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Neutralisation as a Process of Graduated Desensitisation:

Moral Values of Offenders

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Abstract

This study explored neutralisation as a process of graduated desensitisation providing a theoretical link between the opposing tenets of neutralisation theory and the subcultural theory of criminal behaviour. Participants were 95 adult male offenders who were categorised according to type of offending (personal and property) and level of offending involvement (low and high). Offenders' excuse acceptance and offence approval were examined for five offence situations. The results indicated offenders' excuse acceptance varied as a function of their level of involvement in crime. Specifically, for property offence situations, low involvement property offenders reported higher excuse acceptance than high involvement property offenders, while for personal offence situations, low personal offenders reported higher excuse acceptance than high involvement personal offenders. This finding partially supported the graduated desensitisation hypothesis providing an empirical link between neutralisation and the subcultural theory of criminal behaviour.

Neutralisation as a Process of Graduated Desensitisation:

Moral Values of Offenders

One of the most persistent debates concerning theories of criminal behaviour is whether the value system of criminal offenders is fundamentally different from that of larger society (e.g. Cohen, 1955; Hindelang, 1970; Verlade, 1978). Two competing theories of criminal behaviour feature prominently in this debate, the traditional subcultural position (Cohen,1955) and neutralisation theory (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Bandura's (1976) psychological mechanism of graduated desensitisation is proposed as a theoretical link between these two competing frameworks. The aim of the research reported in this paper is to empirically investigate the graduated desensitisation hypothesis by determining if offenders' neutralisations vary as a function of their level of involvement in specific offence types.

The traditional subcultural theory proposes that offenders are part of a distinct subculture that comprises values and beliefs that are "deviant" or "criminal" and condone law violation. Generally, subcultural theorists argue that illegal behaviour is the inevitable result of the values and norms inherent in a lower-class deviant subculture (e.g Miller, 1958; Cohen & Short, 1961; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). A number of studies have investigated the subcultural theory of criminal behaviour (e.g Sherwin, 1968, cited in Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 1981; Ball-Rokeach, 1973). Generally however, the results have failed to support the class-values-crime hypothesis (Barron, 1974). Subsequently, alternative theories of criminal behaviour have been developed and subject to investigation, most notably, Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralisation theory.

Neutralisation theory proposes that offenders are not committed to oppositional values and norms as suggested by the subculturalist tradition, but share the same value system as the dominant culture (Sykes & Matza, 1957). From this perspective, both offenders and non-offenders view illegal behaviour as "wrong". However, neutralisation techniques

allow offenders to temporarily disengage themselves from conventional morality and perform illegal acts (Matza, 1964).

A leading proposition of neutralisation theory is that offenders only neutralise their misdeeds. Therefore, a robber would be expected to accept excuses for theft or stealing but not for assault or murder. This assumption was supported in a study by Wortley (1986) comparing the neutralisations of three offender groups (robbery, murder and theft) and a nonoffender group. Wortley reported that offenders who had committed a particular type of offence endorsed significantly more neutralisations for that offence compared to "other" offenders. Unfortunately however, much of the research on neutralisation theory has failed to distinguish amongst different types of offending (Hindelang, 1974; Wortley, 1986). By not differentiating subjects according to offence type, researchers have not tested neutralisation as posited by Sykes and Matza (1957).

Reformulations of neutralisation theory have been presented which attempt to integrate the contrasting arguments of subcultural and neutralisation theory. Minor (1981, 1984) proposed that neutralisations are required when the offender has a strong commitment to conventional morality and an urge to violate the law. In contrast, offenders who are committed to a deviant lifestyle have a weaker tie to conventional values. For this group of offenders, who are not constrained by personal values, neutralisations are not necessary. Hirshi (1969) considers neutralisation a "hardening process" in that neutralisation may be necessary in the early stages of deviancy when offenders need to resolve the incongruence between their conventional values and their unconventional behaviour. However, with continued involvement, offenders become less committed to their conventional values and drift toward a more enduring commitment to a deviant value system and neutralisations are no longer necessary. Similarly, a reformulation of neutralisation theory is proposed here which views neutralisation as a process of graduated desensitisation, whereby offenders

progress from conventional morality to unconventional morality as their level of involvement in crime increases.

The concept of graduated desensitisation was advanced by Bandura (1976), who stated a person's moral conduct is maintained by the continuous activation of self-regulatory mechanisms. That is, to maintain feelings of self worth, people apply sanctions to themselves so their behaviour does not violate their internal moral standards. However, these regulators of conduct must be activated in order to take effect, and there are psychological mechanisms by which internal moral control can be disengaged (neutralised) from immoral conduct. Graduated desensitisation is one of these psychological mechanisms. It refers to the process which occurs when individuals' self sanctions become extinguished through the repeated performance of a particular behaviour such as criminal offending (Bandura, 1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1996).

Graduated desensitisation provides a theoretical link between neutralisation and subcultural theory. In accordance with neutralisation theory, offenders with a low involvement in crime will have a strong commitment to the dominant value system and disapprove of the offences they commit. Consequently, they will utilise neutralisations to justify their immoral behaviour and to keep their actions in line with their internal standards. However, as the level of the offenders' involvement in crime increases, these self sanctions are extinguished through the process of graduated desensitisation. Therefore, offenders' commitment to the conventional value system is weakened and offences can be performed without neutralisations. Eventually, in accordance with the subcultural theory, offenders with a high involvement in crime subscribe to a deviant value system where neutralisations are not necessary, because this group approves of the crimes they commit.

A fundamental factor in this reformulation is that the psychological process of graduated desensitisation is offence specific. It is the offender's level of involvement in a particular type of crime that determines the level of neutralisations or excuse acceptance for that offence type. Therefore, offenders involved in personal offences would not be expected to demonstrate graduated desensitisation in relation to property offences.

To test the graduated desensitisation process, two sets of hypothesis were generated related to offenders' excuse acceptance and moral judgement (offence approval). In line with neutralisation theory, it was proposed that offenders with low involvement in a specific offence type (property or personal) will have high levels of excuse acceptance and low levels of offence approval with respect to that offence type. In line with the traditional subcultural position, offenders with high involvement in a specific offence type will have low levels of excuse acceptance and high levels of offence approval with respect to that offence type. Specifically it was hypothesised;

1. Excuse acceptance

For property offence situations, low involvement property offenders will report significantly higher excuse acceptance than high involvement property offenders, and there will be no significant difference between low and high involvement personal offenders.

For personal offence situations, low involvement personal offenders will report significantly higher excuse acceptance than high involvement personal offenders, and there will be no significant difference between low and high involvement property offenders.

2. Moral judgement

For property offence situations, high involvement property offenders will be more approving than low involvement property offenders, and there will be no significant difference on property offence approval between low and high involvement personal offenders.

For personal offence situations, high involvement personal offenders will be more approving than low involvement personal offenders, and there will be no significant difference on property offence approval between low and high involvement property offenders.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 95 male adult offenders. Sixty offenders were serving a custodial sentence and 35 were serving a non-custodial sentence (including parole, probation and community service orders). Participants' ages ranged from 18 - 46 years (M = 25.18years, SD = 5.29 years). The education level of participants ranged from year 8 to year 12 (M = 10.43, SD = 1.14).

Using information from each offender's criminal history, participants were categorised as personal or property offenders and as low or high involvement offenders. All documented offences were coded into two categories - property and personal - using the Australian National Classification of Offences (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997). Participants were categorised as a personal or property offender according to the offence category in which they had the greatest total number of offences (no participants had an equal number of personal and property offences). To identify low and high levels of offence involvement, the total number of property offences and total number of personal offences were divided at the median. The median split for personal offenders was five offences, while the median split for property offender was ten offences.

Instruments

The Neutralisation Scale. Participants' tendency to neutralise was measured using a modified version of Ball's (1966) neutralisation inventory. The modified scale consists of five offence situations, each describing a hypothetical property or personal offence with varying degrees of seriousness. Four of the five hypothetical offence situations were originally adopted by Ball (1966). However, Ball classified armed robbery as a property offence and in this study armed robbery is classified as a personal offence (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997). Subsequently, a fifth situation depicting a property offence (burglary) was developed.

Each of the five situations was followed by ten excuse statements, designed to represent the five techniques of neutralisation. Scoring was based on a 5-point Likert scale which were summed to create scores ranging from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 50 for each neutralisation situation. High scores indicated a willingness to accept excuses for crime and low scores indicated a rejection of the excuses.

To distinguish participants' excuse acceptance from their unconventional commitment to the offence, the statement "Jack shouldn't be blamed for this, whatever the excuse" was added to each offence situation. This procedure provided a measure of participants basic moral judgement (approval/disapproval of the behaviour) of each offence situation. Scoring was based on a 5-point Likert scale with high scores reflecting approval of the offence and low scores indicating disapproval of the offence.

Procedure

Questionnaires were administered to custodial offenders during group programs. Noncustodial offenders completed the questionnaire either during group program or during their meeting with their Community Corrections Officer.

Participants completed a questionnaire package which included the modified neutralisation scale. In addition, offence history and demographic information was collected from the participants' criminal files. Demographic information collected included age, ethnicity, education level and occupation. However, much of the information on ethnicity and occupation was incomplete and was not analysed.

Results

Sample Descriptives

Participants were categorised by offender type (property or personal) and level of offence involvement (low or high). The numbers of custodial and non-custodial offenders across the two variables are displayed in Table 1. Property offenders showed a significant relationship between level of offending and type of sentence ($\chi 2(1) = 13.99, p < .001$), with low involvement property offenders more likely to have a non-custodial sentence. Personal offenders showed no relationship between level of offending and type of sentence.

Insert Table 1

For each offender group, the means, standard deviations and ranges for the number of property offences, number of personal offences and total number of offences committed are displayed in Table 2. Although participants were categorised as either a personal or property offender, some offenders were offending in both offence groups.

Insert Table 2

Excuse acceptance

To explore the relationship between offender type, level of involvement and excuse acceptance, a 2 x 2 between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed. Independent variables were offender type (property and personal) and level of offence involvement (low and high). The dependent variables were participant's excuse acceptance for the five offence situations. Two of these offence situations were property offences (situation two and five) and three were personal offences (situation one, three and four).

The results of the MANOVA showed significant main effects for both offender type (F(5, 87) = 45.61, p < .001) and level of involvement (F(5, 87) = 6.93, p < .001). The results were modified by a significant interaction effect between offender type and level of involvement (F(5, 87) = 15.65, p < .001). The results reflect a moderate association $(\eta^2 = 0.47)$ between the interaction and the combined dependent variables. A strong association $(\eta^2 = 0.72)$ was evident between offender type and their excuse acceptance, while the association was less substantial between level of involvement and the excuse acceptance variables $(\eta^2 = 0.30)$.

To explore the interaction effect further, a series of univariate analyses were performed (Table 3). These analyses revealed significant interactions between offender type and level of involvement on all five offence situations. Simple main effects analyses were used to explore the interactions of offender type and level of involvement.

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Neutralisation 12

Insert Table 3

Similar patterns were obtained for the two property offence situations (Figure 1). As predicted by hypothesis 1, low involvement property offenders reported significantly higher excuse acceptance compared to high involvement property offenders for situation two (F (1, 47) = 32.45, p < .001) and situation five (F (1, 47) = 41.78, p < .001). For these two property offence situations, no significant excuse acceptance differences were found between low and high involvement personal offenders.

Insert Figure 1

For personal offence situations the results revealed similar trends (Figure 2). Consistent with hypothesis 1, low personal offenders reported significantly higher excuse acceptance compared to high involvement personal offenders for situation one (F (1, 47) = 33.31, p < .001), situation three (F (1, 47) = 19.36, p < .001), and situation four (F = 20.44, p < .001). For the three property offence situations no significant differences on excuse acceptance between low and high involvement property offenders were found.

Insert Figure 2

Moral judgement

The relationship between offender type, level of involvement and moral judgement was explored using a 2 x 2 between-subjects MANOVA. Independent variables were offender type (property and personal) and level of offence involvement (low and high). Dependent variables were offence approval (moral judgement) scores for the five offence situations. No significant main or interaction effects were found. The mean offence approval rating was $2.08 \ (SD = .99)$ across all offender groups. Contrary to hypothesis 2, the interaction of offender type and level of involvement did not significantly affect moral judgement across the five offence situations.

Discussion

This study examined neutralisation as a process of graduated desensitisation in order to provide an empirical link between the opposing tenets of neutralisation theory and the subcultural theory of criminal behaviour.

Results supported the first set of hypotheses concerned with offenders' excuse acceptance for the five offence situations. For property offence situations, low involvement property offenders reported higher excuse acceptance than high involvement property offenders, while there was no difference between low and high involvement personal offenders. Furthermore, the study found that that for personal offence situations, low involvement personal offenders reported higher excuse acceptance than high involvement personal offenders, while there was no difference between low and high involvement property offenders. The results did not support the second set of hypotheses concerned with offenders' moral judgements. That is, no significant differences were found between offender groups on offence approval for the five offence situations.

These results provide an empirical link between neutralisation and the subcultural theory and lend partial support for the main thesis of this paper that neutralisation may be viewed as a process of graduated desensitisation (Bandura, 1976). Specifically, the findings suggest that the degree of excuse acceptance amongst offenders can distinguish between those with a low or high offence involvement, with the number of neutralisations endorsed decreasing with the rate of offending. Hence, offenders' excuse acceptance appears to vary as a function of offenders' level of involvement in crime.

This finding provides a link between neutralisation theory and the traditional subcultural position, as it suggests that each theoretical framework applies to different groups of offenders; neutralisation theory to low involvement offenders and subcultural theory to high involvement offenders. Neutralisation theory proposes that high excuse acceptance amongst offenders is indicative of their need to episodically break free of the moral constraint of a conventional value system (Sykes & Matza, 1957; Matza, 1964). While neutralisation theory proposes that this is the case for all offenders (regardless of level of involvement), the study found this to be true only for offenders with a low offence involvement (when the offender type was consistent with the offence situation).

In contrast, subcultural theory argues that offenders possess a deviant value system which condones law violation (Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). Hence, regardless of level of involvement, all offenders should have a low excuse acceptance because they have no moral binds to conventional morality and do no need to neutralise their deviant behaviour. Consistent with subcultural theory, this study found that offenders had low excuse acceptance, however this was only true for offenders with a high offence involvement (when the offender type was consistent with the offence situation).

It can be seen from the significant interactions of offender type and level of involvement, that neutralisation of an offence is conditional upon both the type of offence an

offender commits, and the extent of their involvement in criminal activity. This supports the graduated desensitisation hypothesis as it suggests that offenders progress from conventional morality (neutralisation theory) to unconventional morality (subcultural theory) as their level of involvement in crime increases.

In addition to examining offenders' excuse acceptance, the study also examined offenders' basic moral evaluations of the five offence situations to further substantiate the graduated desensitisation process. In accordance with the assumptions espoused by the graduated desensitisation framework, the current study proposed that offender's disapproval of the offence situations would weaken as their level of offence involvement increased. This proposition followed logically from the first set of hypotheses. Low offence involvement would be associated with both high excuse acceptance and offence *disapproval*, while high offence involvement would be associated with low excuse acceptance and offence *approval*. The non-significant results found for moral judgement, suggest that offenders' disapproval of the offences was not dependent on either the type of offences they themselves had committed (offender type) or the extent of their involvement in criminal activity (level of involvement).

While this finding fails to support the graduated desensitisation hypothesis, the results may be explained by the moral judgement statements which were added to the neutralisation questionnaire to distinguish offenders' excuse acceptance from their unconventional commitment - a flaw of prior research (Minor, 1981, 1984; Wortley, 1986). The statement "Jack shouldn't be blamed for this (offence), whatever the excuse", provides a somewhat crude measure of offenders basic moral evaluations of offences. More specifically, it is possible that the wording of the statement may have confused offenders or produced a social desirability effect, as evidenced by the fact that the majority of participants disapproved of the five offences.

Conclusion

The main objective of the current study was to examine neutralisation as a process of graduated desensitisation. The finding that excuse acceptance varies as a function of offender's level of involvement in crime, partially supports the graduated desensitisation hypothesis. Moreover, that offenders with a low offence involvement were found to have higher excuse acceptance than offenders with a high offence involvement, provides a link between neutralisation theory and the subcultural position. The result suggests that each theoretical frameworks applies to different groups of offenders; neutralisation theory to low involvement offenders and subcultural theory to high involvement offenders.

This finding has significant implications for victim-offender programs which arose from the restorative justice approach and which cite neutralisation theory as a rationale for confronting offenders with victims of crime. Specifically, the results of this study suggest that such programs would be more appropriate for low involvement offenders as would cognitive restructuring techniques which challenge the self deception process that is activated when offenders endorse excuses.

The research presented in this paper emphasises the need for a more sophisticated measure which accurately quantifies the endorsement of neutralisations. In addition, the study highlights the fact that neutralisation is an area of research that needs to be re-opened and explored further. This will this serve to provide more understanding about different forms of therapy which are appropriate for different groups of offenders. Moreover, it will provide a sound theoretical basis for victim-offenders such as Victim Offender Mediation and Family Group Conferencing, that are becoming increasing popular in Australia's criminal justice system.

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Table 1 Frequencies for Custodial and Non-Custodial Groups across Offender Type and Level of <u>Involvement</u>

	Property Offender		Personal Offender		
Type of Sentence	low	high	low	high	
	involvement	involvement	involvement	involvement	
custodial	10	20	16	19	
non-custodial	16	2	7	5	
Total	26	22	23	24	

Table 2

Offender Groups' Means, Standard Deviations and Ranges for Personal Offences, Property

Offences and Total Offences.

	Property Offender		Personal Offender		
	low	high	low	high	
	involvement	involvement	involvement	involvement	
Property offences					
M	5.27	32.91	0.30	2.04	
(SD)	(3.35)	(23.80)	(0.64)	(2.33)	
range	1 - 10	11 - 87	0 - 2	0 - 9	
Personal offences					
M	0.58	2.46	2.30	9.04	
(SD)	(0.95)	(3.60)	(1.46)	(2.71)	
range	0 - 4	0 - 16	1 - 5	6 - 16	
Total offences					
M	5.85	35.36	2.61	11.08	
(SD)	(4.02)	(23.88)	(1.59)	(3.84)	
range	1 - 14	11 - 89	1 - 6	6 - 20	

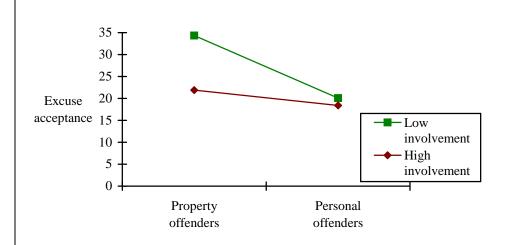
Table 3

<u>Summary of Univariate F values</u>

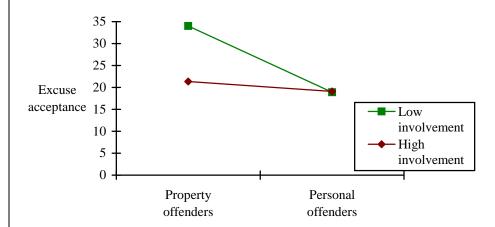
Effects	Dependent variable	F value	df	η2
	situation 1	73.22**	1, 91	0.45
Offender type	situation 2	42.21**	1, 91	0.32
	situation 3	61.28**	1, 91	0.40
	situation 4	54.97**	1, 91	0.38
	situation 5	48.69**	1, 91	0.35
	situation 1	22.07**	1, 91	0.20
Level of	situation 2	21.30**	1, 91	0.19
involvement	situation 3	12.49*	1, 91	0.12
	situation 4	8.88*	1, 91	0.09
	situation 5	22.87**	1, 91	0.20
Offender type by	situation 1	22.37**	1, 91	0.20
level of involvement	situation 2	16.85**	1, 91	0.16
	situation 3	15.90**	1, 91	0.15
	situation 4	15.62**	1, 91	0.15
	situation 5	23.15**	1, 91	0.20

^{*} significant at p < .05

^{**} significant at p < .001

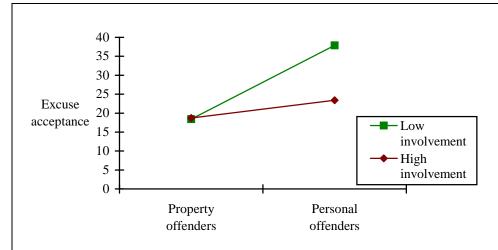


Situation 2.

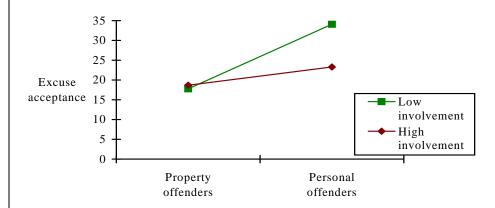


Situation 5.

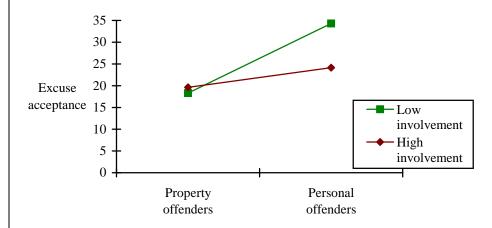
Figure 1 Property offences: mean excuse acceptance by offender type and level of involvement.



Situation 1.



Situation 3.



Situation 4.

Figure 2 Personal offences: mean excuse acceptance by offender type and level of involvement.