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Techniques of Neutralization and Animal Rights Activists

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Neutralization theory posits that criminals assuage feelings of guilt they feel as a consequence of their actions by developing thoughts that justify their deviant behavior. The process is believed to occur prior to the act, and is seen as enabling the deviant behavior. A large body of research has been conducted demonstrating that neutralization “techniques” are used by many criminals. The present work seeks to determine if members of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) use techniques of neutralization. The method used was a content analysis of anonymous communiqués written by the ALF. The results indicate that ALF members do indeed use various techniques of neutralization to justify their actions, including what *may* be a newly identified technique, “appeal to a higher moral principle.” Moreover, as the ALF is motivated by a particular ideology, it seems reasonable to conclude that these techniques were developed in the minds of the communiqué authors prior to the criminal actions they perpetrated.

Introduced by Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957), neutralization theory posits that juvenile delinquents, despite their criminal acts, generally accept societal norms. According to the theorists, the departure from accepted norms must be accounted for and justified by the delinquent in order to assuage feelings of guilt. The theorists went on to enumerate various “techniques of neutralization” used by juveniles to justify their situational violation of otherwise accepted norms (Sykes and Matza 1957).

This study seeks to determine if, and to what extent, persons who commit ideologically motivated crimes use techniques of neutralization to justify criminal behaviors. The method will involve a content analysis of statements made by “underground” animal rights activists who perpetrated crimes such as arson. Evidence of techniques of neutralization used to justify *ideologically motivated* animal rights crimes would provide an argument in support of a central tenet of neutralization theory: thought patterns that work to excuse or justify deviant behavior *precede* the behavior, essentially enabling that behavior in a process of norm erosion (Sykes and Matza 1957; Reckless 1961).

Measuring the *extent* to which techniques of neutralization among animal rights activists contribute to norm erosion and enable crime will not be considered here. Such an effort would involve isolating and measuring other relevant variables that contribute to norm erosion, an important issue that is nevertheless beyond the scope of this initial investigation.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Sykes and Matza (1957) root their theory in Edwin Sutherland's (1955) differential association theory, asserting that delinquent behavior involves, in part, the learning of "motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes favorable to the violation of the law" (pp. 77–80). Departing from the notion of delinquent subcultures exemplified in the work of Albert Cohen (1955), Sykes and Matza (1957) said that juvenile delinquents accept norms, but view them as "qualified guides" as opposed to "categorical imperatives" (p. 666). The implication is that, depending on the situation, individuals may see their criminal behavior as justified. While justifications after the criminal act are common (rationalizations), they also theorized that justifications precede, and in effect, *enable* (not cause) criminal behaviors. The theorists called these before-the-fact accounts neutralization techniques. The process is described succinctly by Sykes and Matza (1957) in the following quote:

Disapproval flowing from internalized norms and conforming others in the social environment is neutralized, turned back, or deflected in advance. Social controls that serve to check or inhibit deviant motivational patterns are rendered inoperative, and the individual is freed to engage in delinquency without serious damage to his self-image. (pp. 666–667)

Sykes and Matza (1957) enumerated five techniques used by juvenile delinquents to neutralize and render inoperative internal and external social controls: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of the condemners, and the appeal to higher loyalties. Since the publication of the original article numerous additional techniques have been identified. Other neutralization techniques include the defense of necessity (Coleman 1998), the metaphor of the ledger (Klockars 1974), denial of the justice or necessity of the law (Coleman 1998), claim that everybody does it/diffusion of guilt (Coleman 1998), claim of entitlement (Benson 1985), justification by comparison, and postponement (Cromwell and Thurman 2003).

In addition to expanding on the list of neutralization techniques, researchers have gone beyond juvenile delinquency and applied neutralization theory to many different types of crimes and non-criminal behaviors, including drug use (Dodder and Hughes 1993; Priest and McGrath 1970), deviant occupations (Hong and Duff 1977; Thompson and Harred 1992), pedophilia (De Young 1988), white-collar crime (Benson 1985; Jesilow et al. 1993; Piquero et al. 2005; Simon and Eitzen 1993), deer poaching (Eliason and Dodder 1999), hate crimes (Byers and Crider 1999) occupational deviance (Dabney 1995; Gauthier 2001; Hollinger 1991), shoplifting (Cromwell and Thurman 2003), the entrance of children into pre-teen beauty pageants (Heltsley and Calhoun 2003), medicare/medicaid fraud (Evans and Porche 2005), the sexual exploitation of females deemed to be unattractive (Gailey and Prohaska 2006), environmentally harmful behaviors (Fritsche 2003), violence and aggression (Agnew 1994; Forsyth and Evans 1998), murder (Levi 1981), genocide (Alvarez 1997), playing bingo (King 1990; Chapple and Nofziger 2000), rape (Bohner et al. 1998), abortion (Brennan 1974), public defenders representing clients they know to be guilty (Rosecrance 1988), shoplifting, drinking, and cheating among college students (Agnew and Peters 1986; Dodder and Hughes 1993; Minor 1984), and how contemporary German youths avoid the stigma of the Holocaust (Hazani 1991).

Numerous articles provide some evidence supporting neutralization theory (Agnew 1994; Ball 1966; Costello 2000; Dodder and Hughes 1993; Fritsche 2003; Minor 1981, 1984; Norris

and Dodder 1979; Mitchell et al. 1990; Shields and Whitehall 1994; Thurman 1984). However, other research suggests limitations of neutralization theory. For example, Fritsche (2005) calculated the effect sizes of twenty neutralization studies and concluded that neutralization is only a “weak predictor of norm-contradictive behavior” (p. 483). Contrary to a central premise of neutralization theory, other research indicates that norm acceptance is not a necessary condition for neutralization effects to take place—in other words, the justification of deviance may influence subsequent behaviors even when individuals have varying, even low levels of commitment to societal norms (Thurman 1984). Others say that the theory “remains badly underdeveloped,” citing in particular the failure to connect neutralization to narrative and sociocognitive research in psychology and other disciplines (Maruna and Copes 2005:221).

A persistent issue in neutralization theory research is the methodological difficulties in testing the theory. Most problematic is determining whether neutralizations actually precede deviant behaviors (Maruna and Copes 2005). Methodological difficulties aside, Hirschi (1969) suggested that it was more plausible to assume that delinquent acts precede justifying beliefs—a behavioral sequence in direct opposition to the central premise of neutralization theory. Maruna and Copes (2005) concluded that viewing neutralization as a theory of criminal etiology “makes little sense (how can someone neutralize something before they have done it?)” (p. 221).

Some research suggests that neutralization theory may be applicable to ideologically motivated crimes. For example, research on terrorists, many of whom are motivated by an ideology, includes the observation that terrorist groups must go through a process of moral justification (White 1998). Arguments made by terrorists include the notion that terrorism is a just revenge for social evils (amounts to denial of victim), terrorism is a lesser evil than the exercise of government power (sounds like condemnation of condemners), and terrorism is the only course of action available (essentially, defense of necessity) (White 1998). Other research describes a process that terrorist groups undergo to justify their actions—in what he termed the “doctrine of necessity,” Cooper (1977) concluded that terrorists come to believe that the maintenance of the status quo is worse than the crimes they perpetrate. One researcher has specifically applied neutralization theory to religious terrorism. Al-Khattar (2003) interviewed Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious leaders, and found that the subjects made statements that justified religious terrorism by using Sykes and Matza’s (1957) five original neutralization techniques.

IDEOLOGY AND EXTREMISM IN THE ANIMAL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The majority of persons who identify themselves as members of the animal rights movement do not subscribe to “direct action” criminality as a reasonable response (Munro 2005; Liddick 2006). A small percentage of those within the movement may be described as animal “liberationists” who argue for the release of animals from medical research laboratories, factory farms, and zoos using nonviolent criminal means, and an even smaller percentage of animal rights activists advocate the liberation of animals by any means necessary—including arson, bombings, and physical attacks (Best and Nocella 2004; Munro 2005). The concern here is with that relatively small percentage of activists who argue that the plight of animals is so severe that criminal acts that cause significant property damage and cause or risk injury to humans is justified.

A central concern in the present study is the ideological framework used by some animal rights activists to justify criminality—hence, a brief overview of animal rights philosophy is

obligatory. The ideological notion of animal rights is exemplified in the works of academic philosophers Peter Singer (1975) and Tom Regan (1983). Although Richard Ryder first coined the term “speciesism” in 1971 (Finsen and Finsen 1994), the concept was firmly established with the publication of Peter Singer’s (1975) seminal work, *Animal Liberation*. Drawing on ideas originally voiced by Jeremy Bentham and Henry Salt, Singer suggested that racism, sexism, and *speciesism* are the same breed of human behavior (unjustified discrimination). In Singer’s view, the suffering inflicted on animals in agribusiness and scientific experimentation far outweigh the benefits to humans. With the publication of Tom Regan’s (1983) *The Case for Animal Rights*, the notion of rights for animals was more fully developed, and the ideological groundwork for liberating animals from human oppression was laid. While Singer argued that animals be granted moral consideration, Regan extended the argument by stating that animals have inherent value, and are therefore deserving of moral *equality*. Regan’s position is most closely aligned with the modern animal liberation movement, which denounces the use of animals for any reason, be it for food, clothing, research, or entertainment.

In sum, to those animal rights activists who see non-human animals as morally equal to humans, the exploitation of animals amounts to a moral wrong equivalent to that of the Jewish Holocaust (Best and Nocella 2004). And while some animal rights activists and philosophers cite Gandhi and Martin Luther King as exemplars (Singer 1975), others clearly feel that to rectify a “holocaust,” criminal actions are warranted (Best and Nocella 2004).

Some of the more prominent groups responsible for animal rights crimes include Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC), the Animal Rights Militia, the Justice Department, and the Animal Liberation Front (ALF). The most prominent and active of these groups is the ALF, whose stated objective is to stop animal suffering through “direct actions” (illegal activities that typically involve the release of animals from farms and laboratories, property destruction, and in some cases, threats and violence against people). The more significant ALF attacks involve timed incendiary devices that cause multi-million-dollar blazes. In other cases of burglary and vandalism perpetrators spray-paint the ALF initials on walls along with graffiti, slogans, and threats (Liddick 2006). Specific guidelines set forth by the ALF in their website include:

- To liberate animals from places of abuse, ie fur farms, laboratories, factory farms, etc. and place them in good homes where they may live out their natural lives free from suffering.
- To inflict economic damage to those who profit from the misery and exploitation of animals.
- To reveal the horror and atrocities committed against animals behind locked doors by performing non-violent direct actions and liberations.
- To take all necessary precautions against hurting any animal, human and non-human. (*Bite Back Magazine* at www.directaction.info/)

A “Diary of Actions” posted in *Bite Back Magazine* (an online publication that serves as an outlet for radical elements of the animal rights movement) reveals that in recent years ALF attacks occur practically every day internationally (Liddick 2006). ALF cells are or have been active in the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Norway, Russia, Croatia, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, Finland, Denmark, Ireland, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, and the United States—more than twenty countries in all. Some activists

have departed from the ALF's stated objective of not harming any living thing, and have targeted humans for threats and physical attacks (Liddick 2006).

METHOD

This study seeks to determine if, and to what extent, persons who identify themselves as members of the ALF use techniques of neutralization to account for and justify criminal actions perpetrated for the purpose of advancing the animal rights cause. The method involved conducting a content analysis of anonymous communiqués written by the perpetrators of various animal rights-related crimes.

The first step was to become fully acquainted with the nature of the animal rights movement. Several sources advocating (Best and Nocella 2004; Newkirk 1992) and denouncing (Oliver 1999; Workman 2003) the animal rights movement were examined. Other scholarly secondary sources especially useful included works by Finsen and Finsen (1994), Guither (1998), Jasper and Nelkin (1992), Pluhar (1995), Rudacille (2001), Singer (1975), and Regan (1983). The animal rights movement literature was examined, including essays posted by animal rights advocates in the online publications *No Compromise* (www.nocompromise.org/) and *Bite Back Magazine* (www.directaction.info/). Steven Best and Anthony Nocella's (2004) *Terrorists or Freedom Fighters?: Reflections on the Liberation of Animals* is a collection of essays that span the spectrum of animal rights thinking, and was especially useful in illuminating the mindset of animal rights activists.

After becoming fully acquainted with the ideology and actions of the animal rights movement, documents for the content analysis were collected. The sole interest was in those animal rights activists who actually perpetrate crimes (remembering that the animal rights movement is quite broad, and includes many people who do not commit crimes, and denounce those who do). As most criminal animal rights activists remain unidentified and are difficult to access for obvious reasons, the method here involved the examination of anonymous communiqués from individuals who claimed responsibility for a documented criminal event. This was a purposive sample of documents written by self-proclaimed members of the ALF who claimed credit for various crimes—a non-reactive method of obtaining the thoughts of the target subjects. Two-hundred and thirty-four communiqués were gathered from the website of the North American ALF Press Office (NAALFPO) at <http://www.animalliberationpressoffice.org/communiques/>. The website listed a physical office for the press office in California, as well as a phone and fax number. In a section of the main page of the NAALFPO website there was a link titled “Press Office Directive,” where the following statement was posted:

The NAALFPO was founded to communicate the actions, strategies, and philosophy of the animal liberation movement to the media and the public. Many of these actions are illegal under a current societal structure that fails to recognize the rights of non-human animals to live free of suffering, but validates and promotes the “right” of industries to do whatever they want to animals for profit or research. . . . Since animal liberation actions either go unreported in the media or are uncritically vilified as “violent” and “terrorist” with no attention paid to the suffering that industries and individuals gratuitously inflict on animals, NAALFPO seeks to clarify the motivation and nature of actions taken in defense of animals. The Press Office also tries to promote a historical, social, and philosophical context for an objective understanding of the nature and motivation of illegal

direct actions taken on behalf of captive animals. (<http://www.animalliberationpressoffice.org/> accessed April 6, 2007)

The communiqués were gathered on November 12, 2008. All of the communiqués posted at the above-referenced website were downloaded and two copies printed to paper—they ranged in date from April 21, 2004 to November 9, 2008. Some of the communiqués were brief, and included only a few sentences describing the criminal event. However, many of the communications posted to the website provided much additional information, including stated reasons for committing the act. Of course there was no way to prove that the posted communiqués were actually written by the individuals who committed the given crime. Many, but not all, of the communiqués were partially validated by independent press accounts reporting the criminal incidents. Details of the crimes included with the communiqués—including, in some cases, photographs—and the professionally maintained NAALFPO website suggest that the communiqués were authentic (actually written and posted by the perpetrators).

Before attempting to practice code, we set out to ensure that both coders (the principal investigator and a student assistant) understood and agreed on the nature of the various techniques of neutralization identified in the literature review. Without consulting one another, we wrote down a general statement for each of the techniques meant to embody the justification being made. We then wrote a second statement for each technique, this one based on *what we thought* an animal rights activists would say. Our statements based on what we thought an animal rights activist would say were derived from our review of the previously cited animal rights literature, especially the online “zines” which serve as a voice for the movement. The following statements are representative of those independently generated.

Denial of Responsibility

General: It’s not my fault. I commit crime because I had a troubled childhood.

Specific: It’s not my fault I break into labs to free animals. The profit-driven capitalist economic system shapes my behavior.

Denial of Injury

General: Maybe what I did was criminal, but no one got hurt.

Specific: So I torched a McDonald’s—that won’t even dent their bottom line.

Denial of Victim

General: Yes, I committed the crime, but he deserved it.

Specific: Bio-medical researchers torture defenseless animals—kicking their ass seems like a pretty mild response to me.

Condemnation of Condemners

General: I’m not the bad guy, the abusive and corrupt criminal justice system is where you find the real crooks.

Specific: The Government calls us domestic terrorists while they support corporations that rape the natural world and murder helpless animals.

Appeal to Higher Loyalties

General: The gang is my family—I sell drugs to support my family.

Specific: The mission of the Animal Liberation Front to free animal slaves is more important than obeying the law.

Defense of Necessity

General: I had no choice—if I didn't steal, my children would starve.

Specific: Factory farming is just as bad as the Jewish Holocaust—we have no choice, the animals must be liberated!

Metaphor of the Ledger

General: Yes, I violated the law, but look at all of the charitable work I've done over the years.

Specific: Yes, I burned down a university laboratory, but I've also done a large amount of charitable work in my community.

Denial of the Justice or Necessity of the Law

General: Smoking marijuana is harmless and punishes nonviolent individuals unfairly.

Specific: A law that sanctions the slaughter of sentient beings is immoral—the violation of such a law cannot be wrong.

Claim That Everybody Does It/Diffusion of Guilt

General: Who doesn't speed—why should I feel bad?

Specific: What we do in the Animal Liberation Front is no different than the actions of Nazi resisters, architects of the Underground Railroad, or the Sons of Liberty at the Boston Tea Party.

Claim of Entitlement

General: After years of slaving for this company, I have a right to steal a few office supplies.

Specific: The McDonalds' corporation misled me for years about the true nature of factory farming—I think I have a right to bust a few windows.

Justification by Comparison

General: Throwing a gum wrapper out the car window is nothing compared to the damage caused by violent criminals.

Specific: Sure, I vandalized a Burger King, but I'm not out there killing people.

Postponement

General: I'll think about the consequences of my crime later.

Specific: When I'm involved in a direct action against an animal industry, I worry about right versus wrong later.

We compared our statements, and after some discussion, agreed that we understood the cognitive underpinnings of each technique. During this preliminary exercise, we also noted that for the category of "everybody does it/diffusion of guilt," an ALF activist could not realistically claim that "everybody does" what they do; however, the tradition of animal rights activists in

comparing themselves to civil liberties protestors led us to believe that justifications by ALF activists using the technique of “diffusion of guilt” was possible. Since the cognitive principle is essentially the same—whether one says “everybody does it” or simply compares oneself to specific individuals or groups, guilt is neutralized through diffusion to others. Therefore, we agreed to maintain “everybody does it/diffusion of guilt” as a single category.

At this point we agreed that the twelve categories/techniques were mutually exclusive, but noted that similarities increased the potential for coder error. For example, it was necessary to carefully delineate between the categories “condemnation of condemners,” “diffusion of responsibility,” and “justification by comparison.” When activists condemn the condemners, responsibility for wrongdoing is diffused to other persons or entities. However, condemning the condemners involves pointing out the wrongs (real or perceived) of those who specifically denounce the activist, while diffusion of responsibility entails pointing out that others—not *condemners*, but persons or entities perceived by the activist to be involved in activities *similar* to their own—engage in like conduct (and may even be praised for that conduct). Meanwhile, justification by comparison, while again spreading around feelings of guilt by comparing one’s own activities with the actions of others, reduces feelings of guilt by suggesting one’s actions are not as harmful as the behavior of those involved in actions *dissimilar* to one’s own. For example, activists might say something like:

They call us terrorists, yet fur farmers torture and murder innocent animals for profit—condemnation of the condemners.

We are no different than freedom fighters in the American Revolution. The Sons of Liberty destroyed British tea in contravention of the law, and are hailed as heroes!—diffusion of responsibility.

Sure, we burn down buildings, but it’s not like we’re out there killing people—justification by comparison.

With all three techniques, guilt is diffused by comparing one’s actions to the actions of others, but in each case the finger-pointing is at a different class of individuals.

Continuing with our pre-coding discussions, we agreed that while it would place at greater risk inter-coder reliability, the communiqués should be examined for both manifest and latent content—to code for manifest content alone would possibly deprive us of the richness of the data. For example, if a communiqué author called a factory farmer a “scum-sucking asshole,” this would not manifestly point to “denial of victim,” yet one might reasonably conclude that there is a latent meaning attached to calling someone a vile name (that the victim *deserved* to have his farm operation damaged—thus, “denial of victim”).

Another issue we examined in our pre-coding discussion of neutralization techniques was the possibility of including a new technique not previously identified in the neutralization theory literature. After reading hundreds of pages of essays published in “zines” such as *No Compromise* and *Bite Back Magazine*, the researcher concluded that there was a consistent theme (justification) running through the animal rights community: the notion that “direct action” to liberate animals was justified because it served a higher moral law or principle. Since this notion was so prominent, and did not seem to fit with any of the established

neutralizations/justifications, we decided to include a new category of “appeal to a higher moral principle” in the coding exercise. The following statements embody the proposed technique:

General: Breaking a man-made law is not wrong when the action serves a higher moral principle.

Specific: Attacking animal butchers furthers animal rights—a cause that is morally superior to laws that serve only human animals.

It should be noted that in previous research “appeal to a higher moral law” was cited, but was included as a component of the “appeal to higher loyalty” technique (De Young 1988; Liddick 2006). However, committing a crime because of loyalty to a group, and stating that one committed a crime because it served a higher moral principle, while related ideas, seem to be two distinct and separate notions—one cites loyalty to a concrete object (a group of people), while the other espouses adherence to an abstract belief. Another area of potential overlap involved the technique “denial of the justice or necessity of the law.” But with the proposed technique “appeal to a higher moral law,” the actor may perceive the man-made law to be just or unjust, necessary or unnecessary, and believe in any case that a higher principle supersedes the existing law. In sum, we decided that it was indeed appropriate to add a category of “appeal to a higher moral law.”

With the addition of our proposed technique, we had thirteen nominal categories to be used for coding. As there could be additional neutralizations/accounts for criminal behavior not identified in the literature, and in the interest of exhaustiveness, we decided to include a category of “other” (for a total of fourteen categories).

All of the previous activity was a prerequisite to the construction of our codebook, the next step in our method. Our understanding of the neutralization techniques as posited in the academic literature, the general and specific statements we produced as a preliminary exercise, and our in-depth examination of the radical animal rights literature enabled us to construct a list of key words and phrases associated with each category/neutralization technique. Our knowledge of the radical literature coupled with our understanding of the cognitive methods associated with each technique gave us some confidence that we could also identify latent meanings in the messages not specifically identified by the key words and phrases we listed. For example, in addition to our key phrase of “corporations/the government are the real criminals,” any phrase or combination of words that seem to shift blame by denouncing those who condemn the ALF would be coded as “condemnation of condemners.” This process of identifying key words and phrases was completed for each of the categories.

The unit to be coded would be a contiguous statement, anything from a few words to an entire paragraph that, within the context of the given communiqué, communicated an explanation for criminal behavior. We observed that a single sentence could contain several units to be coded. For example, it is entirely conceivable that an activist might say something like “if we don’t stop corporate animal murderers now, this holocaust will cost millions of additional lives.” In this single sentence it would be accurate to code for condemnation of the condemners (diverting attention to evil “animal murderers”) and defense of necessity (if millions of animals are being exterminated, then actions ordinarily considered crimes are necessary and just). On the other hand, we concluded that in order to understand an author’s meaning a unit to be coded could involve a group of sentences, even an entire paragraph. Essentially, the unit to be coded would be the minimum number of words necessary to comprehend the author’s meaning (justification for a criminal action).

Having constructed the codebook, the next step was a pilot study. Because the total number of available communiqués was limited, statements to be coded in the pilot study were selected

from Best and Nocella's (2004) anthology, *Terrorists or Freedom Fighters?* This collection of essays is representative of the diversity of positions in the animal rights movement, from those who advocate legal protest and a vegan lifestyle to others who openly encourage property destruction and violence. A few of the essayists in the Best and Nocella collection are admitted lawbreakers, so we concluded that this material was an appropriate source for practice material. The principal researcher recorded and coded thirty-six statements that were believed to represent neutralization techniques. The student assistant independently coded the statements, with direction to not code any statement he/she did not believe amounted to a neutralization. As it turned out, the student coder believed that all thirty-six statements were neutralizations. Using our fourteen nominal categories, the researchers coded thirty-three of thirty-six statements the same, for a simple percent agreement of 92%.

After discussing the results of the pilot study, we agreed that our codebook was adequate, and that the time had arrived for the final coding exercise. Each researcher secured an identical hard copy of all two-hundred and thirty-four communiqués, numbered consecutively by date, earliest to most recent. Using a yellow marker, the researchers independently highlighted and coded statements in the communiqués using the fourteen categories. The results were compared, and only those statements that *both* researchers highlighted were used in the study. After throwing out the highlighted statements that were not agreed on, we also coded each of the communiqués as positive or negative for the appearance of a neutralization technique. Frequency distributions and reliability coefficients were calculated, and the results discussed.

RESULTS

After eliminating highlighted statements that were not selected by both coders, the 234 communiqués yielded 190 statements that we believed amounted to neutralizations. Thirty-three of the 234 (14%) communiqués contained more than one statement. The largest number of statements in any one communiqué was six. Including only those statements that both coders highlighted, we found that 139 of 234 (68%) communiqués contained at least one neutralization statement.

With 380 total observations (190 statements/two coders), the most common technique identified was denial of victim (39.7%), followed by appeal to a higher moral principle (23.7%), defense of necessity (15.5%), and appeal to a higher loyalty (15%). Other categories were only rarely observed, and five neutralization techniques were not identified once.

Examples of neutralization statements highlighted and agreed on by both coders follow. We will limit the examples to the most common techniques identified.

The most common category/technique of neutralization identified was "denial of victim." The essence of the technique is that the crime is justified because the victim deserved the attack. Examples include:

[Name of victim] you need to watch your back because next time you are in the operating room or walking to your office you just might be facing injections into your eyes like the primates, you sick twisted fuck.

For their ways of torturing and killing our animal brothers in their factory farms they deserve to feel terror and intimidation by radical activists and actions . . .

Military strength smoke grenades were detonated on the floor of this animal killers abode. [Name of victim] you are a disgusting human being who takes pleasure in the murder of over 50,000 animals a year. You are a target. Sleep light.

You are sick bastards, and if you imprison so much as one monkey to sell to a lab we will make you pay dearly. We are watching you.

[Name of victim and his wife] are the target of rebellion for the vile and evil things he does to primates at UCLA.

The next most common category observed was “appeal to a higher moral principle.” A new technique posited by the author, the idea is that, in certain situations, man-made law is superseded by a higher moral principle. Some examples include:

We are the Animal Rights Militia and one of our principles is to fight against speciesism, which is nothing more than an anthropocentric idea imposed on the human animal over all those other species that live around them.

It’s time for animal rights to move beyond consumer sub-culture, towards an active liberation movement, which threatens the capitalist commoditization of life and the speciesist ideology itself.

These animals are not capitalist commodities to be bought and sold for fashion or vanity, but unique individuals deserving of liberation from human exploitation.

We will not stop since one of our principles is to fight all forms of slavery and exploitation done to our animal brothers and sisters.

That is why as a militant, clandestine group, we put our freedom at stake to avenge and give freedom to other living beings victimized by the ego-centrism and the degenerated feelings of the human animal influenced by capitalist, neo-liberal globalization.

“Defense of necessity” was also a common technique identified in the communiqués. If the rationale of the communiqué authors was not always explicit, latent meaning could be readily discerned (in the judgment of the coders). This justification suggests that the consequences of not breaking the law are a greater evil than the crime committed. Examples follow:

Our aim in liberating animals should be obvious. Giving them a new life free from the hell that is the LSU ACF [Louisiana State University’s “Animal Cruelty Facility”—a research laboratory].

Our efforts stop the holocaust of animals.

These three are attempting to open a primate holding prison in Richland (PA) before sending the captured primates off to animal labs to be tortured and killed.

Animal lives depend on our action!

... to rescue our brothers and sisters from a savage, inhumane and unspeakable death.

Another common technique identified was “appeal to a higher loyalty.” With this technique, the authors of the communiques state that loyalty to some group or person is more important than strict adherence to the law. Some examples follow:

This action was done in absolute solidarity with all of those forced to flee in order to escape the state’s repression, and most of all for Peter [an imprisoned animal rights activist].

We’d like to dedicate this action to the SHAC 7. Stay strong brothers and sisters, the fight goes on!

Through this communiqué we also want to thank and send a fighting embrace to all companeros internationally speaking that have shown us support . . .

This action is dedicated to the memory of [name of former prisoner and animal rights activist] and to all animal rights prisoners.

This action was carried out in solidarity with [name of animal activist and prisoner], who recently began year seven of his twenty-three year sentence, and all others who refuse to compromise in defense of our earth.

Having provided frequency distributions and examples of neutralization statements, the issue of inter-coder reliability must be addressed. In coding for the fourteen neutralization categories, the coders agreed on 154 of 190 statements, yielding a raw percent agreement of 81%. However, simple percent agreements, however compelling the numbers may be, tell us nothing about the degree to which the coders’ agreement was due to mere chance. A statistic that corrects for chance agreement and takes into account differences in coders’ distributions is Cohen’s *kappa*. We calculated this reliability coefficient as .75. Another statistic, Krippendorff’s *alpha*, takes into account chance agreement and the magnitude of the misses, adjusting for the level at which the variable is measured (in the present case, the nominal level). We calculated Krippendorff’s *alpha* as .74.

Unfortunately, there are no common standards when it comes to an acceptable level of inter-coder reliability. Neuendorf (2002) reports that Cohen’s *kappa* of .75+ indicates excellent agreement beyond chance. For Krippendorff’s *alpha*, Krippendorff (2004) suggests accepting with confidence a figure of .80 or higher, states figures between .67 and .80 should be viewed with caution, and recommends figures below .67 be discarded as unreliable.

DISCUSSION

The animal rights movement is quite broad, and while the underlying notion that animals are being mistreated for economic gain is consistent throughout, the issue of how to remedy the problem is a major point of controversy (Best and Nocella 2004). Many activists disavow all criminal actions, citing Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Others argue that the “holocaust” of animal abuse must be stopped by any means necessary (including arson and violent attacks against people). Still others favor criminal actions, but only those that pose no threat to life. Among those who favor criminal actions, there seems to be a broad consensus that perpetrating crimes to liberate animals is no crime at all, and is absolutely necessary, moral, and just. In fact, criminal animal rights activists ostensibly see themselves as “good people,” waging a moral crusade. And yet, based on a review of the

radical animal rights literature and the analysis of communiqués written by activists, the perpetrators of animal rights crimes go to great lengths to explain and justify their behavior, suggesting a neutralization of guilt feelings. As such, and because animal rights activists do seem to view themselves as “good people”—violating societal norms in only certain narrowly prescribed situations—the application of neutralization theory seems appropriate.

Two-thirds (68%) of the communiqués contained at least one statement the researchers agreed amounted to a neutralization technique. The calculation of inter-coder reliability coefficients yielded generally acceptable numbers, leading us to conclude with some confidence that animal rights activists who perpetrate crimes do use techniques of neutralization.

The behavior and reasoning of animal rights activists, in addition to being at least partially explained by neutralization theory, may also comport with other explanations of deviance typically associated with the neutralization perspective. Sutherland’s (1955) differential association theory, within which neutralization theory is couched, seems to be consistent with the analysis of the animal rights movement presented here. For example, the repetition of specific rationales for norm violations among the authors of the anonymous communiqués, as well as similarities between the writings of “aboveground” ideological leaders and the language used by “underground” activists who actually violate norms, suggest that the criminal behaviors were indeed learned through interactions with others. Moreover, the observed feature of ALF “cells” (groups of two to five activists) who perpetrate criminal actions suggests the learning processes occur, at least in part, within intimate personal groups (Sutherland and Cressey 1978). Based on the specific language/neutralizations used in the communiqués (and in the activist literature), it is likewise plausible to surmise that the “specific direction of motives and drives” present among ALF activists involved a process wherein definitions of legal codes as favorable to norm violation outweighed those definitions unfavorable to a violation of norms (Sutherland and Cressey 1978:80–82).

As a point of theoretical distinction, it is also important to emphasize that the language used by animal rights activists indicates that the crimes perpetrated were explicitly situational—ostensibly, ALF activists do not normally approve of property destruction, or threats and violence against persons. This indicates that among the subjects of interest, there is no inversion of societal norms (as suggested by subculture theories—see Cohen 1955). Rather, as suggested by Sykes and Matza (1961), the deviant behaviors of animal rights activists were likely shaped by “subterranean values” that do not necessarily run counter to established norms—for example, the animal rights value of reducing or eliminating pain and suffering is certainly not inconsistent with mainstream societal norms. It likewise seems reasonable to posit that members of the ALF experienced a process of norm *erosion*, where their commitment to rules of conduct was weakened, thus enabling criminal behavior *in certain situations* (Reckless 1961). Similarly, one may reasonably conclude that as norms were eroded (but not effaced or inverted), the subjects of the study likely *drifted* back and forth between norm acceptance and norm violation, as dictated by the circumstances (Matza 1964).

Theoretical contextualization aside, another point of interest is the “new” technique of neutralization tentatively identified in this study. Based on the results, it is tempting to suggest that “appeal to a higher moral principle” be accepted as a category of neutralization. However, as Table 1 demonstrates, there was a significant discrepancy between the coders in identifying this proposed neutralization. In addition, it must be acknowledged that there was the potential for a subconscious bias (not inevitable, perhaps, but certainly possible that we found so many statements fitting our proposed category because we *wanted to*). Upon further reflection, it is possible

TABLE 1
Frequency of Neutralization Techniques

	<i>Coder A</i>	<i>Coder B</i>	%
Denial of responsibility	1	0	.3
Denial of injury	0	1	.3
Denial of victim	77	74	39.7
Condemnation/condemners	10	4	3.7
Appeal to higher loyalty	29	28	15
Defense of necessity	39	20	15.5
Metaphor of the ledger	0	0	0
Denial of law/unjust law	3	4	1.8
Diffusion of Guilt	0	0	0
Entitlement	0	0	0
Justification by comparison	0	0	0
Postponement	0	0	0
Appeal to higher principle	31	58	23.7
Other	0	0	0
	190	190	100%

that this may not be a “new” technique after all, but is simply a variant of “appeal to a higher loyalty.” Although the communiqués of animal rights activists did seem to indicate a distinction between the two—those who appealed to a higher loyalty justified their actions by proclaiming loyalty to a specific *group* with which they identified, while statements that seemed to suggest appeal to a higher moral principle cited adherence to an abstract *belief*—it must be acknowledged that the cognitive processes may have been quite similar. After all, in either case the subjects were essentially claiming that they did not violate norms for their own benefit, while thinking that one should remain loyal to friends or certain groups is itself a *belief*. In sum, there is some doubt as to whether the two categories are, in fact, mutually exclusive: researchers should proceed with caution, and choose to use “appeal to a higher moral principle” as a distinct category of neutralization only after careful consideration.

A long standing debate among neutralization researchers has been whether or not neutralizations actually precede criminal behavior—a central element of the theory as originally formulated by Sykes and Matza (1957). The observation that ALF activists do in fact use neutralization techniques, coupled with the ideological motivation underlying ALF crimes, allows the researcher to posit what may be viewed as a significant finding relative to this point.

The virtual impossibility of establishing empirically whether neutralizations precede behaviors has ostensibly been identified as a reason to shunt the debate on this issue to the periphery (Maruna and Copes 2005). However, in a comprehensive review of the neutralization literature over the last fifty years, I believe Maruna and Copes misinterpret the concept of neutralizations when they say “how can one neutralize something before they have done it?” (p. 221). Since the “it” in this statement apparently references the *crime* committed, the error becomes apparent—according to neutralization theory, criminals do not neutralize an *action or behavior*, they neutralize *norms* by developing cognitive justifications for the crime (essentially, *thoughts* neutralize other *thoughts*). In any event, the present study sheds light on this issue, and casts some doubt on the position of Maruna and Copes (2005) that neutralization theory has little or no value in examining criminal etiology.

If we accept the present findings that ALF activists use techniques of neutralization to justify criminal actions, and *assume* that ALF activists are motivated by a particular *ideology*, then logic allows us to conclude that neutralizations must be formulated *prior to the criminal action*. While it is certainly possible (if not probable) that the communiqués used in this study were written after the fact, it does not seem likely that the *neutralizations* contained in the messages were formulated in the minds of activists after the associated crimes were committed. Would a self-identified member of the ALF specifically target a research laboratory for arson because animals were being used in experiments, and *then* determine that the researchers were immoral, and that the arson was necessary to save animals? No, logic dictates that ALF activists justify, in their own minds, their actions prior to the criminal behavior.

If motive precedes action, and the motive is formed by a specific ideology, *and* justifications (neutralizations) for an action are part of that *ideology*, then the justifications/neutralizations must precede the action. While this conclusion is admittedly not as strong as if the thoughts of activists had somehow been recorded prior to the crimes, I believe this study is, nonetheless, quite suggestive. Of course I must concede that this conclusion about temporal order is correct only if one accepts the underlying assumption that ALF activists are indeed motivated by a radical ideology. Also, my belief that neutralizations occur prior to crimes committed by *some* ideologically motivated criminals says nothing about *non-ideologically motivated* crime. I also recognize that the neutralizations contained in the communiqués may be simply propaganda intended for an audience—there is simply no way to be sure that the motives expressed in the communiqués were related to the *actual* reasons driving the observed behaviors (a weakness also inherent to survey research generally). Still, coupled with Al-Khattar's (2003) observations of neutralization techniques used by religious terrorists (who are also motivated by an ideology), it may be fair to say that the long standing debate about the temporal order of neutralizations and crimes has been illuminated.

In closing, it is necessary to stress the limitations of the findings—this study tells us nothing about crime that is not motivated by an ideology, and does not begin to address crucial issues such as norm erosion and the inculcation of norms. What is significant is this: for some criminals (those motivated by an ideology), it seems reasonable to conclude that neutralization techniques are formulated and applied *prior* to the criminal act, and may thereby enable criminal behavior to some (largely unmeasured) extent.

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