Techniques of Neutralizing the Trafficking of Women

A Case Study of an Active Trafficker in Greece

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most enduring sociological theories is Robert Merton’s strain theory. One of the popular spin-offs of the symbolic interactionist perspective was the work of Gresham Sykes and David Matza, who suggested a new criminological theory of juvenile delinquency – a popular theme during this period, and developed a different theoretical perspective, which challenged the dominant one that there are specific and fundamental differences between delinquents and non-delinquents. However, depending on the source, the theory has been interpreted as a variation of social control theory or social learning theory. Nevertheless, Sykes and Matza argued that a significant amount of delinquency and criminality is based on the offenders’ justifications of their activities that are seen as “valid by the delinquent but not by the legal system or the society at large”. The five techniques of offenders’ justification of their criminal activities or techniques of neutralization that were proposed were:

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6 G. Sykes and D. Matza, *loc. cit.*
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a) the denial of the victim, b) the denial of responsibility, c) the denial of injury, d) the condemnation of the condemners, and e) the appeal to a higher loyalty. They contend that these techniques could be considered as one element of some more general theory just as Freud’s defence mechanisms are seen as part of the psychoanalytic theory. In fact, the techniques of neutralization can be regarded as an extension of Freud’s defence mechanisms.7

Sykes and Matza proposed these techniques based on research on male juvenile delinquents in the United States,8 however, they are not limited to juvenile delinquents but other groups also use them to justify their activities, protect their image and themselves from self-blame, and neutralize their sense of guilt.

The basic premise is that whether an individual will obey or disobey societal rules is dependant upon a person’s ability to rationalize as appropriate a particular transgression. To do so assumes a degree of conscious or unconscious distortion of reality. Hence a potential offender needs to neutralize their sense of guilt. For example, Sykes and Matza (1957) point out, the techniques of neutralization ‘are needed to shield the individual from the force of his/her own internalized values, and delinquents often appear to suffer from feelings of guilt and shame’.9

Criminological research throughout the Anglo-Saxon world has focused on a number of individuals and/or groups that commit criminal activities of one kind or another, and on behaviours that are “easily mitigated”.10 Examples of such research are the one from Jason Ditton (1977) on pilfering bread salesmen,11 and Hayano (1977) on the professional poker player.12 Other research has focused on more serious offending such as this by Levi (1981) on the professional ‘hitmen’,13 on rapists,14 and even police officers.15 Finally, Yochelson and Samenow (1976) observed that even many of the chronic offenders they studied denied that they were criminals (e.g., it

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7 L. Cao, loc. cit.
8 G. Sykes and D. Matza, loc. cit.
9 Cited in L. Cao, loc. cit., p. 49.