

Holiday Revelry and Legal Control of Fireworks: A Study of Neutralization in Two Normative Contexts

Timothy Buzzell
Baker University

ABSTRACT

Over 40 years ago Sykes and Matza suggested that holidays create “circumstances” of “periodic anomie” in which adherence to the law may be suspended by otherwise conventional persons. No research to date has studied this argument. One holiday “circumstance” that may foster minor criminality is Independence Day in the United States and the associated use of consumer fireworks. This study reports on the results of a survey of 145 patrons at fireworks stores in two communities. Subjects were asked to indicate agreement with nine techniques of neutralization. Persons living in a community where fireworks had recently been criminalized reported higher levels of agreement with some neutralization measures than persons in a community where fireworks were legal. The study also found differences in age, degree of social attachments, and neutralization. The results are discussed in light of recent theorizing about accounts for deviant behavior (Scott and Lyman 1968; Lyman 2000; Fritche 2002) and the role of holidays in fostering deviance.

KEYWORDS: neutralization; accounts; holidays; fireworks.

Holidays and associated rituals and celebrations include behaviors that are by design out of the ordinary, expressions of misrule rather than rule. These occasions are moments when the dynamics of social control are altered, shifting from normative to acceptable non-normative acts. The principle argument of social control theories of crime is that the otherwise law-abiding individual is, for various reasons, freed from the norms of society (Durkheim 1951 [1897], 1965 [1912]; Sykes and Matza 1957; Matza and Sykes 1961; Hirschi 1969). In their early analysis of neutralization, Matza and Sykes (1961) suggested that holiday contexts may create unique social conditions that foster a relaxing of social controls. In their original description of “subterranean values,” they suggested that middle class values included an “element of adventure” especially associated with holiday observances. Specifically, holidays create unique:

circumstances in which conventional canons of conduct are interpreted rather loosely. In fact, most societies seem to provide room for Saturnalias in one form or another, a sort of periodic anomie in which thrill-seeking is allowed to emerge. In other words, the middle class citizen may seem like a far cry from the delinquent on the prowl for “thrills” but they both recognize and share the idea that “thrills” are worth pursuing and often with the same connotation of throwing over the traces of opposing “fun” to the routine (716).

Given this, there is reason to hypothesize that the “periodic anomie in which thrill seeking is allowed” may lead to forms of deviant behavior including possible violations of criminal law.

The study presented here is designed to address two significant gaps in current criminological research. First, no research reported to date has examined the unique normative context created by holidays as suggested by Sykes and Matza over 40 years ago. Second, no research has been reported on what would be considered a “public order crime” (Clinnard, Quinney and Wildeman 1994; Miethe and McCorkle 2001) – illegal use of fireworks. Specifically, this study examines the use of neutralization techniques by patrons at local fireworks retail outlets in two communities with contrasting normative/legal environments: one where fireworks are legal to use, and one where fireworks use was recently banned by local ordinance. While the study does not report on criminal behavior per se, it does examine the normative conditions identified in previous research as precursors to criminal behavior. The analysis begins with a discussion of fireworks use and then considers the ritual of holiday fireworks use in context of current research on neutralization theory. This is followed by an overview of the methods used to test a number of hypotheses related to justifications (neutralization techniques) for fireworks use. The results of a survey of patrons at fireworks retail outlets are presented, and conclusions related to holiday normative/legal contexts and research in criminology are offered.

FIREWORKS AND PUBLIC ORDER

The thrill seeking associated with holidays is found in rituals and celebrations associated with a particular date on the calendar, or seasonal observance. Revelry is a part of this observance, and has historically been characterized by behaviors such as drinking, costuming, role-reversals, making noise, and feasts. This study operationalizes holiday revelry as use of small pyrotechnic devices, which are incorporated into holiday revelry for a number of different celebrations (Brock 1949). This form of revelry is commonly part of the U.S. Independence Day celebration (Cohn 1976; Spillman 1997; Travers 1997), although these devices have been used in other holiday contexts (e.g., Christmas in the South, New Year's Eve). There are two patterns in the use of fireworks in Independence Day rituals that are of interest to criminological study. First, the use of consumer class fireworks has increased in the United States especially since 1976, the nation's bicentennial celebration. Second, parallel to this increase in the use has been the expansion of legal controls of fireworks devices at the state and local level, and more recently, by federal law.

Pyrotechnic devices became available to U.S. citizens for private use during the late 1800's and were sold commercially through the early 1920's (Smilor 1980). Use of consumer class pyrotechnic devices has increased in the last 20 years, far beyond sales in the early part of the century. Consumer class fireworks currently include small pyrotechnic devices containing less than 1.4 grams of gunpowder. Popular or common items used in holiday rituals are known as sparklers, fountains, roman candles, and firecrackers. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) has followed the increased use in consumer class fireworks since the nation's bicentennial and more recently the millennium celebration (Greene and Joholske 2003). The American Pyrotechnics Association (APA) reports that "fireworks use has more than doubled since 1990" (APA website Press Release June 24, 2003). The fireworks industry in the United States reported record revenues in 2002 of \$725 billion mostly due to the increased sales of consumer class fireworks.

At the same time, 43 states have either banned the use of consumer class fireworks, limited the kinds of fireworks that can be used, or limited the dates for use of fireworks. County and city ordinances commonly place greater restrictions on fireworks use. Violation of these state and local laws is typically treated as a misdemeanor. While no data exists on the number of persons who have been arrested for violation of state or local fireworks laws, various sources report a link between injuries and "illegal" fireworks (Rivara and Mueller 1987, Committee on Injury and Poison Prevention 2001). In a study of fireworks injuries in a large urban setting, Smith, Knapp, Barnett and Shields

(1996) claimed that "two thirds of the [fireworks] injuries resulting in hospitalization are associated with illegal fireworks" (2), although what constituted "illegal fireworks" was not formally defined in the study. The Consumer Product Safety Commission reported that 2% (1.3% in the 2001 report) of the injuries in 2002 were from "illegal firecrackers" (12), which involved devices that apparently exceeded legal gunpowder limits (e.g., M-80's and cherry bombs), or homemade devices. With the growth in fireworks sales and use, the CPSC has reported more fireworks related injuries through the 1980's and then declines in the mid-1990's. Currently, the annual injury rate from consumer class fireworks is about 3 to 4 persons per 100,000 population or 8,000 to 10,000 injuries per year.

INDEPENDENCE DAY REVELRY AND NEUTRALIZATION

Neutralization theory (Sykes and Matza 1957; Matza and Sykes 1961; Matza 1964) would suggest that holidays create on one hand "periodic anomie" around celebration and ritual. This anomie becomes more demarcated when a community criminalizes behaviors that traditionally or historically have been associated with the holiday ritual. This kind of situation creates a unique normative/legal context. We can expect to find individuals in some areas using fireworks on Independence Day, perhaps as a public proclamation of conventional holiday ritual but also in violation of state and local laws. Ultimately, we are interested in whether individuals abide by the newly created laws. Do persons who suddenly find themselves associated with deviant (criminal) acts distance themselves from the behavior, or reject the newly imposed legal controls? Research on justifications and accounts for deviant acts may suggest an answer.

One argument consistent with Sykes and Matza is that the holiday will create a normative expectation that may conflict with legal expectations, and as a result persons will develop justifications for deviant behaviors. The concept of "accounts" originally proposed by Scott and Lyman (1968) has more recently emerged as an explanation for how persons manage self-image and stigma when engaged in apparent lapses in conventionality (Durkin 2000; Lyman 2000; Zelditch 2001; Fritsche 2002). Scott and Lyman (1968) suggested that an examination of "talk" found in social rituals of many kinds would reveal "the timbers of fractured sociation" (46). Much like Sykes and Matza argued that holiday normative situations are outside the routine, Scott and Lyman argued that accounts appear in situations of unconventionality, not "when people engage in routine, common-sense behavior" (47). Specifically, the holiday reveler who has compromised conventionality is likely to use an "account...a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or

untoward behavior” (46). Revelry that reaches the point of being perceived as deviant, therefore, is likely to be surrounded by “accounts.”

Accounts and Deviance

Recent theorizing now suggests that there are many kinds of accounts (Fritsche 2002; Durkin 2000; Lyman 2000). Neutralization techniques are one type of accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968) called justifications, or “accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it” (Sheley 1980:47). The appropriateness of this concept to the study of revelry that becomes deviant or criminal is found in the use of this particular form of talk to rectify or bridge the apparent deviant to the conventional community. This is done through justification: “to assert its positive value in the face of a claim to the contrary . . . [and] recognize a general sense in which the act is impermissible, but claim that the particular occasion permits or requires the very act” (51). Using fireworks on Independence Day is part of a holiday tradition. The use of fireworks has been deemed impermissible in some states and communities, yet some holiday revelers would claim that the occasion of Independence Day permits the ritual. As communities move to make aspects of fireworks use illegal, persons caught up in the occasion contrary to the law may assert justifications for these adjudged untoward or deviant acts.

Neutralization according to Sheley (1980) is “the process by which individuals extend or distort socially accepted conditions for norm violation in order to deviate without forfeiting allegiance to the norm” (50). Sykes and Matza initially described (1957) five techniques individuals use to neutralize the effects of conventional norms and law: (1) denial of responsibility, (2) denial of the victim, (3) denial of injury, (4) condemnation of the condemners, and (5) appeal to higher loyalties. Research on accounts has also revealed a number of additional techniques of neutralization (Lyman 2000; Fritsche 2002; Minor 1981; Coleman 1987; Nelson and Lambert 2001) including: (6) the metaphor of the ledger, (7) claims of normality of the behavior, (8) denial of negative intent, and (9) claim of relative acceptability of the behavior (see Lanier and Henry 2004). The metaphor of the ledger is used when individuals want to show that “on balance” they are normal law abiding persons. Similarly, claims of relative acceptability of the act focuses on pointing out the acts of others, which in comparison, are to be seen as more serious than the act in focus. The claim to normality focuses on explanations for one’s behavior by suggesting “everyone is doing it.” Denial of negative intent is a technique used to also diminish responsibility and suggest that no harm was intended by the behavior.

Neutralization as Accounts

While Sheley (1980) and others (Minor 1981; Hindelang 1970) found that persons who use these techniques do not necessarily demonstrate a pre-existing conformity or agreement with conventional norms, other research has shown that this is the case for some committing various criminal acts, such as check forgery (Lemert 1953), shoplifting (Cameron 1964), minor traffic offenses (Taylor 1990), violent acts (Agnew 1994), and white collar crimes (Coleman 1987). Moreover, neutralization seems particularly relevant to accounts associated with minor law breaking. Studies of the connection between neutralization and frequency of offending confirm this pattern, suggesting that minor offenders are for the most part individuals who have effectively checked or inhibited motivations not to deviate (Mitchell and Dodder 1983; Dodder and Hughes 1993; McCarthy and Stewart 1998). Neutralization has also been linked to shoplifting (Cromwell and Thurman, 2003), minor property theft (Hollinger 1991; Dabney 1995), and poaching wild animals (Eliason and Dodder 1999). Clinard, Quinney, and Wildeman (1994) conclude that minor crimes are typified by the use of justifications for otherwise conventional persons who have drifted into episodic criminal behaviors.

In spite of neutralization theory’s success in explaining a wide variety of deviant behaviors, there are a number of limitations encountered in much of this research (Moyer 2001; Maruna 2003). In addition to challenging the critical assumption behind the use of neutralization (that persons are conventional to begin with), Sheley (1980) argued that most research on neutralization suffers from problems of causal ordering. Agnew (1994) highlights methodological issues in the literature such as imprecise operationalizations of concepts that overlap with concepts from social bonding theory, namely belief in the moral order (Hirschi 1969), and over reliance upon cross-sectional studies which in essence fail to measure a two-stage process (neutralization first, and then drift to deviance). However, Agnew (1994) calls for research into not only the relationship between neutralization and types of crime, but also the exploration of neutralization in patterns related to general deviance. He suggests that neutralization may affect the relationship between deviance and broader normative structures, and deviance promoting acts. Moreover, as the notion of accounts (Scott and Lyman 1969; Lyman 2000) suggests, neutralization techniques may constitute “ex post facto” justifications of deviant behavior. This may be consistent with Agnew’s observation that the relationship between deviance and normative structures is found in the frequency or situations where persons use these accounts. This need not render research on neutralization an empirical dead-end as some suggest (Maruna 2003; Sheley 1980). Rather it suggests that in

the study of deviance, varying social interactions and structural normative contexts may produce different individual reflections on behavior. Holidays are one such normative structural context.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Heltsey and Calhoun (2002) studied how mothers of children in children's beauty contests used neutralization techniques in a period following the JonBenet Ramsey murder investigation. They suggested that in the period studied "pageant mothers became temporary deviants" (85). In their project, interview results were available from both before and after this period of temporary deviance creation, allowing for contrasts in how parents managed the stigma of the newly emerging deviant category. Following their argument that recent events create a normative context, this analysis set out to study the responses of individuals purchasing fireworks in a community where fireworks use had recently been banned, and contrasted these responses with those of persons in a community where no ban exists. This survey allowed for a comparison of persons in two normative/legal contexts related specifically to fireworks use and the use of the techniques of neutralization. A number of hypotheses were tested.

Sykes and Matza originally hypothesized that holidays constitute a unique social structural condition "in which conventional canons of conduct are interpreted rather loosely" (1961: 716). The implicit argument here is that persons claim adherence to conventional norms which subsequent research has found is a precursor to using the techniques of neutralization (Hindelang 1974; Sheley 1980; Agnew 1994; Copes 2003). This study predicts that persons in the community with newly created restrictions on the ritual use of fireworks will report weaker claims to convention studied here as following fireworks laws. The convention of law-abiding is broken. These persons will report higher agreement with the claim that "it's alright to break local fireworks laws if you can get away with it." The holiday has "loosened" a belief in following the law. Individuals in the community where fireworks use has been restricted will find the potential for violating fireworks laws as a "thrill worth pursuing." Persons in communities where fireworks have not been restricted would be indifferent to this account, or report weaker agreement since legal convention and holiday convention do not appear to be in conflict or raised to a level of cognizance. This study first hypothesizes that:

H1: persons living in a community that has recently restricted fireworks use by law will report weaker claims to conventional norms than persons living in a community where fireworks use is not restricted.

Once the conventionality has been diminished by the holiday, and otherwise normative adherence to laws governing fireworks use has been weakened, persons will readily agree with the use of neutralization techniques as accounts for their potential deviance. The presence of these accounts is expected to be stronger in a community where the "conventional canons of conduct" are compromised than in a community where fireworks have not been restricted by law. Traditionally, research on neutralization has created an index of combined neutralization techniques (Agnew 1994). The accounts framework in contrast gives greater attention to the study of specific, separate techniques of neutralization, as each kind of justification according to Fritsche (2002) is used at different stages in a process of account creation:

H2: persons living in a community that has recently restricted fireworks use by law are more likely to use the techniques of neutralization than persons living in a community where fireworks use is not restricted.

Citizens whose observance of the Fourth of July holiday potentially involves minor law infractions (new law banning fireworks) will be expected to readily use justifications such as the neutralization techniques identified in prior research.

Recent research on neutralization has attempted to clarify observed variations in the use of accounts based on sex, age, social situations, and the need to manage guilt. Some studies report that males are more likely to readily engage in neutralization depending on the type of deviant act being committed (Mitchell, Dodder and Norris 1990; Polding 1995). This may be especially true for fireworks use, which may be more common among males. Prior research on the techniques of neutralization has shown that these techniques are used by both adolescents (Agnew 1994) and adults (Hollinger 1991; Dabney 1995; Nelson and Lambert 2001). As Sheley (1980) observed, "adults are precisely the groups that should require neutralization" (54). Holiday revelry for adults may, however, represent a more dramatic suspension of norms and, thus, justifications for their revelry would mean older persons are more likely to use the techniques of neutralization. Based on this research, this analysis hypothesized that:

H3: males in a community where fireworks have recently been restricted will be more likely to engage in neutralization than females.

H4: older persons in a community where fireworks have recently been restricted will be more likely to engage in neutralization than younger persons.

In response to early tests of the notion that most persons believe in conventional norms to begin with (Minor 1981; Thurman 1984; Agnew 1994), Costello (2000), and Copes (2003) have offered some evidence that persons with greater conventional social attachments use the techniques of neutralization to save face and manage guilt created by the deviant act. Their research found that persons who are “more attached” to conventional social systems, such as attachments to parents, or being employed, married, and educated were related to differences in the use of accounts that included the techniques of neutralization. This is explained by the fact that persons with greater social attachment have more to lose and thus use the techniques of neutralization to assuage guilt or save face. Holiday revelers who leave the routines of these social attachments may find themselves caught up in the pursuit of ritual-organized thrills. Persons who are more enmeshed in mainstream culture may have greater need to save face in light of law breaking revelry and, thus, offer accounts to “rectify or bridge” the deviance. This study hypothesizes that:

H5: persons with more conventional attachments in a community where fireworks have recently been restricted will be more likely to engage in neutralization than persons with fewer conventional attachments.

METHODS

A survey was administered to patrons at fireworks stands in two Midwestern communities in late June and early July, 2003. These locations for the survey were selected based on several criteria. First, local and state fireworks laws were studied in order to determine research settings where there were variations in fireworks laws, and thus community normative/legal contexts. The first survey site selected was in a community which had no legal restrictions on fireworks use. The second survey site was in a community where fireworks use had been “legal” until restrictions were put into place by adoption of a city ordinance just prior to the 2003 Independence Day holiday. Both sites allowed access to a variety of patrons who by virtue of their zip code could be assigned to one of two groups – residing in a community where fireworks were recently restricted, or in a community where fireworks use was not restricted. Permission to conduct the survey was granted by the owners of the retail outlets two weeks prior to the survey. Results of the survey were shared with the owners of each of the establishments.

A 73-item, paper-pencil questionnaire was administered over a two day period at each survey site. Researchers worked in teams of two-to-three and in each six hour survey period approached all patrons who were exiting the fireworks business so as not to interfere

with the outlets’ business, and invited them to voluntarily participate in the study. After respondents completed the questionnaire they were debriefed, told about the goals and intent of the study, and told how to receive final results.

The independent variable in this analysis was classification of each subject as living in a normative/legal context where fireworks use had been restricted or in a normative/legal context where fireworks use was not restricted. This classification was determined by having respondents report their zip code in the survey. The survey included a number of items designed to measure variations in agreement with fireworks laws and use of fireworks in these two normative/legal contexts: claim to conventional norms, agreement with nine techniques of neutralization, sex, age, and social attachment. Measures for each variable are summarized in Table 1. The measures of claim to conventional norms and nine techniques of neutralization were adapted from prior research (Lanier and Henry 2004) as well as that of Sykes and Matza (1957). Agreement with these items (scale of 1 to 5, with 5 as strongly agree) measured readiness by the subject to utilize these forms of justification. Conventional social attachment was measured in an index based on items researched by Copes (2003). To construct the index of social attachment, subjects reported whether they were married, employed, voted, or completed high school.

Tests for significant differences in the means (ANOVA) for these variables from the two survey sites were conducted (N=131). Tests for significant differences in the means (ANOVA) for sex, age, and social attachment were conducted for those from the restricted fireworks community only (n=71).

The design was selected for this study for a number of reasons. First, the design is appropriate to measuring subject agreement with accounts based on past operationalizations of the techniques of neutralization (Hamlin 1988; Agnew 1994). Second, this design strategy allows for a comparison of two communities with different normative/legal contexts related to fireworks use and additional hypothesis testing. Third, this study is the first to examine fireworks use, and as a result survey design allows the researchers to collect a great deal of information quickly and efficiently in two separate communities.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A combined total of 214 persons were approached at the three retail locations, and 145 agreed to complete the survey, for an overall participation rate of 67.7 percent across all sites. It must be recognized that little is known about the 69 non-respondents, and thus like any purposive sample, bias in the responses is possible in the group of subjects studied. Over half of the subjects

were males (61%). The average age of the respondents was 32 years (SD 12.35). Nearly all respondents had completed high school (97%) and over one-third of the respondents had completed college (37%). Most were employed (64%), or were students in high school or college (25%). Half of the respondents were married (50%), had been divorced (5%), or were widowed (5%). This profile was shared with the owners of the retail outlets, who informed the researchers that these characteristics accurately reflected the customer base of their businesses. However, this was a subjective judgment on the part of the retail owners as no marketing data was available for purposes of comparing this purposive sample with other samples.

H1: persons living in a community that has recently restricted fireworks use by law are less likely to claim conventionality to norms than persons living in a community where fireworks use is not restricted.

Subjects were asked if they agreed with the statement that “it’s alright to break fireworks laws even if you can get away with it” to measure their attachment to the conventional norm of law-following. Persons living in the community where fireworks had recently

been restricted reported statistically significant less agreement (M= 2.87, SD 1.39 compared to M 2.14, SD .97; F=11.92, p<.001) with the claim to conventionality. Hypothesis 1 was supported. This suggests that subjects in this normative/legal context agreed with the acceptability of lawbreaking and, thus, were situated to use justifications for violations of fireworks laws.

The fact that persons in the community with recently restricted fireworks use were in greater agreement with the statement that “its alright to break fireworks laws if you can get away with it” than persons in a community with no restrictions may reflect a number of important normative characteristics in the community. One explanation for this is that the recent change in fireworks law for the one community generated opposition to the newly created restriction. Prior to 2003, fireworks use in this community was for the most part unrestricted, save for dates and using bottle rockets, which were prohibited by state law. The willingness to break with the convention of law following was perhaps heightened by the change. In other words, the “thrill seeking” of Independence Day revelry was now limited. Approval of lawbreaking behavior according to Sykes and Matza in this case would reflect the “periodic anomic” associated with the holiday.

Table 1. Operationalizations of Variables.

Variable	Coding
<i>Dependent</i>	
Normative/Legal Context	Respondent lives in 1=restricted firework use context; or 2=nonrestricted fireworks use context
<i>Independent</i>	
Sex	0=Female, 1=Male
Age	In years
Techniques of Neutralization	Scale for each: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree
Claim to conventional norms	It’s alright to break fireworks laws if you can get away with it.
Denial of responsibility	If I were to use fireworks illegally I am responsible.
Denial of injury	Most fireworks people use really don’t hurt anyone.
Denial of victim	If people in my neighborhood are worried about noise or harm from fireworks they should take responsibility to protect themselves or be out of town that evening.
Condemn the condemners police	Police should be more worried about catching other kinds of law violators than those using fireworks.
Condemn the condemners lawmakers	The city or county where I live really should worry about other issues than fireworks use.
Appeal to higher loyalties	Fireworks are ok to use because family/friends enjoy them.
Claim of normality	Even if there are prohibitions against using fireworks, it’s ok because so many people in my neighborhood use them anyway.
Denial of negative intent	Using fireworks is just in good fun.
Claim of relative acceptability	To get ahead in life you sometimes have to do some things that are not right.
<i>Conventional Attachments</i>	
Marital Status	Married=1
Employment	Employed=3, student=2, all others=1
Voting	Voted in last election=1
Education	Education completed: with college=4, some college=3, high school=2, some high school=1
<i>Index of Conventional Attachments</i>	Sum of marital status, employment, voting, and education.

H2: persons living in a community that has recently restricted fireworks use by law will report greater agreement with the techniques of neutralization than persons living in a community where fireworks use is not restricted.

There were differences in agreement with neutralization accounts between the restricted and unrestricted communities. The results in Table 2 show that persons living in the community which recently had restricted fireworks use reported higher agreement with all nine measures of neutralization. Two of nine measures showed statistically significant differences. Subjects in the community which recently restricted use of fireworks reported higher mean agreement with claims that fireworks did not cause real injury ($M = 3.67$; $F=4.16$, $p<.04$). In addition, subjects reported higher agreement with the statement that persons who did not like fireworks should perhaps leave town when they were used ($M = 3.10$; $F=6.15$, $p<.01$). Subjects in this community also reported higher condemnation of the police for catching fireworks violators ($M = 3.99$; $F=3.44$, $p<.07$), although this difference was just over the 0.05 level of significance. Hypothesis two is partially supported.

These results suggest that there are differences in the use of neutralization accounts in these two normative/legal contexts—denial of victims and denial of injury. In his recent reconceptualization of neutralization as accounts, Fritsche (2002) argued that these techniques unfold in a hierarchical path. Persons first condemn the condemners, and as accounts become more elaborate, they assert the denial of injury or harm to others. The fact that subjects in the restricted fireworks context reported statistically significant higher agreement with denial of victim and denial of injury, may indicate that persons in this environment have developed elaborate accounts to be used when

violating fireworks laws. No such elaboration is found in the non-restrictive community. This provides some evidence that holiday context does foster the use of neutralization.

To further examine differences in agreement with the neutralization techniques, the analysis turned to a study of sex, age, and social attachments. Differences in these variables are studied only for the subjects residing in the restricted community since they are hypothesized to be more likely to use accounts in this manner ($n=71$).

H3: males in a community where fireworks have recently been restricted will be more likely to engage in neutralization than females.

Only on technique of neutralization demonstrated statistically significant sex differences between persons living in the restrictive normative/legal context. Males reported higher agreement with the item measuring condemnation of lawmakers ($M = 4.32$, $SD=0.99$). No other sex differences were found (Table 3).

These findings would suggest that fireworks use on Independence Day does not differ by gender. At first glance this is somewhat surprising given the popular notion that males are commonly assumed to be more likely to use fireworks. This is reflected to some extent in fireworks injury reports, which show that males are 4-5 times more likely to be injured (Green and Joholske 2003). Moreover, given the prior research on delinquency and neutralization, differences in male and female uses of these techniques were predicted. One interpretation of the absence of sex differences is that the holiday context of Independence Day may be unique enough to transcend the influences of gender, unlike other criminal contexts examined in prior studies of neutralization.

Table 2. Comparison of Mean (SD) Neutralization Scores in Two Normative/Legal Contexts, 2003 (N=145; combined communities).

Technique of Neutralization	Restrictive		Non-Restrictive		F	Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Condemn lawmakers	3.90	1.17	3.67	1.05	1.43	.23
Condemn police	3.99	1.14	3.60	1.24	3.44	.07
Denial of negative intent	4.21	.90	4.08	.87	.71	.40
Denial of responsibility	4.27	.95	4.19	1.11	.23	.68
Claim of normality	2.93	1.31	2.60	1.11	2.34	.13
Relative acceptability	2.59	1.25	2.54	1.16	.04	.84
Appeal to higher loyalties	3.94	1.03	3.90	.84	.07	.80
Denial of victim	3.10	1.32	2.57	1.10	6.15	.01
Denial of injury	3.67	1.22	3.23	1.18	4.16	.04

Table 3. Comparison of Mean (SD) Neutralization Scores from Restricted Fireworks Community, by Sex, 2003 (n=71).

Technique of Neutralization	Male		Female		F	Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Condemn lawmakers	4.32	.99	3.67	1.21	5.21	.03
Condemn police	4.24	1.01	3.85	1.19	1.94	.17
Denial of negative intent	4.12	1.01	4.27	.84	.42	.52
Denial of responsibility	4.40	.87	4.20	.95	.71	.40
Claim of normality	2.75	1.26	3.02	1.34	.67	.41
Relative acceptability	2.63	1.31	2.57	1.22	.04	.85
Appeal to higher loyalties	4.00	.93	3.91	1.09	.11	.74
Denial of victim	2.96	1.46	3.17	1.25	.41	.52
Denial of injury	3.68	1.07	3.66	1.31	.01	.95

H4: older persons in a community where fireworks have recently been restricted will be more likely to engage in neutralization than younger persons.

A number of age differences were revealed in the analysis of persons studied from the restricted community (n=71). The findings do not support the hypothesized relationship that older persons would be more likely to neutralize in the face of potential violations of fireworks laws. The results in Table 4 agree with five of nine justifications for breaking fireworks laws (two additional measures approached significance but were just under the .10 level). Thus, consistent with prior applications of neutralization theory to the study of youth crime, younger persons appear to be more likely to use these techniques.

Older persons were predicted to be more likely to use accounts in light of potential criminal uses of fireworks since older persons have “more to lose” in the face of accusations of deviance. The fact that younger persons in this study show marked differences in agreement with neutralization techniques is perhaps a reflection of the kind of revelry being studied—fireworks on Independence Day. Again, these results are consistent with fireworks injury reports that show injury rates are higher for younger persons (Rivara and Mueller 1987; Green and Joholske 2003). Moreover, these data may be showing that younger persons have

developed the more elaborate account system as suggested by Fritsche’s (2002) hierarchical model of account giving. In addition, Hagan et al (1998) linked participation in a “party subculture” to youth, which may be reflected in how this holiday is celebrated by young persons. In other words, fireworks use by younger persons may emerge out of a larger subcultural influence that also creates accounts to manage deviance associated with the partying or the ritual.

H5: persons with more conventional attachments in a community where fireworks have recently been restricted will be more likely to engage in neutralization than persons with fewer conventional attachments.

The results reported in Table 5 demonstrate that persons in the restricted community (n=71) with “medium” levels of social attachment report stronger agreement with two techniques of neutralization—relative acceptability, and denial of claims by victims. These findings are perhaps reflective of the previous findings on age in that adults would be more likely to report high levels of attachment, and college aged students and employed high school students, would report medium levels of attachment to conventional activities. Thus more persons under 25 are in the

Table 4. Comparison of Mean (SD) Neutralization Scores from Restricted Fireworks Community, by Age Group, 2003 (n=71).

Technique of Neutralization	25 and Under		Over 25		F	Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Condemn lawmakers	4.42	.88	3.64	1.22	7.66	.01
Condemn police	4.50	.83	3.72	1.19	8.12	.01
Denial of negative intent	4.48	.85	4.09	.91	3.04	.09
Denial of responsibility	4.17	1.13	4.33	.85	.44	.51
Claim of normality	3.71	1.08	2.52	1.24	15.66	.00
Relative acceptability	3.38	1.17	2.17	1.08	18.37	.00
Appeal to higher loyalties	4.25	.94	3.78	1.05	3.33	.07
Denial of victim	4.08	1.10	2.60	1.14	27.84	.00
Denial of injury	3.83	1.15	3.59	1.26	0.59	.45

medium category of attachment as constructed here. The hypothesis is not supported since persons with more attachments to conventional social networks and interactions were predicted to have “more to lose” by the deviance.

Copes (2003) did find variations in the use of certain techniques of neutralization among youthful offenders. He accounted for this by levels of attachment to conventional social ties, such as work and education. The results in this survey confirm similar patterns in a sample of persons participating in a holiday ritual. Certainly persons who are employed will have the financial resources to purchase fireworks, although what may be reflected in the results here are parents purchasing fireworks for their adolescents. Moreover, the medium attachments as defined in this study include “students” suggesting that school links youth to the youth party subculture (Hagan et al. 1998), which teaches how to use accounts like the neutralization techniques. These may be explanations for the differences in social attachment and use if neutralization, and should be addressed in future studies focusing on holiday context and accounts.

A number of factors may limit the generalizability of the results. First, while the purposive sample was deemed appropriate to the selection of patrons at each site, the sample was not random. Second, the number of retail sites used to draw the sample was limited, and sites were not selected based on random sampling. Because two sites were studied here and within 100 miles of one another there may be bias in subject selection. Although the small sample (N=145) was adequate to perform statistical analysis, the non-random nature of selecting subjects and limited geography means that caution should be used in making conclusions about the nature of accounts among holiday revelers using fireworks. Nonetheless, this study represents a first effort in assessing the relationship between Independence Day revelry and accounts for deviant behavior as reported in a survey.

Other limitations are also noted. As mentioned earlier, some controversy exists regarding how the techniques of neutralization have been operationalized in research. Fritsche (2002) has suggested that not only is there overlap in some of these techniques, but embedded within these justifications identified by Sykes and Matza are other forms of accounts. He suggests “referentializations” which may in fact include accounts formerly treated as justifications. Additionally, the survey design limits respondents to reporting strength of agreement with the techniques of neutralization. As a result the behavioral repertoire of how subjects used justifications is not captured. Related to this concern is that the current study was constrained by the fact that illegal behavior was not observed or self-reported as is common to research on neutralization.

CONCLUSION

The analysis here has demonstrated that persons in a community where fireworks were recently restricted agree with justifications for potential law violation during a holiday, namely the techniques of neutralization identified by Sykes and Matza (1957) and others (Coleman 1987; Nelson and Lambert 2001). The results further indicate that persons under 25 years of age report greater agreement with justifications of behavior (neutralization techniques) than older persons. The analysis found no support for the claim that older persons rather than younger persons are more likely to use these justifications in the context of the holiday behavior studied here. Moreover, the results showed mixed support for the claim that persons with greater attachment to conventional social networks and behaviors agreed with the techniques of neutralization. Thus, confirming that “the study of deviance and the study of accounts are intrinsically related” (Scott and Lyman 62). Surprisingly, the data did not support that cultural image of boys being more likely to justify fireworks use than girls. The study has brought a much needed first-attempt at revisiting the concept of holidays

Table 5. Comparison of Mean (SD) Neutralization Scores from Restricted Fireworks Community, by Conventional Attachment, 2003 (n=71).

Techniques of Neutralization	Low		Medium		High		F	Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Condemn lawmakers	4.00	.71	4.47	.99	3.67	1.20	2.78	.07
Condemn police	4.20	.84	4.33	1.11	3.82	1.17	1.21	.31
Denial of negative intent	4.00	.71	4.07	1.22	4.23	.67	.32	.73
Denial of responsibility	4.00	.71	3.86	1.29	4.38	.71	2.01	.14
Claim of normality	2.60	.89	3.40	1.30	2.71	1.27	1.76	.18
Relative acceptability	2.20	.84	3.40	1.24	2.39	1.15	4.46	.02
Appeal to higher loyalties	4.00	.71	4.27	.88	3.84	1.03	1.03	.36
Denial of victim	3.20	.84	3.87	1.41	2.67	1.18	5.31	.01
Denial of injury	3.80	1.10	4.00	.85	3.55	1.20	0.90	.42

as suggested by Sykes and Matza 40 years ago. The study has brought an empirically informed description of the nature of one public order crime not reported as of yet in the literature.

This study has demonstrated that survey design is useful in capturing what Scott and Lyman originally suggested are "situated" accounts based on normative contexts and social structural contexts as well. Norms in time and place are commonly studied in surveys of this nature. Holidays may represent one such context where routines are broken and non-conventional behaviors are not only allowed but in some holiday contexts encouraged in rituals and other expressions. This is similar to the observation made by Sykes and Matza regarding the holiday normative context. Given the type of ritual studied here, holiday revelry in American culture may be affected by age but only as a function of neutralization.

This study has also advanced the argument that justifications may be useful in explaining minor crimes committed by conventional persons. Clinnard, Quinney, and Wildeman (1994) suggested ten years ago that "continued progress in criminology depends greatly on the study of the types of criminal behavior" (v). Similarly, Sheley's (1980) criticism of the neutralization theory argued that more work needs to be done to "determine how, where, and with respect to which offense the mechanism is used" (69). The evidence presented in this project demonstrates the utility of applying the neutralization-as-justification framework to further understanding the potential for minor law breaking.

These preliminary results suggest a number of directions for future research. First, there may be utility in now elaborating accounts of deviance by linking specific techniques of neutralization to certain types of deviance. Typically studies of neutralization have tended to search for all five original techniques identified by Sykes and Matza. Others have identified new techniques. Certain behaviors may be linked to the use of certain techniques at the exclusion of others (Sheley 1980). Prior studies indicate that some techniques may be more significant than others depending on the type of offense (Mitchell and Dodder 1983; Landsheer, Hart and Kox 1994). Minor crimes may be justified differently than major crimes. This may in fact be a condition of the convergence of different normative influences created by holidays and associated rituals and celebrations. Future research may want to examine the role of individual techniques in accounting for minor law violations.

Second, the study of deviance and holiday norms may be useful. Holidays and rituals associated with these societal celebrations and observances may constitute a particular structural source that creates

subterranean convergences and thus, the potential for deviance. As Etzioni has observed (2000), sociology has given little attention to the study of holidays, which is disappointing given their potential linkages to the study of social control and deviance. He proposes that "holidays serve to socialize members of a society as well as to reaffirm their commitments to values, and as such serve to sustain the integration of society" (47). The Fourth of July represents a structural organization of celebration to "reaffirm commitment to values" which are assumed to be those associated with patriotism and nationalism (Spillman 1997). A holiday represents an episodic although cyclical dominant normative environment different from the mundane, daily routines of the rest of the calendar. Holidays represent a different normative context. The subterranean aspects of this are found in the forms of observance or what others have called revelry (Nissenbaum 1998; Travers 1997).

This means thirdly, that greater attention should be given to other types of holiday revelry especially those that might be considered minor deviances or minor crimes. For example, alcohol use during the holidays and related alcohol crimes could be studied, including minor offenses (misdemeanors) or in some cases more serious crimes (manslaughter). Thus, management of a spoiled identity in the holiday context has different forms than management of spoiled identity in other deviant contexts.

The use of accounts through the techniques of neutralization may be fostered by the unique normative conditions of holidays. The results of this analysis provide evidence that those engaged in holiday revelry during a particular holiday use the techniques of neutralization to account for their behaviors. The "anomie in which thrill seeking is allowed" is described by patrons at fireworks stands as just harmless fun. The conditions of the 4th of July celebration which includes fireworks use provide the episodic "throwing over" from conventional to deviant that Sykes and Matza identified over 40 years ago. The study suggests that the current reexamination and development of the accounts framework may be significant to the study of deviance and criminality, especially building on 40 years of research on neutralization.

REFERENCES

- Agnew, Robert. 1994. "The Techniques of Neutralization and Violence." *Criminology* 32(4): 555-580.
- American Pyrotechnics Association. 2003. "APA Anticipates Robust Year for Fireworks Industry." Press Release June 24 [Online]. Available: www.americanpyro.com.

- Brock, Alan St. H. 1949. *The History of Fireworks*. London: George G. Harrap & Co.
- Cameron, Mary Owen. 1964. *The Booster and the Snitch: Department Store Shoplifting*. New York: Free Press.
- Clinard, Marshall, Richard Quinney, and John Wildeman. 1994 (3rd edition). *Criminal Behavior Systems: A Typology*. Ohio: Anderson Publishing Company.
- Cohn, William. 1976. "A National Celebration: The Fourth of July in American History." Pp.141-156 in *Cultures, Festivals and Carnivals: The Major Traditions* Volume III, Number 1 The Unesco Press and LaBacconniere.
- Coleman, James. 1987. "Towards an Integrated Theory of White Collar Crime." *American Sociological Review* 93 (2): 406-439.
- Committee on Injury and Poison Prevention, American Academy of Pediatrics. 2001. "Fireworks Related Injuries to Children." *Pediatrics* 108(1): 190-191.
- Copes, Heith. 2003. "Societal Attachments, Offending Frequency, and Techniques of Neutralization." *Deviant Behavior* 24: 101-127.
- Costello, Barbara. 2000. "Techniques of Neutralization and Self-Esteem: A Critical Test of Social Control and Neutralization Theory." *Deviant Behavior* 21: 307-329.
- Cromwell, Paul and Quint Thurman. 2003. "The Devil Made Me Do It: Use of Neutralizations by Shoplifters." *Deviant Behavior* 24 (6): 353-550.
- Dabney, Dean. 1995. "Neutralization and Deviance in the Workplace: Theft of Supplies and Medicines by Hospital Nurses." *Deviant Behavior* 16: 313-331.
- Dodder, Richard and Stella Hughes. 1993. "Neutralization of Drinking Behavior." *Deviant Behavior* 14: 65-79.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1951. [1897]. *Suicide*. New York: Free Press.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1965. [1912]. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Durkin, Keith. 2000. "Accounts: Recent Trends and Developments." In, *Encyclopedia of Criminology and Deviant Behavior*, C. D. Bryant (editor). Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge.
- Eliason, Stephen and Richard Dodder. 1999. "Techniques of Neutralization Used by Deer Poachers in the Western United States: A Research Note." *Deviant Behavior* 20:233-252.
- Etzioni, Amitai. 2000. "Toward a Theory of Public Ritual." *Sociological Theory* 18(1): 44-59.
- Francis, D. 1980. *Shoplifting: The Crime Everybody Pays For*. New York: Elsevier/Nelson.
- Fritsche, Immo. 2002. "Account Strategies for the Violation of Social Norms: Integration and Extension of Sociological and Psychological Typologies." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*. 32 (4): 371-394.
- Greene, Michael. and Patrick Race. 2001. *2000 Fireworks Annual Report: Fireworks Related Deaths, Emergency Department Treated Injuries, and Enforcement Activities During 2000*. U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission; Washington, D.C.
- Greene, Michael and James Joholske. 2003. *2002 Fireworks Annual Report: Fireworks Related Deaths, Emergency Department Treated Injuries, and Enforcement Activities During 2002*. U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission; Washington, D.C.
- Hagan, John. 1991. "Destiny and Drift: Subcultural Preferences, Status Attainments, and the Risks and Rewards of Youth." *American Sociological Review* 56: 567-582.
- Hagan, John, Hans Merckens, and Klaus Boehnke. 1995. "Delinquency and Disdain: Social Capital and the Control of Right-Wing Extremism Among East and West Berlin Youth." *American Journal of Sociology* 100 (4): 1028-1052.
- Hagan, John, Gerd Hefler, Gabriele Classen, Klaus Boehnke, and Hans Merckens. 1998. "Subterranean Sources of Subcultural Delinquency Beyond the American Dream." *Criminology* 36(2): 309-341.
- Hamlin, John. 1988. "The Misplaced Concept of Rational Choice in Neutralization Theory." *Criminology* 26:4425-438.
- Heltsley, Martha and Thomas Calhoun. 2003. "The Good Mother: Neutralization Techniques Used by Pageant Mothers." *Deviant Behavior* 24: 81-100.
- Herman, Nancy, Patricia Little and John French. 1999. "Road Rage: An Exploratory Analysis." *Michigan Sociological Review* 13: 65-79.

- Hindelang, Michael. 1970. The Commitment of Delinquents to Their Misdeeds: Do Delinquents Drift?" *Social Problems* 35:159-161.
- Hindelang, Michael. 1974. "Moral Evaluations of Illegal Behaviors." *Social Problems* 21:370-385.
- Hirschi, Travis. 1969. *Causes of Delinquency*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hollinger, Richard. 1991. "Neutralizing in the Workplace: An Empirical Analysis of Property Theft and Production Deviance." *Deviant Behavior* 12: 169-202.
- Landsheer, J., H. Hart, and W. Kox. 1994. "Delinquent Values and Victim Damages: Exploring the Limits of Neutralization Theory." *British Journal of Criminology* 34:44-53.
- Lanier, Mark and Stuart Henry. 2004. *Essential Criminology* (2nd edition). Colorado: Westview Press.
- Lemert, Edwin. 1953. "An Isolation of Closure Theory of Naïve Check Forgery." *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science* 44:290-310.
- Lyman, Stanford. 2000. "Accounts: Roots and Foundations." In *Encyclopedia of Criminology and Deviant Behavior*, C. D. Bryant (editor). Philadelphia: Brunner - Routledge.
- Maruna, Shadd. 2003. "Excuses, Excuses: What Have We Learned in 50 Years of Testing 'Neutralization Theory'?" Lecture to Cambridge University's Institute of Criminology, May 8. Cited in Mark Lanier and Stuart Henry Pp. 175. 2004. *Essential Criminology* (2nd edition). Colorado: Westview Press.
- Matza, David. 1964. *Delinquency and Drift*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Matza, David and Gresham. Sykes. 1961. "Juvenile Delinquency and Subterranean Values." *American Sociological Review* 26:713-719.
- McCarthy, J. and A. Stewart. 1998. "Neutralization as a Process of Graduated Desensitization: Moral Values of Offenders." *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 42: 278-290.
- Miethe, Terance and Richard McCorkle. 2001 (2nd edition). *Crime Profiles: The Anatomy of Dangerous Persons, Places, and Situations*. California: Roxbury Publishing Company.
- Minor, William. 1981. "Techniques of Neutralization: A Reconceptualization and Empirical Examination." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 18:295-318.
- Mitchell, Jim and Richard Dodder. 1983. "Types of Neutralization and Types of Delinquency." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 12: 307-318.
- Mitchell, Jim, Richard Dodder, and T. Norris. 1990. "Neutralization and Delinquency: A Comparison by Sex and Ethnicity." *Adolescence*, 225(98):487-497.
- Moyer, Imogene. 2001. *Criminological Theories: Traditional and Non-Traditional Voices and Themes*. California: Sage Publications.
- Nelson, E.D. and R. D. Lambert. 2001. "Sticks, Stones and Semantics: The Ivory Tower Bully's Vocabulary of Motives." *Qualitative Sociology* 24 (1): 83-106.
- Nissenbaum, Stephen. 1998. *The Battle for Christmas*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Polding, Brian. 1995. "Dishonesty of College Students." Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Florida, Gainesville.
- Rivara, F. and B. Mueller. 1987. "The Epidemiology and Causes of Childhood Injuries." *Journal of Social Issues* 43 (2):13-31.
- Scott, Marvin and Stanford Lyman. 1968. "Accounts." *American Sociological Review*. 31: 46-62.
- Sheley, Joseph. 1980. "Is Neutralization Necessary for Criminal Behavior?" *Deviant Behavior* 2: 49-72.
- Smilor, Raymond. 1980. "Creating a National Festival: The Campaign for a Safe and Sane Fourth, 1903-1916." *Journal of American Culture* 2(4): 611-622.
- Smith, Gary, Jane Knapp, Theodore Barnett and Brenda Shields. 1996. "The Rockets' Red Glare, the Bombs Bursting in Air: Fireworks-Related Injuries to Children." *Pediatrics* 98(1): 1-10.
- Spillman, Lyn. 1997. *Nation and Commemoration: Creating National Identities in the United States and Australia*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sykes, Gresham and David Matza. 1957. "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency." *American Sociological Review* 22:664-670.

Taylor, Tom. 1990. *Why People Obey the Law*. Connecticut: Yale University Press.

Thurman, Quint. 1984. "Deviance and Moral Commitment: An Empirical Analysis." *Deviant Behavior* 5: 291-304.

Travers, Len. 1997. *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of the Nationalism in the Early Republic*. Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press.

Zelditch, Morris. 2001. "Processes of Legitimation: Recent Developments and New Directions." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 64 (1): 4-17.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Buzzell is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Baker University in Baldwin City, Kansas where he teaches courses in criminology, deviance, sociology of law, and political sociology. He is currently engaged in research on forms of computer crime and deviance, and is authoring a related text. In addition, he is studying the interplay between holidays and aspects of social life including minor crimes and deviances. He also recently served as an Associate Editor for the series *Research in Political Sociology*. In 2003 he was awarded the *Distinguished Scholarship Award* by Baker University. Prior to his appointment at Baker he served as the Director of the Iowa Center for Law & Civic Education at the Drake Law School (1988 to 1996).

Contact Information: Department of History, Political Science & Sociology, Baker University, Baldwin City, KS 66006-0065, e-mail: tim.buzzell@bakeru.edu.