

# Who Assuages Feelings of Guilt? Moral Neutralization of Juvenile Delinquents in Serbia

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The paper deals with the use of neutralization techniques among juvenile delinquents in Serbia. The conceptual framework of the study is based on the theory of neutralization developed by American sociologists Sykes and Matza. The aim of the research is to determine to what extent do juvenile delinquents use rationalizations of their behaviour, and to discern whether there is a connection between such justifications, socio-demographic characteristics of families, and the self-perceptions of juvenile offenders. The study includes all juvenile offenders in the Educational Correctional Facility (ECF) Kruševac (N = 153) at the time of the research (2017). In order to obtain data on technical rationalization, we used a slightly modified version of the moral neutralization scale developed by Ribeaud and Eisner. The findings reported indicate that most respondents do make use of neutralizations to justify their delinquent behaviour. It was also reported that respondents of different socio-economic status and family structure tend to resort to different forms of justifications, and that self-perception goes hand-in-hand with preferred rationalizations. In summary, the findings provide empirical support for the theory of neutralization and its core concepts.

**Keywords:** neutralization, rationalization, juvenile delinquency, correctional home, Serbia

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## 1 Introduction

The theory of moral neutralization is one of the most frequently cited and influential concepts helping people understand criminal behaviour. Maruna and Copes (2005) note that the article published by Sykes and Matza in 1957, was quoted more than 700 times according to the *Social Science Citation Index* by the beginning of the second millennium. It is noteworthy that, as the time has gone by, the concept did not lose value. Techniques of neutralization have also found a place in psychological theories, such as in learning theory, various control theories, Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming, and the theory of rational choice (as cited in Maruna & Copes, 2005). It is especially important to point out that the technique of offender verbalization of justifications<sup>4</sup> is also included in rehabilitative practice. On these core concepts a number of socio-therapeutic procedures are used with persons deprived of liberty. For example, there is a widely-shared belief and considerable empirical confirmation<sup>5</sup> that cognitive

behavioral treatment programs have been shown to be effective. This type of treatment is premised on the assumption that numerous specific cognitive justifications – rationalizations can be found to hide behind delinquent behaviour and knowledge of which facilitates therapeutic treatment.

However, despite the fact that most authors give proper recognition to Sykes and Matza's theoretical contribution, the sociological literature on neutralization is too often remiss in giving credit where it is due. For example, Bandura (as cited in Ribeaud, 2012), while developing his theory of moral disengagement, describes a series of justification techniques such as dehumanization of the victim or diffusion of responsibility.<sup>6</sup> However, he never once mentioned that these concepts are virtually identical to the theory of neutralization explicated by Sykes and Matza. It seems that Howard and Levinson are correct in noting, in a study published in 1985 (as cited in Maruna & Copes, 2005), that an interdisciplinary ignorance too often results in the unnecessary duplication of scientific efforts.

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<sup>4</sup> Which is the essence of the Theory of neutralization.

<sup>5</sup> That line of research is performed almost exclusively by those who

belong to the therapeutic modality whose effectiveness is checked by monitoring outcomes (see: Berger, 2000; Srna, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> It is obvious that these concepts are almost identical. In Bandura's theory, the victim is dehumanized or guilty, the offenses are denounced, the consequences are neglected, the responsibility is denied by substituting or transferring responsibility to others, and the ways to justify a delinquent by appeal to higher loyalties include moral justification, the use of linguistic euphemisms as well as comparison with those who are in a better position (Bandura, 1986).

At the time it was created the theory of moral neutralization was focused on (juvenile) delinquents. Today, its core concepts are applied to understanding a wide range of serious criminal offences such as rape (Scully & Marolla, 1984), murder or genocide (Hazani, 1991), hate crimes (Burke & Pollock, 2004), white collar crimes (Kovčo-Vukadin, 2007), corporate crime (Piquero, Tibbets, & Blankenship, 2005), economic crimes in general (Geis, 1968; Swartz, 1975), employee computer crime<sup>7</sup> (Matotek, 2012) as well as alcohol-related crimes (Rumgay, 1998). They can also be applied to those behaviours which are deviant, but not necessarily criminally sanctioned (for example, games of chance/gambling, consumer behaviour and others). The conceptual framework of the theory is also useful for understanding the behaviour of the victims of family violence. Thus, for example, Hazani (1991) argues that it is a theory that is widely used. Maruna and Copes (2005) go one-step further claiming that this creative and visionary theory provided the most influential contribution to the sociology of crime of the twentieth century.

While all of this may be true enough, some serious disputes have indeed arisen around this concept in the research literature. For example, Robert Agnew (1994: 563) states two basic objections to the theory of neutralization: first, some of its techniques are very difficult to measure, making empirically testing the theory problematic (unlike adopting unconventional tendencies and norms). The second objection concerns the possibility that offenders do not use techniques of neutralization before, but rather develop them after committing criminal offence (Hamlin, 1988). This is a significant criticism from the point of view of causation because it does not allow us to understand the genesis of the crime.

However, Agnew's observations notwithstanding Lilly, Cullen, & Ball (2007: 93) rightly point out that Sykes and Matza's findings have influenced many criminologists for more than half of the century. All of the above-mentioned scholarship provides sufficient incentive to focus research on the essential aspects of the techniques of neutralization. But before we move on to the research we have done, we will briefly review the basic ideas upon which this theoretical concept is based.

## 2 Basic Theory Views

As noted in the literature (Ribeaud & Eisner, 2010: 298), Gresham Sykes and David Matza proposed the theory of moral neutralization in the late 1950s in response to, for them, an

<sup>7</sup> For example, white collar crime investigations have pointed to a series of cognitive justification processes, such as, for example, calling for a necessity or a claim of normality.

insufficiently developed theory postulating a delinquent subculture promoted by Albert Cohen. Cohen's thesis held that juvenile delinquents almost exclusively belong to the working class, and their delinquent behaviour is conditioned by the financial and other related aspects of relative deprivation. Delinquency is, therefore, representing the working-class youths' rebellion against the dominant social norms (middle class) which they find at least unreasonable (Cohen, 1955). Sykes and Matza (1957) refute this thesis by an irrefutable observation – namely, there are many middle class juvenile delinquents whose moral beliefs differ little from those of non-delinquents. They note that delinquents often feel both shy and guilty over their delinquent behaviour, show respect for those who adhere to conventional values, make a clear distinction between those who can and cannot be victims, and finally, participate in conventional activities as well as citizens who do not violate the law. In other words, they are well aware that their behaviour is wrong (McCarthy & Stewart, 1998).

How then, is it possible that a juvenile violates and believes in conventional norms at the same time? Sykes and Matza believe that such an outcome can occur when justifications or neutralizations of a sense of guilt accompany the violation of the norms in which one believes (Henry & Milovanovic, 1996: 132). Rationalization or justification are achieved by applying the techniques of neutralization. Although they do not make delinquents innocent before the institutions of formal social control, they offer reasonable justification for personal choices, significantly reduce the sense of guilt, and finally help preserve a desirable self-image. The delinquent may redefine his/her behaviour as acceptable, though maybe-not-correct (Sykes & Matza, 1957: 667).

The neutralization techniques available to the delinquents are the following<sup>8</sup>:

1. *denial of responsibility*: by refusing to accept responsibility for causing damage, the delinquent transfers the guilt to others. The damage, from his or her point of view, happened accidentally; either the victim is responsible or delinquent's behaviour was done due to pressure from his or her peers;

2. *denial of injury*: the consequences of their behaviour are rationalized by claiming that an act did not really harm the victim. This is the most frequently used denial of the consequences of verbal violence – from the perspective of a delin-

<sup>8</sup> And not just them. The juvenile justice system also uses techniques of neutralization. Thus, the subjects of formal social control, from a social worker to a judge, as well as researchers of this subject, often find justification for juvenile delinquents. For example, their behaviour is seen as a consequence of unfavorable environmental factors (see: Maruna & Copes, 2005).

quent who denies the existence of an injury “*the victim does not feel the pain*”;

3. *denial of the victim*: although a delinquent may accept both responsibility for this action and inflicting an injury, he or she redefines the role of the victimized party. The victim, according to the interpretation of delinquents, becomes a bad person who deserved such treatment;

4. *condemn the condemners*: here the delinquent condemns those who condemn him, arguing that the authorities are corrupted or bad (certainly worse than him or her);

5. *appeal to higher loyalties*: Delinquent displays his or her behaviour as justified in the given circumstances. Thus, from his or her perspective, violation of social rules is the expression of the chivalry loyalty to the group the delinquent belongs to (Sykes & Matza, 1957: 667–669).

The authors of the theory highlight the fact that techniques of neutralization, in the case of many delinquents, are not such a powerful shield that it can fully alleviate their sense of guilt. Finally, there are those youth who are sufficiently isolated from conventionality that they actually do not employ techniques of neutralization. However, Sykes and Matza (1957) stick with the view that justifications significantly influence the reduction of the effectiveness of social control to account for most juvenile delinquency.

It should also be noted that Sykes and Matza (1957: 669) argued that techniques of neutralization precede the criminal act, and thereby make it possible. But this connection is not viewed as deterministic – that is, the tendency towards the use of techniques of neutralization does not necessarily lead to a status offence or a criminal act.

### 3 Past Attempts of Empirical Verification of the Theory – Research Results

Although Tibbetts and Hemmens (2010: 449) argue that the results of studies which empirically test neutralization techniques are somehow inconsistent in outcomes, the techniques are still frequently being investigated both in qualitative and quantitative research studies. Qualitative studies provide insight into subjective points of view of the respondents, as well as provide an opportunity for understanding the justification process. Quantitative studies base their conclusions on the use of the neutralization scale on mostly large and representative samples. It is typical to use a procedure for the comparison of non-delinquent and delinquent (control and experimental) groups, and among the studies whose results are considered reliable emphasis is placed upon the relatively few longitudinal studies.

What can be concluded from the findings of those evaluative research studies? Qualitative studies are most frequently focused on justification/neutralization examination in different situations and among different types of respondents. For example, Maruna and Copes (2005) note that the theory of neutralization concepts are extremely prominent among researchers studying hate crimes, stigmatization and snitching. They note findings from research on a sample of rapists (N = 114), who tend to make frequent use of techniques of rationalization. They deny the existence of a victim, claiming that usually women say no when they actually think yes. Another form of denial of responsibility implies that the victim is seen as a person who deserves to be victimized because of her behaviour. Simply stated, good girls do not get raped.

Quantitative studies are largely based on the use of neutralization scales. The first neutralization scale, which is still prevalent in the research of this subject, was developed by Ball<sup>9</sup> (see McCarthy & Stewart, 1998; Ribeaud & Eisner, 2010). Additional measurement instruments have been developed over the course of time. Maruna and Copes (2005) note that numerous studies are using tests which measure neutralization process phenomena indirectly. The results of the research done in this area without exception show that there is a positive, but generally weak correlation, between the tendency towards rationalization and engagement in delinquency. For example, Ball (as cited in Maruna & Copes, 2005) found in the comparison of delinquents with non-delinquents that the latter are far less likely to use the techniques of neutralization. In studying recidivism, Shileds and Whitehall (1994) established a significant correlation between the tendency to employ exculpatory justification and recidivism. Importantly, based on his longitudinal study Agnew (1994) concluded that rationalization can be found to be a significant factor in future violent behaviour.

McCarthy and Stewart's research (1998) proceeded from the concepts of the theory of neutralization and redefined it in the following noteworthy way. Neutralization is conceptually reframed and renamed the process of “gradual desensitization” by McCarthy and Stewart. As the involvement of a delinquent in criminal behaviour increases, his or her need to justify harmful acts to themselves and others decreases. The explanation for this phenomenon lies in the fact that, as time goes by, a chronic delinquent desensitizes the feelings of shame and guilt. This claim has been empirically confirmed<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> This scale describes four formally punitive situations and offers the respondent a script for each of them, as well as ten justifications he needs to decide upon (see: McCarthy & Stewart, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> The survey was conducted on a sample of 95 adult criminal offenders for crimes against property or against a person.

Two studies on young people from Slovenia, Austria and Hungary (Meško, Hirtenlehner, & Bertok, 2015) as well as from Slovenia, Belgium and Austria are in accordance with this hypothesized desensitization (Hirtenlehner, Pauwels, & Meško, 2013). While somewhat conceptually unconnected to the theory of moral neutralization, these researches reveal the preventative significance of internalized moral norms. If young people have not incorporated them, fear of punishment has little to no effect.<sup>11</sup>

When it comes to the Republic of Serbia, empirical research on the neutralization process among juvenile delinquents has not been carried out prior to the study reported on here. However, the findings of studies dealing with phenomenology and the etiology of violence within peer groups suggest the need for such empirical research on the use of techniques of neutralization. The overall conclusions of these studies are: a) victimization of young people by peers happens frequently; and b) the use of violence against the weak and/or those perceived as such as well as members of all minorities, and especially materially deprived persons, is broadly considered morally justified (see Popadić, Plut, & Pavlović, 2014; Simeunović-Patić, Meško, & Ignjatović, 2016). We can assume that such behaviour facilitates both accepting justification and rejecting one's own responsibility for what harm to others has been done. In addition, experience suggest that the bullies often become victims of violence themselves, especially in the context of total institutions (Ilić & Maljković, 2014). However, we have little idea of their attitudes towards self-victimization. Honestly, revealing their perceptions and thought process would be precious to researchers, especially since now victimized they were once in the role of the bully.

These important topics are still not open for investigation, at least not in scientific discourse in Serbia. However, we will, for our part, make a modest contribution to research on the use of techniques of neutralization among juvenile delinquents.

## 4 Empirical Part of the Research

The primary goal of our research was to determine whether juvenile delinquents use rationalizations, to what extent they do so, and to document which techniques of moral neutralization they tend to favor. The second goal of the analysis was to investigate whether there is a connection between family (socio-demographic) conditions and the extent to which respondents tend to use rationalizations. Finally, we attempt to determine whether there is a correlation between youth self-image and the tendency to use justifications for delinquent behaviour.

The conceptual foundation for our analysis is: a) rationalizations are used when we need to justify our behaviour that opposes previously internalized moral reasoning; and, b) justifications are used in order to preserve a positive self-image.

In accordance with these starting points, we have tested the following hypotheses:

1. In percentage terms, the largest number of respondents accept justifications of delinquent behaviour;
2. There is a significant statistical correlation between the tendency to use the techniques of neutralization and the social status of the family. We expect that the tendency towards neutralization will be significantly more prevalent among juveniles coming from more well-off families, and *vice versa*;
3. There is a significant statistical correlation between the tendency towards the use of techniques of neutralization and family structure. As the family structure becomes more non-conventional, the tendency towards the use of techniques of neutralization will be less present;
4. There is a significant statistical correlation between the tendency to use techniques of neutralization and self-image. We expect to find that the use of the technique of neutralization is more prevalent among those who have positive self-perception than among those who have negative self-perception.

In order to test these hypotheses, we used the *Moral Neutralization Scale* developed by Ribeaud and Eisner<sup>12</sup> (2010), based on the theoretical concept of the neutralization process explicated by Sykes and Matza (1957). In creating the scale, the authors have also taken Bandura's theory of moral disengagement into full account. Since this theory is not essentially different from the concepts of Sykes and Matza, it is quite reasonable to say that the scale we used in the research

<sup>11</sup> A special incentive to undertake research studies of this kind has expanded the influence of a recent theory which in an authentic way explains the genesis of criminal behaviour - primarily in the case of juveniles. It is a *Situational Action Theory* (SAT) whose creator is Per-Olof Wikström (2010). In his opinion, crime is the outcome of acts of personal traits and the environment; personal propensity and environmental inducements create situations in which the motivation and perception of action alternatives (Wikström, Mann, & Hardie, 2018) play a key role. As the results of one evaluative study of SAT (Pauwels, Svensson, & Hirtenlehner, 2018) demonstrate, adopted moral values (including legal cynicism), fear of shaming and low self-control play a major role in development of criminal behaviour.

<sup>12</sup> The scale was validated through five waves of longitudinal research on samples of over 1,000 subjects. It has also been shown to be significantly predictive of a range of different types of violence (from physical to psychological).

examines the well-established sociological concept of rationalization.

For the purposes of our research, we excluded one subscale, which does not correspond with techniques of neutralization<sup>13</sup>. This, now modified, scale consists of 26 items used for measuring four essential justifications (Table 1). Those are: *cognitive restructuring*<sup>14</sup> (7 items), *blaming the victim* (6 items), *distorting the negative influence* (6 items) and *minimizing one's own involvement in action* (7 items). The respondents were asked to state the degree to which they agree with the claims on the scale of 1 (I do not agree in general) to 5 (I agree fully). The overall score on each of the subscales allowed us to rank the respondents with regard to the tendency to use techniques from the strongly present (value 5) to the absent (0).

inadequate family care, the death of both parents, unknown parents). In order to examine what kind of self-image our respondents have, we invited them to describe themselves in the space of 12 sentences. Based on content analysis of these descriptions, we identify five ideal type narrative identities. These identities are: *well-adapted adults*, *submissive protégé*, *altruist*, *manipulator*, and a *bad boy*.

In order to test our hypotheses, we relied on the descriptive statistics of the chi-square test to determine whether there are statistically significant relationships among the observed variables, and Cramer's V to test the strength of the relationship among them. The data were processed in the SPSS program version 19.

**Table 1:** Techniques of neutralization - Examples of claims

Techniques	Examples of claims in neutralization scale
cognitive restructuring/appeal to higher loyalties	'Fight in order to protect friends' 'Only a coward would run away from the fight'
blaming the victim/denial of the victim	"Some people are victims because they deserved it"
distorting the negative influence/denial of injury	'It should be forgiven if you injure someone unintentionally or by accident.' 'Teasing and insulting do harm.'
minimizing one's own involvement in action/denial of responsibility	'Everyone is breaking the rules', 'OK to get into fight with someone to protect oneself'

We operationalized the concept of family situation by using two indicators, social status and family structure. In regard to social status, respondents were asked to self-assess the extent to which the existential needs of their family members were being met. We provided four possible social positions: very low, low, medium and high. With respect to the structure of the family, the marital status of the parents was used as the determinant. We considered the complete family to be one in which parents live with children, and an incomplete one, take one in which only a single parent is present (the other is dead, or does not live with a family due to divorce). We also permit respondents who are accommodated in foster families or in social care homes to indicate this state of care (the reason:

#### 4.1 The sample

The study included 153 respondents, all residents of the Educational Correctional Juvenile Facility in Kruševac. They represent the main share of the small number of serious juvenile delinquents sentenced to institutional educational measures in the last couple of years (see Ignjatović, 2014)<sup>15</sup>. Inclusion of the respondents is complete; all the minors who were in the facility at the time of the research took part<sup>16</sup>. The research was conducted in October 2017. The majority of juveniles were institutionalized for crime against property; however, the number of juveniles who committed violent crimes is not negligible (Table 2).

<sup>13</sup> The value of Cronbach's alpha internal validity in this structured scale is extremely high (.901), which justifies its use.

<sup>14</sup> In the language of the theory of neutralization, cognitive restructuring is a technique of appeal to higher loyalties; minimizing one's own influence relates to denial of responsibility; blaming the victim is denial of the victim; negative influence is denial of true injury.

<sup>15</sup> When it comes to the last year, complete data is available (2016), according to the Bulletin of the Republic Institute for Statistics no. 630, nine juveniles were sentenced to this sentence (out of 3,643 of the reported juvenile offenders).

<sup>16</sup> Respondents did not always answer all the questions, therefore the total sum in tables differs marginally.



**Table 2:** Structure of criminal offences by gender

Criminal offense	Gender male	female
manslaughter	11	0
murder	5	0
Infanticide	0	1
serious body injury	5	0
minor body injury	3	0
unlawful deprivation of liberty	0	1
endangering security	2	0
rape	7	1
child sexual abuse	3	0
domestic violence	11	1
theft	6	0
aggravated theft	46	0
robbery	47	0
destroying and damaging someone else's property	1	0
unauthorized use of a vehicle	5	0
unauthorized production, possession and trafficking of narcotic drugs	9	0
assault on a public official on duty	1	0
violent behavior	22	0
unauthorized possession of firearms and explosives	3	0
<b>Total<sup>17</sup></b>	<b>187</b>	<b>4</b>

The largest number belongs to the category of older juveniles – aged 16 to 18 (55.5%). Five are 15 year-olds, and it is surprising that even three of them spent 6 months to one year in the juvenile detention facility. About 40% of the residents at the facility are younger adults. Let us add that the latter are detained for the longest period of time (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Sentence term

Sentence term	f	%
up to 2 months	7	4,7
from 2 to 6 months	23	15,3
from 6 to 12 months	36	24,0
from 12 to 18 months	23	15,3
from 18 to 24 months	30	20,0
from 24 to 30 months	11	7,3
from 30 to 36 months	9	6,0
over 36 months	11	7,3
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100,0</b>

<sup>17</sup> Of course, due to the presence of multiple offenses the number of offences does not match with the number of juveniles.

Most of the respondents are in semi-open treatment regime (over 80%). Sixteen of them are in the most restrictive (closed) treatment regime, while there are far fewer respondents in the least restrictive, open, treatment regime (Table 4).

**Table 4:** Respondents related to the staying regime

Regime	F	%
placement unit	1	0,7
semi-open	123	81,5
open	9	6,0
closed	16	10,6
release unit	2	1,3
<b>Total</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>100,0</b>

The majority of juveniles spend up to a year, but the percentage of offenders who spend from 18 to 24 months and even over three years in ECF is not negligible. They are mostly included in the educational process. For almost one-third of the respondents, education programs are not in accordance with their calendar age. Thirty-two go to secondary school, while four of the offenders are enrolled at college /university. Unfortunately, a considerable number of these young peo-

ple ended their education by completing only a few primary school grades, or with completing just the basic primary school program (65 of them) (Table 5).

**Table 5:** Educational status of respondents

Educational status	f	%
does not go to school/ uncompleted primary education	8	5,3
attending primary school	41	27,3
completed primary school	57	38,0
attending secondary school	35	23,3
completed secondary school	5	3,3
enrolled at college/university	4	2,7
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100,0</b>

## 5 Research results

### 5.1 Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents' families

When it comes to the structure of the family, fewer than half of the juveniles in the facility lived in complete families, with both parents, brothers and/or sisters (Table 6). Quite a few respondents come from single-parent families living with their mothers more frequently than with their fathers. There were 5 respondents living without either parent, but in homes of the blood-related family (with grandparents). Four of the youths were in foster care, and 9 were in a social care institution. Particularly interesting are those few respondents who, in response to the question 'Who did you live with before coming to the juvenile detention facility?' chose *other*. These are young people who have either founded their own family (8), or those who say that they do not have a family. These are young people who were orphaned immediately after their birth.

**Table 6:** Before coming to juvenile detention facility respondent lived

Juvenile lived	f	%
with parents, brother & sister	69	45,4
with father, brother & sister	23	15,1
with mother, brother & sister	33	21,7
with grandparents, brother & sister	3	2,0
with foster parents	4	2,6
in social care institution	9	5,9
Other	11	7,2
<b>Total</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Most of the respondents lived in structurally incomplete families (Table 7). We find that just over a third (34.6%) of parents are married, while others are formally or non-normally divorced (about 50%). The death of a parent affected 21 respondents, and five of them have never met their parents.

**Table 7:** Marital status of parents

Your parents are	f	%
Married	53	35,1
married but not living together	11	7,3
Divorced	59	39,1
never lived together	2	1,3
mother died	6	4,0
father died	15	9,9
Other	5	3,3
<b>Total</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>100,0</b>

When it comes to parental occupation there is high percentage of both fathers and mothers who are workers (42% of them). Mothers are far more likely to be unemployed when compared to fathers, and they are more unlikely to work on a farm (Table 8). When young people were asked about their parental occupation, some indicated that their father/mother died or they have never met them; we also found the following answer: *the father is in prison* (in five cases). We think that this surprising honesty of our respondents deserves deeper observation as it provides a new insight into the understanding of the influence of family circumstances on (delinquent) choices of young people and hence a formal reaction to them. For now, we will leave this question aside.

**Table 8:** Parental occupation

Occupation	Father		Mother	
	f	%	f	%
farmer	13	8,7	5	3,3
worker	65	43,6	65	43,3
clerk	7	4,7	9	6,0
manager	8	5,4	4	2,7
retiree	6	4,0	2	1,3
unemployed	21	14,1	39	26,0
housewife	0	0,0	16	10,7
other	29	19,5	10	6,7
<b>Total</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Almost 50% of the respondents described the social status of their families as poor or very poor (Table 9). Extremely poor financial position respondents come from families in

which fathers are unemployed, engaged in agriculture or have worker occupations ( $\chi^2 = 41.681$ , Cramer's  $V = .267$ ,  $p = .014$ ). However, if mothers are workers, respondents find their family considerably more well-off ( $\chi^2 = 70,743$ , Cramer's  $V = .347$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Families in which mothers are housewives, unemployed or engaged in agriculture belong to the categories of either extremely or just poor families. Expectedly, families of juveniles whose parents are managers, experts and clerks have the best financial stability.

**Table 9:** Family's financial status

Family's financial status	F	%
we do not have enough to meet basic needs	14	9.2
we have just enough to meet basic needs	60	39.2
we have enough, we can even save	58	37.9
great financial stability	13	8.5
I do not have a family	3	2.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>96.7</b>

There is evidence of a significant statistical correlation between the financial situation of the family and the marital status of the parents (Table 10). Structural completeness of the family goes hand-in-hand with its financial situation. If parents are married, their children – our respondents – are, considerably more likely to describe their family situation as financially stable.

**Table 10:** Family's financial status regarding parental marital status

Family's financial status	We do not have enough to meet basic needs	We have just enough to meet basic needs	We have enough, we can even save	Great financial stability	I do not have a family	Total	
Parents' marital status	married	3 (21.4%)	22 (36.7%)	24 (41.4%)	3 (23.1%)	52 (35.1%)	
	married, but not loving together	0 (0.0%)	2 (3.3%)	6 (10.3%)	2 (15.4%)	11 (7.4%)	
	divorced	7 (50.0%)	25 (41.7%)	20 (34.5%)	5 (38.5%)	57 (38.5%)	
	never lived together	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.7%)	1 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.4%)	
	mother died	3 (21.4%)	2 (3.3%)	1 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (4.1%)	
	father died	0 (0.0%)	7 (11.7%)	5 (8.6%)	3 (23.1%)	15 (10.1%)	
	other	1 (7.1%)	1 (1.7%)	1 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (66.7%)	5 (3.4%)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>148</b>

## 4.2 Techniques of neutralization

When it comes to techniques of neutralization, an interesting distribution of responses is in evidence (Table 11). About one-third of respondents, almost independently of the technique in question, are indecisive in terms of rationalization. On the other hand, far more of the juvenile offenders do consider the use of neutralization as justified. No doubt, the most acceptable technique is appeal to higher loyalties<sup>18</sup>. Most respondents agree that 'some people deserve to be beaten up' and that it is 'OK to get into a fight with someone if he starts first' (over 60% of them), while the justifications: 'fight in order to protect friends' and 'only a coward would run away from the fight' chosen by are close to half of the respondents. It may be that this is a kind of *machismo* response based on the following finding – namely, only 1/3 think it is acceptable to join other guys while 'teaching someone, they do not like, a lesson'. Respondents with such a tendency to hide behind others typically did not enjoy the support of an intact primary family; many are juveniles who lived in foster homes and/or social care institutions ( $\chi^2 = 45,693$  Cramer's  $V = .278$ ,  $p$  that = .05). Although a statistically significant, the observed connection is a weak one (Cramer's  $V = .278$ ).

<sup>18</sup> All claims in this paragraph describe the technique of appeal to higher loyalties.



**Table 11:** Respondents in relation to the tendency towards the use of neutralization techniques

Degree of use of neutralization techniques	Appeal to higher loyalties		Denial of the victim		Denial of injury		Denial of responsibility	
	f <sup>19</sup>	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
absent	5	3.6	6	4.3	14	9.9	4	2.8
weakly present	13	9.5	24	17.0	42	29.8	15	10.4
moderately present	47	34.3	40	28.4	46	32.6	53	36.8
present to higher degree	46	33.6	52	36.9	34	24.1	52	36.1
strongly present	26	19.0	19	13.5	5	3.5	20	13.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Compared with this technique, our respondents express less preference for the denial of the victim<sup>20</sup>. That said, over half of the respondents do acknowledge that *‘those who were beaten up deserved it’* and that *‘some become victims again since they deserve it’* and feel that these are adequate justifications. Moreover, one-fifth of the juveniles in the ECF think it is *‘OK to make fun of losers’*.

When it comes to denial of responsibility, we observe that the rationalization of abolition is least acceptable to our respondents – denial of personal guilt since *‘everyone is breaking the rules’*. In contrast, the justification that it is *‘OK to get into fight with someone to protect oneself’* is viewed as acceptable to over 70% of the respondents.

The least used justification by our respondents was denial of injury<sup>21</sup>. That said, we note that a large percentage (over 70%) opines *‘that it should be forgiven if you injure someone unintentionally or by accident.’* It should be noted in this regard that fully half of the respondents displays full awareness that teasing and insulting do cause harm, and that *‘making fun of’* others is not a way to show interest in them and that use of violence is seldom a proper solution to a problem.

In order to determine whether there are differences between respondents who are using these justifications and those who are not, we proceeded with further analysis. We found that young people from very well-off families ( $\chi^2 = 165.318$  Cramer’s  $V = .557$ ,  $p = .044$ ) more frequently appeal to higher loyalties. The justification of *‘being loyal to the group’* is used to a lesser extent by members of the middle and, even more rarely, lower social status groups.

When it comes to denial of responsibility we find similar findings. Young people coming from very well-off families are more likely to deny responsibility for their own actions than poorer juveniles at JDF ( $\chi^2 = 147.739$  Cramer’s  $V = .517$ ,  $p = .007$ ). Furthermore, young people whose families are very well-off tend to find more acceptable dehumanization of the victim and denial of injury, yet the differences between them and the respondents whose socio-economic status is lower did not prove to be statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 67.925$  Cramer’s  $V = .357$ ,  $p = .345$ ;  $\chi^2 = 74.851$  Cramer’s  $V = .642$ ,  $p = .368$ ).

In further analysis undertaken we attempted to determine the degree of correlation between justification acceptance and family structure. We found that denial of injury is more acceptable to juveniles living in families with one or both parents, while such justification is least acceptable to respondents who came from social care institutions or foster care prior to ECF arrival. Justification of denial of responsibility and victimization is most frequently acceptable for respondents from structurally incomplete families. Dehumanization of the victim is the least acceptable rationalization to young people who do not have families.

Finally, the question of the connection between juvenile offender self-perception and neutralization was investigated. Our expectation at the onset was that the respondents wanted tell a concise story about themselves; this expectation was fulfilled. Instead of a narrative about themselves, which we found in only in a small number of respondents (17 of them), personal self-description stores generally have a temporal dimension. Their stories were usually highly contextualized and rich in meaning; respondents often offer only fragmentary insight into their personal traits, but detailed accounts of appearance. From these descriptions we find out what they look like – e.g., tall, handsome, black-haired and we find out what they like – e.g., playing video games, football, cooking, girls, their families. Moreover, we often discovered what kind of features they believe they have – e.g., romantic, loyal, smart.

<sup>19</sup> Frequency.

<sup>20</sup> All claims in this paragraph relate to the technique of denial of the victim.

<sup>21</sup> All claims in this paragraph relate to the technique of appeal to higher loyalties.

In a word, the self-descriptions tend to be very rich and revealing. It was our task to bring them down to an acceptable number of categories via the process of content analysis. In these narratives, we found five distinctive categories of self-descriptions: 1) a youth who has become *more mature* due to staying in the ECF; 2) *a well adjusted* respondent who claims to be good and obedient; 3) a youth who is manifestly good, but latently manipulative and seemingly well adapted to the formal system, but whose *real face* is hidden; 4) *an altruist*, a youth who tends to help others even to his own harm – always and everywhere. The fifth group consists of those youth who offer a narrative about themselves depicting a bad and unadjusted person. They call themselves drug addicts, bad, ‘mafiosos’ and criminals. Finally, it should be emphasized that a substantial number (16%) of our respondents refused to provide narratives depicting themselves. Some of them told their counselors that finding out who they are was none of our business!

It was a pleasant surprise that almost a third of the youth see themselves as mature, more responsible because of staying at ECF. Only a small number of juveniles consider themselves as being well-adjusted. These are youth who tend to present themselves to various audiences (other juveniles, counselors, researchers) in different ways, taking care of their interests as such self-revelations are made. There are far fewer genuinely obedient juveniles, those who display good conduct, are hard-working, are not quarreling, and do not make trouble. The fewest juvenile offenders’ type are those who are willing to sacrifice for others because they are good and because it is important to them that others accept them. It was most surprising that there is a non-negligible number of juvenile offenders who do not consider themselves conventional persons and believe that they are truly incorrigible. Finally, it should be noted that the number of young people who refused to introduce themselves through the short narrative is also not small (Table 12).

**Table 12:** Respondents’ self-description

Respondent describes himself as	f	%
mature/grown-up person	42	27,5
obedient resident	20	13,1
manifestly obedient, latently manipulative	34	22,2
unreserved altruist	14	9,2
openly unadjusted	18	11,8
I refuse to describe myself	25	16,3
<b>Total</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Crossing justifications with self-perceptions produced interesting findings. It should be noted that apart from the obvious percentage differences, few statistically significant difference

were found.<sup>22</sup> The young people we placed in the category of openly unadjusted were most prone to seek justification/rationalization of their behaviour. The justifications of loyalty to the group and denial of victimization are somewhat less closely related to those respondents who are manifestly adjusted. Justifications that they are not responsible are most often drawn upon by youth who consider themselves to be mature, while denied of inflicting injuries are prominent among the well-adjusted. Attention should be drawn to the finding that young people who claim they love others and who are ready to help even to their own detriment tend to rationalize their harmful behaviour in ways that do not fall on the conventional spectrum.

## 5 Discussion

In this study we have tried to describe juvenile delinquents’ tendency to use techniques of neutralization in ways suggested by Sykes and Matza (1957). In addition, we were interested in determining a statistically significant correlations exist between the techniques of neutralization and: 1) the socio-demographic characteristics of the family (its structure and financial status); and 2) the self-perception of our respondents. The conceptual framework of our study was founded in the still contemporary theory of neutralization of Sykes and Matza. Our research was directed by the general hypothesis that people use rationalizations to justify their (non)conventional behaviours and in so doing preserve positive self-perception. In addition to some theoretical exploration, we examined several empirical hypotheses as well. Some of these gained empirical support, while others were rejected.

We found that justifications were used by more than half of the 153 juvenile offenders who participated in our study. Also, we take note of the fact that a large percentage of juveniles placed themselves in the category of *indecisive*; our strong suspicion is that this finding should be viewed as somewhat suspect. We are convinced that among these indecisive respondents many were reluctant to be truthful, because they believe that counselors might gain access to the questionnaires they filled in.<sup>23</sup>

It is clear that some of the neutralization techniques were more acceptable to the respondents than others. For example, they most frequently appeal to higher loyalties, while the de-

<sup>22</sup> The values of the chi square test for the crossed features of the self-description and 1. appeal to higher loyalties  $\chi^2 = 156,527$ , Cramer’s V =, 478, p = .763; 2. Denial of the victim  $\chi^2 = 94,158$ , Cramer’s V =, 365, p = .133; 3. Denial of responsibility  $\chi^2 = 141,644$ , Cramer’s V =, 444, p = .331; and 4. denial of injury  $\chi^2 = 118,184$ , Cramer’s V =, 407, p = .104.

<sup>23</sup> Questionnaires were distributed and collected by counselors, not by researchers.

nial of injury is least acceptable to them. It is particularly interesting that the vast majority of our respondents do not think violence is a way to solve the problem and, we might say, that they also have some empathy for those who are victimized.

We also found that the tendency to use different rationalization techniques goes hand-in-hand with the financial situation of the family. Accordingly, the denial of responsibility for their own actions tend to come from young people whose families are very well-off. We think that referring to personal chivalry and transferring responsibility to others is an appropriate way either to cut off a potential loss of class status or to, from a discursively justified vision of a higher-class members, assign guilt to others. On the other hand, young people whose families are financially deprived tend to accept responsibility for their own behaviour because the class matrix implies that there is no one to blame but themselves. It should also be noted that better of ECF residents are more prone to both dehumanize the victim and deny injury than the poorer ones, but these differences are not statistically significant. We have presented these findings bearing in mind that the same class and social contexts of post-transitional Serbia in which the right/ability to validate the rationalization of one's own behaviour by others goes hand-in-hand with the availability of capital (see Ljubičić, 2009).

There is no significant statistical connection between tendency to use rationalization and family structure. Although only percentage differences are in question, it should be emphasized that some of the techniques of neutralization (e.g., the denial of injury) are more frequently used by respondents whose families belong to the category of complete or intact. However, young people who lived with foster parents or in social care institutions are highly inclined to resort to different types of rationalizations. For example, while the youth from intact families tend to reject responsibility for their own behaviour, the displaced youth are more inclined to appeal to higher loyalties. We assume that an explanation for this observed difference lies in the fact that their peers are the only family they have. In favor of the thesis that group cohesion and affiliation is extremely important to them, we speculate that in the place of their absent family it is their peers whose acceptance may confirm their status of men and adults.

It turned out that there is an interesting connection between the tendency for justifications and self-perception. Mature respondents whose growth and development were facilitated by staying at ECF, the obedient, manifestly adapted, manipulative, altruists and openly unadjusted were distinguishable ideal types among the juvenile offenders. The findings which, although did not reach the level of statistical significance, we consider especially important are as follows: 1) justifications are most frequently used by young people who see themselves as

bad. These juveniles see themselves as hopeless drug addicts, 'mafiosos', pimps, bad, nervous, or aggressive; and 2) juveniles that we categorized as altruists are least prone to rationalizations. How can we explain these findings? In the case of the first mentioned, rationalizations are used for defending themselves from a degrading self-image. In the case of others who voluntarily put themselves in the victim's position, justification is not necessary because they masochistically accept the duty to serve others and be responsible for all consequences.

## 6 Conclusion

Our research has confirmed that juvenile delinquents placed in a juvenile detention facility do tend to use rationalizations of their delinquent behaviour. Choice of techniques and the extent of use of them is directly connected to family structure and financial status as well as the context within which they create their own self-image.

Comparison our study findings with the results of other studies on the use of techniques of neutralization among juveniles is virtually impossible due to methodological differences in data collection and analyses. However, the existence of somewhat comparable international studies is very valuable to us. We believe that our finding that our respondents use rationalization in a large percentage of cases can be a significant contribution in practice, primarily in the work of re-socialization undertake by juvenile correction professionals (see Ilić, 2010).

It should certainly be underlined that the findings we have reported here should be replicated in new empirical studies which would be even more methodologically sophisticated. We are certainly aware of one serious methodological deficiency of our study. We did not include a control group corresponding to the respondents in the research. The lack of a comparative perspective hinders the potential for generalization of the conclusions, and imposes a series of new hypotheses that should be investigated. If we proceed from the assumption that there is a diffuse and permissive attitude towards violence in our post-modern/reality society (see Jugović, 2012), we can hypothesize that rationalization of various forms of personal aggressiveness issued both by juveniles and adults in conflict with the law and their conventional peers will be a common occurrence. In this context, a significant role is played by mass media which contributes both to the desensitization of violence (Erjavec, 2014; Ignjatović & Ljubičić, 2017) and the fear of spreading crime (Đurić & Popović-Ćitić, 2013; Ljubičić & Dragišić-Labaš, 2010; Meško, Cockcroft, Crawford, & Lemaitre, 2009).

Since most of these factors are closely related to techniques of neutralization, it is obvious that they remain attractive to

criminologists. For, as Hirtenlehner et al. (2013) state, the motivation of the offender is significantly influenced by what they call a “moral filter” which comprises the person’s individual morality and moral norms of the setting within which people operate. In this field particularly, the theory of techniques of neutralization has helped us understand how these two moral codes interweave with the offender. Hence, we can better understand the process of making a criminal career and developing effective mechanisms for preventing professional crime. On the other hand, it is necessary to influence the judiciary to rid itself of prejudice and compassion towards young offenders, many of whom have done the most serious crimes in recent decades, including those which correspond to the methods and actions of organized crime. Furthermore, it is necessary to put pressure on the media to stop fabricating allegations, in a sensational way, which unfoundedly accuse the judicial authorities of corruption and law violations. Such a practice not only serves criminals as justification for their actions (‘those who apply justice’ are worse than ‘their patients’), but also destroys the reputation of the judiciary in the eyes of the citizens.

Finally, techniques of neutralization do not only allow us to understand the behaviour of persons who are in conflict with the law, but also to understand how people explain both their own personal behaviour and that of others. We will mention only some typical examples: these techniques are frequently used by members of certain professions, this is demonstrated by a study on how the security staff of psychiatric facilities in Canada justify the use of violence against their patients (Johnston & Kilty, 2016); or even of greater significance is the existence of a specific ‘culture of denial’ which Stan Cohen wrote about. In this culture, characterized by denial of guilt by its state and its compatriots for serious violations of international law, one of the most important elements are exactly the techniques about which Sykes and Matza (1957) wrote.

We conclude on the basis of the foregoing discussion that the techniques of neutralization in our time have not lost any of their currency, and perhaps represent one of the most provocative issues for future criminological research as we move ahead in this decade and the next.

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## Kdo vzbuja občutke krivde? Moralna nevtralizacija mladoletnih prestopnikov v Srbiji

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Prispevek se osredotoča na uporabo tehnik nevtralizacije med mladoletnimi prestopniki v Srbiji. Pojemovni okvir temelji na teoriji nevtralizacije, ki sta jo razvila ameriška sociologa Sykes in Matza. Cilj študije je ugotoviti, v kolikšni meri mladoletni prestopniki uporabljajo tehnike racionalizacije za upravičenje svojega vedenja, in preveriti, ali obstaja povezava med takšnimi utemeljitvami, sociodemografskimi dejavniki družin in samopodobo mladoletnih prestopnikov. V študijo so bili vključeni vsi mladoletni prestopniki, ki so bili v času raziskave (2017) nastanjeni v popravnem domu Kruševac ( $N = 153$ ). Avtorji so za pridobitev podatkov o tehnični racionalizaciji uporabili nekoliko spremenjeno različico vprašalnika o moralni nevtralizaciji, ki sta ga razvila Ribeaud in Eisner. Ugotovitve so pokazale, da večina anketirancev uporablja tehnike nevtralizacije za upravičenje lastnega odklonskega vedenja. Mladoletni prestopniki z različnim socioekonomskim statusom in družinsko strukturo se nagibajo k različnim oblikam upravičevanja svojega vedenja, prav tako pa samopodoba mladoletnih prestopnikov vpliva na racionalizacijo odklonskega vedenja. V splošnem ugotovitve študije predstavljajo empirično potrditev teorije nevtralizacije in njenih temeljnih konceptov.

**Ključne besede:** nevtralizacija, racionalizacija, mladoletniško prestopništvo, popravn dom, Srbija

UDK: 343.915(497.11)