

PUNISHMENTS ADOLESCENTS FIND JUSTIFIED: AN EXAMINATION OF ATTITUDES TOWARD DELINQUENCY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine adolescents' attitudes toward delinquency, specifically the degree to which they find norm violations acceptable in various circumstances. A total of 1,914 Dutch youths participated: 1,046 reported having committed no crimes in the past year, 578 reported having committed only nonviolent offenses, and 290 reported having committed both violent and nonviolent offenses. It was hypothesized that, in general, delinquents would prescribe less severe punishments for deviant behavior, irrespective of the circumstances. This hypothesis was rejected. It was found, however, that violent delinquents were significantly more tolerant of violent behavior as compared with nondelinquents, with one important exception: when injury was inflicted on someone they knew, they were as little inclined to excuse the perpetrator as were nondelinquents. Violent delinquents discriminated most strongly between friends and strangers as both victims and perpetrators.

This study focused on the degree to which delinquents and nondelinquents find norm violations acceptable in various circumstances. According to Sykes and Matza's (1957) *neutralization theory*, delinquents as well as nondelinquents subscribe to conventional norms, but delinquents differ from nondelinquents in using techniques to neutralize such norms when participating in morally offensive behavior. Neutralization serves to excuse the actor and facilitate deviant behavior. This raises two important questions: Are excuses for deviant behavior directed specifically at offenses that have been committed (and at associated feelings of guilt), and not at offenses that delinquents have not committed? Do delinquents neutralize conventional beliefs or are neutralizations part of unconventional beliefs?

This research was funded by the Dutch Ministry of Justice and the Netherlands Research Council, N.W.O. We would like to thank Godfried van den Wittenboer (University of Amsterdam) and Peter van der Heijden (Utrecht University) for their constructive remarks.

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ADOLESCENCE, Vol. 35, No. 140, Winter 2000

Libra Publishers, Inc., 3089C Clairemont Dr., PMB 383, San Diego, CA 92117

The first question is whether finding excuses is deviance-specific; that is, are neutralizations used to relieve the guilt that arises from crimes that have been committed, or are these excuses also applied to offenses not yet committed? Hindelang (1974) found that those who reported engaging in an illegal act were consistently and substantially less disapproving of that act than were those who reported not engaging in that act. Mitchell and Dodder (1983), investigating the pattern of agreement among neutralization techniques and delinquent acts, found a lack of consistency between what youths said and what they reported actually doing. Mitchell, Dodder, and Norris (1990) showed that the relation between neutralizing excuses and delinquent behavior can vary for different behaviors and subsamples. Landsheer, 't Hart, and Kox (1994) found that even delinquents who reported violent offenses were relatively nonpermissive when it came to violence that involved familiar victims and relatively permissive when the violent acts involved unfamiliar victims. All offenders had a permissive attitude toward acts that resulted in property loss. Dabney's (1995) data illustrated that neutralization does not function solely as post hoc justification for deviant behavior; it also serves as discriminative stimuli for such behavior. Agnew (1994) found that 54% of a sample of adolescents accepted at least one neutralization, justifying the use of violence in particular situations, whereas only 38% had committed any of the eight violent offenses in question during the previous year. In conclusion, it seems that accepting excuses for offenses is more common than the offenses themselves, and that these excuses are therefore not only used to relieve feelings of guilt after committing an offense. Moreover, delinquents seem to justify offenses not yet committed, increasing the likelihood that they will engage in such offenses in the future.

The second question concerns one of the premises of neutralization theory; that is, are delinquents committed to conventional beliefs? Matza (1964) has stated that "The subcultural delinquent unwittingly extends the conditions of inapplicability considerably beyond the point conceded in law, but in so doing he extends them along the same general lines already indicated in legal principles" (p. 61). Matza and Sykes' assumption that youths subscribe to a common value system, regardless of illegal involvement, was not supported by Hindelang's (1974) data. Austin (1980) reported that boys who engaged in violence were less likely to hold conventional moral beliefs. Moreover, only 45.8% of offenders who repeatedly engaged in assault believed in strict adherence to the law. Thus, the majority of offenders did not need to engage in neutralization. Austin concluded that "The explanation that deviance results from an amoral posture is at least as credible as Matza's proposition that the deviant neutralizes his acceptance of conventional beliefs" (p. 560).

Minor (1981) found that the acceptance of excuses is related to subsequent behavior among those who approve of that kind of behavior in general. Moreover, excuse acceptance is more strongly related to subsequent behavior for those who have previously engaged in that behavior than it is for those who have not. This seems to indicate that neutralization theory applies to youths who have no prior record of deviance as well as to youths who do, and this contradicts Hindelang's (1970) suggestion that neutralization is unnecessary for those who are already committed to deviance.

Thurman's (1984) findings imply that neutralizations serve as an effective means to accommodate feelings of guilt especially when the threat of guilt is low. This would seem to contradict Sykes and Matza's view on delinquents' commitment to conventional norms.

Agnew (1994) noted that, even among adolescents who had engaged in violence of some sort, 87% said that hitting without reason is "wrong" or "very wrong." Thus, only a small minority approved of, or were indifferent to, violence. At the same time, many adolescents felt that violence was justified under certain circumstances. Agnew concluded that the data provide support for the position of Sykes and Matza, but added the assumption that individuals with weak conventional beliefs would be more likely to try to justify their delinquency after the fact.

Landsheer et al. (1994) found that when a physical injury is inflicted upon a familiar victim, delinquents are just as unpermissive toward that act as are nondelinquents. Yet, delinquents are significantly more permissive when an unknown victim is injured.

In general, however, the question of whether delinquents neutralize conventional beliefs remains unresolved. It seems that delinquents' approval of deviance is circumstantial: often, they apply neutralizations while subscribing to conventional norms, but under some circumstances their commitment to conventional norms may be lacking. There are also circumstances where delinquents disapprove of criminal offenses as strongly as nondelinquents.

The present study sought to assess the differential facilitation of delinquent activities. In general, neutralizations reflect a more lenient attitude toward delinquency. However, some excuses may be more easily applied under some conditions. Here, the focus was on "denial of the victim" and "appeal to a higher loyalty" in four situations with two different criminal offenses, where either both excuses could be easily applied at the same time, one could and the other could not be easily applied, or neither could be easily applied. Denial of the victim is assumed to be easy to apply when the victim is a stranger, and hard to apply when the victim is a friend. Appeal to a higher loyalty, in this

case friendship, is assumed to be easy to apply when the perpetrator is a friend, and hard to apply when the perpetrator is a stranger.

In addition to neutralization theory, Landsheer et al.'s (1994) *ignorability hypothesis* proposes that when the damage of a delinquent act is harder to ignore (i.e., neutralizations are less easily applied), the attitude of delinquents toward crime will be more like the attitude of nondelinquents. This has an important implication, namely that there are specific circumstances where delinquents are as little inclined to justify an offense as are nondelinquents.

This study focused on the generalizability of the neutralization thesis and aimed to map the circumstances under which delinquents find the above excuses applicable. In line with earlier research, it was assumed that delinquents apply neutralizations both to offenses already committed and to offenses not yet committed. Moreover, it was assumed that delinquents apply the same kinds of excuses to offenses committed by others. It was expected that delinquents' use of neutralizations would depend on the kind of offense and on the circumstances of that offense.

The basic assumption was that, in general, neutralization is a significant part of delinquents' reasoning. Independent of specific conditions, it was expected that delinquents would more easily find excuses for unlawful behavior and therefore find lesser punishments justified.

When neutralizing conventional beliefs, delinquents are expected to differentiate strongly between friends and strangers as both victims and perpetrators. Nondelinquents are expected to be more committed to conventional norms regardless of who the victims and perpetrators might be. According to the ignorability thesis, when a friend is the victim and a stranger is the perpetrator, the damage is harder to ignore (i.e., neutralization is more difficult) and the discrepancy between delinquents and nondelinquents will be smallest in terms of the degree of punishment they deem justified.

Last, if neutralization is indeed behavior-specific, violent delinquents should have a more tolerant attitude toward violent behavior. Furthermore, nonviolent delinquents should be more tolerant of nonviolent offenses but not acts of violence.

METHOD

Participants

Data were obtained from the second wave (September 1, 1994) of a Dutch nationwide panel study. This wave consisted of 2,301 youths: 1,966 adolescents from the first wave (1991), which had 2,699 respon-

dents ranging in age from 15 to 17 years, and an additional sample of 335 youths ranging in age from 12 to 14 years. (The reduction in the number of respondents in the second wave was due to attrition over the intervening three years.) With regard to the independent variables used in the present study, there were no significant differences between those who participated in the second wave and those who did not

Data collection consisted of a face-to-face interview, lasting about one hour, and self-administered pen-and-paper questionnaires. The questions that were the focus of this study were available only in the 1994 wave. Respondents who did not answer all questions were dropped from the analyses, reducing the sample to 1,914 (see Table 1 for their demographic characteristics). There was no significant difference in the mean delinquency score of those who were included in the analyses and those who were not, $F(1, 2299) = 0.312$, ns.

Variables

Attributed punishments. Attitude toward delinquency was defined as the degree of punishment thought to be appropriate, specifically in regard to two offenses: beating someone up badly enough to necessitate hospital treatment, and stealing someone's wallet. The use of neutralization was operationalized as the choice to impose a lighter punishment. In the application of "denial of the victim," the distinction was drawn between someone unfamiliar (an easily ignored victim) and someone familiar (a victim who is less easily ignored). "Appeal to a higher loyalty" differentiated a friend as the perpetrator (high loyalty) and a stranger as the perpetrator (low loyalty). Denial of the victim is more difficult when a friend, rather than a stranger, is the victim. Appeal to a higher loyalty is more easily applied when a friend, in contrast to a stranger, is the perpetrator.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

		Non- delinquents	Nonviolent delinquents	Violent delinquents
<i>n</i>		1046	578	290
Male <i>n</i> / Female <i>n</i>		363 / 683	249 / 329	209 / 81
Age (in years)	<i>M</i>	20.4	19.1	17.8
	<i>SD</i>	4.5	4.2	3.9
Delinquency (frequency)	<i>M</i>	0	3.4	6.4
	<i>SD</i>	0	2.6	4.9

Delinquency. There were three categories of self-reported delinquent activity: nondelinquent (no delinquent activities during the past year), nonviolent delinquent (only nonviolent delinquent activities in the past year), and violent delinquent (at least one violent delinquent act in the past year). This study focused on differences in attitudes between violent delinquents, nonviolent delinquents, and nondelinquents. (Conventional belief was operationalized as the assignment of different punishments to different delinquent behaviors, irrespective of familiarity of the victim or the perpetrator.) Delinquency was measured as the frequency of 28 offenses committed in the past year. The 22 nonviolent acts ranged from *riding a bus without buying a ticket* to *car theft*. The 6 violent acts ranged from *illegal possession of a weapon* to *violent assault*. Youths who had not engaged in any of the offenses were assigned to the nondelinquent group, whereas those who had committed any of the nonviolent crimes were assigned to the nonviolent delinquent group. Those who had committed at least one violent offense were assigned to the violent delinquent group (all of whom had participated in nonviolent delinquency as well).

Design

A facet design was applied (Canter, 1985; Shye, Elizur, & Hoffman, 1994; Hox, Mellenbergh, & Swanborn, 1995). The following mapping sentence was created.

- A criminal act (a)
 - a1. a beating that necessitates hospital treatment
 - a2. stealing a wallet
- executed by a person (p)
 - p1. a friend
 - p2. a stranger
- with a victim (v)
 - v1. someone you do not know personally
 - v2. someone you know personally
- should receive a punishment (R)
 - R0. no punishment
 - R1. a fine
 - R2. imprisonment of one to several days
 - R3. imprisonment of several weeks
 - R4. imprisonment of several months
 - R5. imprisonment of several years
 - R6. cannot imagine this situation (missing value).

Thus, eight conditions were formulated (two delinquent acts, executed in four circumstances). These were as follows: (1) a friend of yours beats up someone you do not know, seriously enough to need hospital treatment (p1v1a1); (2) a friend of yours beats up someone

you know well, seriously enough to need hospital treatment (p1v2a1); (3) a stranger beats up someone you do not know, seriously enough to need hospital treatment (p2v1a1); (4) a stranger beats up someone you know well, seriously enough to need hospital treatment (p2v2a1); (5) a friend of yours steals a wallet from someone you do not know (p1v1a2); (6) a friend of yours steals a wallet from someone you know well (p1v2a2); (7) a stranger steals a wallet from someone you do not know (p2v1a2); (8) a stranger steals a wallet from someone you know well (p2v2a2). The punishments youths deemed justified served as the dependent variables.

The youths were instructed as follows: "The law proscribes various acts and specifies the punishments a perpetrator may receive when he or she breaks the law. We want to know which punishment you think should be given for two offenses, when the circumstances are taken into account. Read each question carefully and try to imagine each situation as clearly as possible. Choose in each case one of the alternative punishments shown."

Analysis

MANOVA was used to investigate the combinatory effects of the different circumstances of the delinquent acts ($2 \times 2 \times 2$ within-subject design). The assumptions underlying the use of MANOVA were tested and deviations from multivariate normality could be detected. According to Stevens (1992), deviation from multivariate normality has only a small effect on Type I error, and checking for homogeneity of the covariance matrices is more important. The Box *M* test was significant, and as relatively high generalized variance is associated with smaller group size, a stricter level of significance was chosen ($\alpha = .01$), resulting in more rigorous testing compared with the Greenhouse-Geisser correction.

RESULTS

It was hypothesized that, in general, delinquents would prescribe less severe punishments for deviant behavior, irrespective of the circumstances. Although nonviolent delinquents as well as violent delinquents prescribed less severe punishments than did nondelinquents, the difference was not statistically significant, $F(2, 1911) = 0.33$, ns. Thus, the hypothesis that delinquents would more easily find excuses for unlawful behavior had to be rejected. However, the multivariate

test of the interaction between conditions and groups indicated a significant difference in the response patterns of nondelinquents, nonviolent delinquents, and violent delinquents, Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.97141$, $F(14, 3810) = 3.98$, $p < .0005$.

It was also hypothesized that if delinquents neutralize conventional beliefs, whereas nondelinquents do not, then delinquents would differentiate between friends and strangers as both victims and perpetrators, while nondelinquents would be less inclined to do so. The results of contrast analysis indicated a different application of neutralizations by nondelinquents, nonviolent delinquents, and violent delinquents. Table 2 shows the raw mean scores and standard deviations of the punishments prescribed (on a scale from 0 to 5) for two delinquent acts (beating someone up and stealing someone's wallet) with two different victims (someone known and someone not known) and two different perpetrators (a friend and a stranger).

The grand means in Table 2 reveal that a more severe punishment was chosen when the perpetrator was unknown, $F(1, 1911) = 158.44$, $p < .0005$, as well as when the victim was known, $F(1, 1911) = 144.56$, $p < .0005$. As expected, there was an interaction effect for perpetrator

Table 2. Mean Scores and Standard Deviation of the Punishments Prescribed for Two Delinquent Acts with Two Different Victims and Two Different Perpetrators

Conditions		Grand mean ($n = 1914$)	Non- delinquents ($n = 1046$)	Nonviolent delinquents ($n = 578$)	Violent delinquents ($n = 290$)
1. p1v1a1: Known Perpetrator, Unknown Victim, Violent Act	<i>M</i>	2.09	2.16	2.05	1.91
	<i>SD</i>	1.13	1.10	1.12	1.22
2. p1v2a1: Known Perpetrator, Known Victim, Violent Act	<i>M</i>	2.17	2.22	2.15	2.01
	<i>SD</i>	1.13	1.11	1.11	1.22
3. p2v1a1: Unknown Perpetrator, Unknown Victim, Violent Act	<i>M</i>	2.20	2.24	2.18	2.10
	<i>SD</i>	1.12	1.09	1.12	1.18
4. p2v2a1: Unknown Perpetrator, Known Victim, Violent Act	<i>M</i>	2.29	2.32	2.27	2.27
	<i>SD</i>	1.15	1.11	1.15	1.27
5. p1v1a2: Known Perpetrator, Unknown Victim, Nonviolent Act	<i>M</i>	1.82	1.82	1.80	1.86
	<i>SD</i>	0.95	0.93	0.95	1.02
6. p1v2a2: Known Perpetrator, Known Victim, Nonviolent Act	<i>M</i>	1.83	1.82	1.81	1.91
	<i>SD</i>	0.95	0.93	0.96	1.02
7. p2v1a2: Unknown Perpetrator, Unknown Victim, Nonviolent Act	<i>M</i>	1.83	1.81	1.82	1.90
	<i>SD</i>	0.97	0.93	0.99	1.05
8. p2v2a2: Unknown Perpetrator, Known Victim, Nonviolent Act	<i>M</i>	1.87	1.84	1.86	2.00
	<i>SD</i>	0.99	0.94	0.99	1.11
Total	<i>M</i>	2.01	2.02	1.99	2.00
	<i>SD</i>	0.89	0.87	0.90	0.93

facet and delinquency group. Violent delinquents made the widest distinction between a friend and a stranger as the perpetrator, choosing a much greater punishment when the perpetrator was unknown, $F(2, 1911) = 14.34, p < .0005$. There was a similar finding for the victim facet. Violent delinquents made the widest distinction, finding a significantly heavier punishment justified when the victim was someone they knew well, $F(2, 1911) = 9.73, p < .0005$.

The third hypothesis was that if the ignorability thesis is true, neutralization would be easiest when a friend was the perpetrator and a stranger was the victim (questions 1 and 5); that is, the chosen punishment would be lowest, and the difference between delinquents and nondelinquents would be greatest. Under the opposite conditions (questions 4 and 8), delinquents would be expected to choose just as high a punishment as would nondelinquents. Analysis of the eight questions showed that not all facet combinations resulted in significant differences among the three groups. Regarding the violent act (a beating necessitating hospital treatment), there was a significant difference only for the first question, with the nondelinquent group prescribing the highest punishment: $p1v1a1, F(2, 1911) = 5.93, p < .003$. For the second, third, and fourth questions, however, differences were slight and nonsignificant: $p1v2a1, F(2, 1911) = 3.87, ns$; $p2v1a1, F(2, 1911) = 1.86, ns$; and $p2v2a1, F(2, 1911) = 0.40, ns$. In regard to the nonviolent act (stealing a wallet), there were slight but nonsignificant differences among the three groups, with the violent delinquent group in all cases prescribing the highest punishments: $p1v1a2, F(2, 1911) = 0.33, ns$; $p1v2a2, F(2, 1911) = 1.19, ns$; $p2v1a2, F(2, 1911) = 0.88, ns$; and $p2v2a2, F(2, 1911) = 3.27, ns$.

These findings, in part, confirm the ignorability thesis. As expected, there were no significant differences among groups when the victim was someone known personally and the perpetrator was a stranger. In this case, delinquents chose as high a punishment as did the nondelinquents. However, in the opposite case (when the perpetrator was a friend and the victim was a stranger), a large difference between the two delinquent groups and the nondelinquents would be expected, as neutralization could be easily applied. This held true for the beating scenario, but not for stealing a wallet.

The fourth hypothesis was that if neutralization is behavior-specific, violent delinquents would excuse violent acts, while nonviolent delinquents would excuse nonviolent acts but not violent acts. In regard to the violent act (beating someone up), violent delinquents discriminated more strongly between friends and strangers as victims and perpetrators compared with nonviolent delinquents, $F(1, 866) = 13.09, p <$

.0005, while nonviolent delinquents did not discriminate more strongly than nondelinquents, $F(1, 1622) = 0.51$, ns. Regarding the nonviolent act (stealing a wallet), violent delinquents discriminated more strongly than nonviolent delinquents, $F(1, 866) = 17.10$, $p < .0005$, and nonviolent delinquents discriminated more strongly than nondelinquents, $F(1, 1622) = 5.05$, $p < .03$ (although this last finding does not meet the strict .01 significance level). These results confirm the hypothesis that delinquents tend to excuse the kind of deviant behavior they themselves have previously been involved in.

DISCUSSION

The data show that violent delinquents (who are also the most frequent perpetrators of nonviolent criminal offenses) have a significantly different attitude toward offenses compared with nondelinquents and even nonviolent delinquents. This suggests that they may have a different value system.

Nondiscrimination is an established part of legal standards (for the present discussion, considered synonymous with conventional morality), to which the majority of nondelinquents adhered, both in the case of the perpetrator and in the case of the victim. On the other hand, delinquents discriminated between friends and strangers as both victims and perpetrators. Does this prove that delinquents are not committed to conventional morality? Not necessarily; delinquents may be well aware of conventional morality, but find grounds to excuse delinquent behavior (i.e., neutralization).

The results confirm earlier findings (Landsheer et al., 1994); delinquents and nondelinquents have comparable attitudes toward norm violations when someone they know well is victimized and the perpetrator is a stranger. However, it was theorized that delinquents would be as little inclined to excuse norm violations as would nondelinquents when the damage of a deviant act is hard to ignore. The results suggest that there are additional circumstances in which delinquents and nondelinquents show similarities. In fact, the low level of punishment that was chosen by both delinquents and nondelinquents in the case of stealing a wallet was quite surprising. It seems that the need for more excuses is slight when "only" possessions are involved. Future research is needed on these interesting exceptions to the neutralization paradigm.

The results do not show that delinquents find deviant behavior excusable in every situation. On the contrary, the punishment that delinquents prescribe depends on the circumstances. Delinquents

differentiate more strongly between victims and perpetrators in comparison to nondelinquents. There is no discrepancy between delinquents and nondelinquents when the victim is a friend and the perpetrator is a stranger: both groups prescribe more severe punishments. However, the laxer attitude when loss of property is involved, as well as when strangers are victimized, is a source of concern for society.

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