of incident.

“The property manager and [the offender] have surveillance cameras available for viewing to prove that [the victim] was not at [the offender]'s residence.” (IR4)

Officers talked to OF-01 who quickly began crying and stated "I did not do anything. Am I going to get arrested?" OF-01 would reiterate that he did not know what was going on. (IR10)

In the statements above, the offender denied any incident and claimed that he/she was not present when the incident had allegedly occurred.

“[The victim] and [the offender] had not had any argument.” (IR6)

“Nothing happened.” (IR15)

Some offenders did not deny his/her presence on scene, but still denied that any incident occurred.

Denial of incident was identified 9 times within 6 incident reports. Out of 23 incident reports in the sample, 6 offenders neutralized the assault using denial of incident (26% of the sample). Denial of incident accounts for offenders that deny any involvement in the assault. Some offenders claimed to not be present for the offense while others only claim that no offense ever occurred.

Prior History/Behavior

Prior history/behavior was defined as having a previous history of assault (i.e., a history of violence). The use of assault in the prior history/behavior coding scheme was chosen to accommodate for a change in offense type or a probable plea bargain. For example, an offender may have had a previous conviction of assault/bodily injury, but the initial charge was plead down from aggravated assault date/family/household w/weapon. It was important to capture an offender’s previous history due to this potential discrepancy. The following are examples of offenders charged with assault family/household member w/prior conviction utilizing prior history/behavior his/her incident report.

“[The victim] (common law spouse to OF-01) and [the offender] have had a long history of issues.” (IR1)

“[The offender] is current on probation due to a current pending case of family violence against [the offender].” (IR1)

The OF was found to have one prior conviction of assault family violence. (IR17)

Officers located [case number] and found OF-01 had been previously arrested for assault family violence. (IR18)

OF-01 had two pending warrants for assault family violence. (IR23)

Other Themes Identified

Statements that deviated from the techniques of neutralization were codified as “other.” These statements were then codified within five subcategories: (a) admitting to allegations, (b) does not admit nor deny incident, (c) display of anger/resentment, (d) changed initial story, and (e) protected his/her partner. These statements pertained to the offender admitting to the allegations, neither confirming or denying the allegations, displaying anger and/or resentment, changing the initial statement, and providing statements to protect the victim.

The following statements are examples of an offender changing the initial statement to protect the victim.

While at the station, OF-01 stated to officers that he withheld information in order to protect VI-01. (IR1)

“[The offender] did not say anything in order not to get [the victim] in trouble.” (IR1)

Few offenders within the sample admitting to the allegations brought against them.

OF-01 advised that he ran away from his address because he was in an argument with his girlfriend (VI-01) and stated that he knew he was going to jail because he assaulted her. (IR11)

“[The offender] pushed [the victim] as hard as [the offender] could...[the offender] had grabbed a bunch of rocks and threw them at [the victim]’s vehicle since [the offender] knew [the offender] was going to jail for family violence.” (IR11)

“[The offender] hit [the victim].” (IR22)

The following is an example of the offender verbally displaying anger and/or resentment.

OF-01 continued to walk toward VI-01 in an aggressive manner, stating that he had done nothing. (IR18)

The researcher developed this category to identify variations within offender statements.

This category alludes to the notion that not all offenders will fall into the previously stated neutralization techniques.

Summary

The most commonly identified techniques of neutralizations utilized by offenders were *denial of the victim*, *denial of injury*, and *denial of responsibility*. Multiple patterns were inductively identified within the incident reports: (1) the victim instigated the incident, (2) the reaction was in self-defense, (3) an incident was only considered abuse if a physical component was present, and (4) there was no assault if there was no proof of physical harm (e.g., bruises). The implications of these findings are discussed in Chapter V.

V. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Based on existing literature by James and Gossett's (2018) analysis of neutralization in serial killers and Dutton's (1986) study exploring self-punishment of wife assaulters, the present study sought to determine the prevalence of Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization (*denial of responsibility*, *denial of injury*, *denial of the victim*, *condemnation of the condemners*, and *appeal to higher loyalties*) across family violence offenses in adjudicated IPV offenders in one county in Texas using a content analysis of incident reports. This present study also sought to determine the prevalence of Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralization techniques, if any, within incident reports among the adjudicated offenders across six family violence offense types: assault causes bodily injury (family violence), assault family/household member with previous conviction, aggravated assault date/family/household w/weapon, assault family/household member impede breathing/circulation, assault intentional/reckless impede breathing/circulation (family violence), and assault bodily injury family/household member 2+ w/in 12 months.

The results confirmed that more than half of the offenders within the sample had at least one neutralization technique prevalent in his/her statements to law enforcement. It was found that all offenders within the sample used at least one neutralization technique to justify the offense. The researcher's hypothesis that *denial of the victim* would be more prevalent in offenders charged with assault family/household member with previous conviction, based on findings that offenders who commit intimate partner homicide had a history of serious, repeat violent abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 2011), was not met. Rather, the results revealed that *denial of the victim* was more prevalent in offenders charged with

assault causes bodily injury (family violence), followed by assault family/household member with previous conviction. *Denial of the victim* was also the most employed technique of neutralization, followed by *denial of injury*. Themes were also inductively identified within the sample including foundation for denial of responsibility, denial of incident, prior history/behavior, and other relevant information. These findings provide insight into those who have committed intimate partner violence attempt to neutralize his/her offenses.

Condemnation of the condemners and *appeal to higher loyalties* were not found within the incident reports. It can be speculated that these neutralizations were not identified in the present study for various reasons, including utilization of pre-adjudication incident reports. The IPV offense was the first felonious offense for few offenders in the sample, meaning that he/she had not been processed through the criminal justice system before or have engaged with offenders who employ these neutralizations with positive reinforcement. It can also be speculated that the pre-adjudicated statements captured by law enforcement could have been censored (i.e., only making note of statements relevant to the offense). It can also be speculated that neutralizations among those who commit IPV are simply less likely to use this neutralization and are more likely to be prevalent among those who commit crimes where it can be justified and lack personal contact with an individual victim (e.g., theft, fraud, etc.).

A notable finding was that the neutralization techniques often overlapped across the incident reports and offenses. *Denial of the victim*, *denial of responsibility*, and *denial of injury* co-occurred within the same seven cases. *Denial of the victim* and *denial of*

responsibility co-occurred within the same 10 cases. These results suggest that offenders use more than one neutralization technique to justify his/her offense.

Among Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization, four patterns emerged: (1) the victim instigated the incident, (2) the reaction was in self-defense, (3) an incident was only considered abuse a physical component was present, and (4) there was no assault if there was no proof of physical harm (e.g., bruises). The offenders admitted to an incident but argued that his/her reactions were grounded on the actions of the victim. The offenders also acknowledged the injury but indicated that it was not wrong in light of the circumstances (i.e., self-defense). These patterns were identified in *denial of the victim*, *denial of injury*, and *denial of responsibility*.

This study contributes to the compiling evidence that neutralization techniques are prevalent amongst offenders across various offense types. Similar to James and Gossett's (2018) findings of neutralization among serial killers, the researcher identified at least one neutralization technique in all offenders within the analysis of incident reports. The results were also consistent with Copes (2003) and Dutton's (1986) findings that *denial of the victim* was the most employed neutralization technique, with the offender accrediting his/her assault to aggravations from the victim.

Limitations

This study, although important in its findings, must be considered in light of its limitations. This study was limited by the reliance upon offender reports that were not verbatim details of the offender's statements. Instead, it is a report by the law enforcement officer of what the offender stated (i.e., an indirect measure). This study,

therefore, may lack validity by not being able to measure techniques of neutralization more directly. The statements could have been subjected to confounds such as lack of objectivity by the law enforcement officer. Though an offender may confess, it is difficult to determine the quality of said confession without being present. Another concern was that an offender could have falsely confessed or reported due to the conditions of the questioning.

A possible limitation of this study is the ability to identify the temporal order of the neutralization. It is not known if the neutralizations occur before, during, or after the incident. Statements to police showed the neutralizations of actions subsequently without acknowledging the possibility that neutralizations could have been present before the crime commission (Moore & McCullan, 2009). This distinction is important because if neutralizations are used prior to committing the offense, they would instead be rationalizations. This is an important distinction to make because neutralization theory is based on the premise that neutralizations occur after the commission of a crime. The study was also limited in that the statements were not coded using statistical software specifically designed for qualitative data that may have identified more analysis of the themes. Given the small number of cases, it was deemed the learning of a new software may not justify the amount of analysis that could have been conducted.

Implications

Implications for the present study can be impactful for both offenders and for those affected by IPV. The capability to identify neutralization techniques proactively can be a critical skill utilized by law enforcement officers when responding to calls of

domestic violence. Law enforcement can apply the present findings to lethality assessments, which are required by law to predict the likelihood of an assault to result in death. If a law enforcement officer is able to identify that an offender is neutralizing the offense and how frequently the neutralizations are being employed, it is theorized that the law enforcement officer can make a proactive decision to ensure the safety of the victim and determine a course of action (i.e., order of protection). Findings could also be used as a comparison to other formats of reporting such as self-report surveys to explore similarities or variation in statements.

Treatment options for those who have committed IPV can also be influenced by the findings of the present study. Existing literature on neutralization rehabilitation in offenders, particularly IPV, shows that cognitive behavioral therapy reduces recidivism (Cotti et al., 2020). For example, batterers are typically given a needs assessment used to identify specific problem areas and then treated using cognitive behavioral group therapy. Problem areas include anger management, stress, and conflict resolution (Cotti et al., 2020).

Cognitive behavioral therapy typically involves the offender identifying and addressing the criminogenic thinking errors before acting on the emotions that are induced. These interventions also emphasize cognitive biases and build on skills such as assertiveness, emotional dysregulation, communication, and problem solving (Wexler, 2020). The current study found that *denial of the victim* was the most frequently employed neutralization technique. Treatment directions for offenders specifically utilizing this neutralization may focus on conflict resolution skills and address victim-focused thinking errors.

Patterns identified across offender statements were that the victim instigated the offense and that the offender's reactions were a response to the victim's precipitating actions. Offenders that implied that the victim instigated the offense may feel that the relationship is a perpetual cycle of instigation, arguments, and reconciliation. These thinking errors may lead the offender to shift the blame to victim throughout the cycle. To address this error, treatment can focus on the offender's conflict resolution skills and stress management. External stressors may influence how the offender responds or interacts with the victim and can precipitate an assault. If the offender can identify stressful situations and utilize conflict resolution skills, he/she may be less likely to incite an argument or commit an assault against the victim.

Another notable thinking error that arose within the sample was that the offender considered abuse to be exclusively physical. The offender would acknowledge that there was a verbal argument but did not feel that the argument was abuse because it was lacking a physical component. This thinking error is important to identify and correct because verbal and emotional abuse are just as harmful to a victim as physical abuse (Mairuo, 2015). Cognitive behavioral therapy can address this criminogenic thinking error by having the offender focus on the emotions that induce his/her actions, including what the offender says to the victim. By addressing and correcting instances of verbal abuse, the offender may resolve his/her feelings of anger and an incident of abuse may be avoided.

Prevention can also be addressed in regard to IPV. Teaching the importance of conflict resolution at a young age may aid in preventing one from developing violent tendencies in future relationships. By identifying and address thinking errors at a younger

age, one can utilize healthy conflict resolution and stress management in relationships throughout various life-stages. For example, if a teenager was taught at a younger age to identify when he/she is upset, she/she may be able to address what upset him/her in a relationship and utilize healthy conflict resolution skills.

Future Directions

Replication of the present study is recommended to strengthen reliability of the coding scheme and identify the prevalence of neutralization techniques across offense types. The results of this study may strengthen, or even abdicated, by replicating the study in more counties across the state. It could be assumed that, if results are consistent across counties, law enforcement may take on a more focused approach when handling calls of domestic violence. Replication of the present study should also include the use of coding software to identify patterns and themes more easily within the sample.

The findings supported the proposed hypothesis in that all offenders within the sample employed at least one neutralization techniques across family violence offense types. If the current study is replicated with similar results, results can be studied further to investigate a potential relationship between those who have committed IPV with present neutralizations and recidivism. The ability to identify neutralizations in relation to IPV offender recidivism, if any, could also be utilized by LEOs to make an educated decision when conducting a lethality assessment.

Future research should focus on the format in which offender statements are obtained. One of the limitations of this study was the reliability of the offender statements. The statements could have been subjected to confounds such as lack of

objectivity by the law enforcement officer or how the interrogation was conducted (i.e. coercions or false promises). By utilizing formats such as audio or body cam footage, it may be easier to identify confounds and better assess the quality and legitimacy of the offender statements.

APPENDIX SECTION

Coding Guidelines

Each section of the report that contains a minimization/justification/excuse will be identified. Several sentences that appear together that relate to the same “theme” will be coded as one section. Sections that contain multiple techniques listed below, will include multiple techniques.

1. Denial of responsibility

- Delinquent acts are due to forces outside of the individual
- “It is not my fault”
- It was someone else’s fault or something else (alcohol, drugs, other substance/biological problem, childhood problems, bad parents, bad workday, etc.) that caused this other than me
- “I am the victim, not the perpetrator”

2. Denial of injury

- No harm has actually resulted from (alleged) perpetrator’s actions
- No visible proof of harm (bruise or any of physical injury noticed by the naked eye)
- Injury was in the past
- Lessen the severity of the injury

3. Denial of the victim

- Injury is not wrong in the light of circumstances

- Victim “had it coming”
 - Victim “deserved it”
 - Victim crossed a line and/or instigated
4. Condemnation of the condemners
- Hypocrites or compelled by personal spite
 - Shift the blame to the system
 - Rules should not be upheld
5. Appeal to higher loyalties
- Follow or adopt the social norms of smaller social group
 - Did it be part of something bigger/admirable (i.e., gang)
6. Prior History/Behavior
- Previous assault history
7. Foundation for Denial of Responsibility
- Use of alcohol and/or drugs
8. Denial of Incident
- Was not involved or present

9. Other

- Admitting to allegations
- Does not admit nor deny incident
- Display of anger/resentment
- Changed initial story
- Protected their partner

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