

# Confessions of a Serial Killer: A Neutralisation Analysis

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/hsx](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/hsx)**Mark Pettigrew<sup>1</sup>** 

## Abstract

An analysis is offered of a confession given to detectives by a serial killer who, at the time of his arrest, admitted to the murder of 15 men. Qualitative analysis, using Sykes and Matza's techniques of neutralization as a theoretical base, reveals several attempts to mitigate his crimes and offer some justification to his killings. Through such analysis, it is possible to discern some psychological mechanisms that facilitate the commission of multiple homicides over a period of time, allowing a mentally fit offender to retrospectively rationalize his killings, and even provide some insight into how victims were selected.

## Keywords

serial killing, confession, techniques of neutralization, victims, homicide

## Introduction

As noted by Culhane, Hilstad, Freng, and Gray (2011), the serial killer is the most demonized but least understood of criminals. Pivotal, we know very little of such offenders that comes by way of interviews; information gathering is problematized by issues of access and even the varying definition of serial killing among researchers. Definitions of serial killing have ranged from a minimum number of two to four victims, with a cooling off period of varying lengths of time between murders (Fox & Levin, 2015). As such, in the myriad of structural and situational accounts and theories of serial killing, there is no singular theory that explains the phenomenon. However, as with other areas of offending behavior, it is doubtful a unifying theory will ever account for all examples of serial killing; how the offending behavior was created. Capturing the killer at the earliest opportunity is a particular challenge for law

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enforcement and, so, in that regard, there has been some shift of focus from explaining serial killing to identifying serial killers at large. Harold Shipman killed 250 people over 20 years before he was captured; Peter Sutcliffe the “Yorkshire Ripper” attacked at least 20 women, 13 fatally, over a 5-year period before he was apprehended; Fred and Rosemary West, together, murdered at least 10 young women and girls for over 15 years before being discovered. When killers are able to operate for so long without detection, there are obvious questions as to how they were able to do so. In that regard, James and Gossett (2018) note that very little is known of how serial killers manage their identities, how they use verbalized neutralizations to negotiate and present self-conceptions, or how such statements allow for the maintenance of morally decent selves through impression management (James & Gossett, 2018).

To offer some justification or excuse for killing is not uncommon, derivations of “he asked for it” or “he had it coming” not only are frequent but also have been incorporated into profiling typologies. Even in the seminal, if now somewhat relegated typology, advanced by R. M. Holmes and DeBurger (1985), a distinct category of killer, the mission-orientated killer, will justify his actions on the basis that he is performing a service in eliminating a certain group, ridding the world of prostitutes, for example. Yet, such justifications need not be the rationale for killing and can be found at a much lower level. Even throwaway comments made by some killers can reveal some personal sense of mitigation, excuse, or justification for the murder(s) they have committed. British serial killer Myra Hindley, for example, somewhat famously remarked, in reference to her youngest victim, whom she procured for her partner and sexually abused with him, “That girl shouldn’t have been out at that time of night” (Roberts, 2002). Rationalizing and justifying to themselves, their crimes, mitigating their responsibility, speaks to how they are able to go about their daily lives without arousing the suspicion of those around them.

Several authors have noted that despite serial killing being the site of considerable academic interest, there is no theory, sociological or psychological, that adequately addresses the etiology of the serial killer (see, for example, Edelstein, 2015; S. T. Holmes, Tewksbury, & Holmes, 1999). In that vein, S. T. Holmes et al. (1999) offer their theory of fractured identity syndrome. Building on Cooley’s (1902) theory of actual social identity and Goffman’s (1963) theory of virtual social identity, the authors assert that the serial killer, often in his or her adolescent years, suffers a social event, or series of events, which results in a fracture of his or her personality. The fracture does not destroy the personality and is not visible to the outside world but is acutely felt by the individual. The authors cite examples such as Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and Andrew Cunanan as examples of killers who maintained a public persona while keeping the fractured part of their identity hidden.

Serial killers have exerted great amounts of energy to keep their fractured identities secret. A managed identity is constructed and consistently presented in social encounters; this virtual identity presents the individual as a regular normal member of society. The fractured identity is hidden from public view. (S. T. Holmes et al., 1999, p. 269)

So, a trauma creates a fracture in the personality but the individual is still able to appear conventional and as conforming to society's shared norms of behavior. How a serial killer presents himself to the world, how he is able to function as a member of society, as a coworker, friend, neighbor, husband speaks to the ability to compartmentalize different aspects of behavior and personality.

Despite the assertion of Nee (2004) that the offenders' point of view is rarely considered, in the context of self-presentation, there is a body of research that is devoted to the exploration of how the offender manages his or her identity and how he or she subjectively assesses, and presents, his or her offending. Hochstetler, Copes, and Williams (2010) found, in their interviews with carjackers, offenders differentiated their own violent behaviors, as situational or excusable, from those behaviors that authentically characterize violent others. Presser, meanwhile, found in her interviews with 27 violent offenders that a range of excuses and justifications were offered to mitigate their actions, specifically, (a) victims are to blame for harm that stems from their provocation, (b) it is not so bad to harm victims who are also offenders, (c) one did not harm if one did not intend to harm, (d) harms that one has been legally sanctioned for negate harms that one has caused, and (e) harms that one has sustained negate harms that one has caused (Presser, 2003).

Forsyth (2015) offers a case study of serial killer Ronald Dominique who, like the offender presented here, was a homosexual who preyed on men, some of whom were willing to have sex for money. Dominique killed at least 23 men in Louisiana between 1997 and 2006, yet simultaneously was a well-respected and well-considered part of his community, helpful to his neighbors, a volunteer helping senior citizens at the weekend but, as Forsyth notes, "Even serial killers are conformist most of the time" (Forsyth, 2015, p. 863). It is the ability to cope with duality, the two different spheres of life, which make serial killers dangerous and difficult to apprehend, to go about their daily routine without alerting suspicion (Forsyth, 2015).

Particularly, little is known of how serial killers, who Forsyth notes are conformist most of the time, are able to temporarily release themselves from conventional reality (James & Gossett, 2018). Using techniques of neutralization, such as those described by Sykes and Matza (1957), allows the offender to protect his self-image and justify or excuse the behaviors of the hidden/private self, and more easily present, with belief, his public self. James and Gossett (2018) interpret neutralizations as moral boundaries, socially approved linguistic devices that can be employed when a person's conduct is questioned and serve to mitigate responsibility or negate the conduct, and its consequences (James & Gossett, 2018). Neutralization techniques not only allow offenders to engage in criminality without damage to their self-concept but also allow them to drift in and out of offending while maintaining their commitments to conventional norms, morals, and behaviors (Copes & Williams, 2007; James & Gossett, 2018).

## Theoretical Background

"I didn't mean it." "I didn't really hurt anybody." "They had it coming to them." "Everybody's picking on me." "I didn't do it for myself." These slogans or their variants, we hypothesize, prepare the juvenile for delinquent acts. (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 669)

The techniques of neutralization advanced by Sykes and Matza (1957) are techniques that allow offenders to rationalize their actions, their crimes, and to protect them from self-blame and the blame of others. Such rationalizations occur after the deviant behavior has been committed but the authors note, pivotally, that there is reason to believe that they can precede such behavior and facilitate action (Sykes & Matza, 1957). The theory offered by Sykes and Matza was predicated on juvenile delinquency, which is suggestive of intent, on behalf of the authors, to try and explain youth offending at a low level of seriousness. There is, however, no logical reason as to why the theory cannot be extended more widely to cover more serious offending perpetrated by adults.

Sykes and Matza assert that much delinquency is based on an unrecognized extension of defenses to crimes such as necessity, insanity, or self-defense, for example, in the form of justifications for offending and deviance that are subjectively felt as valid by the offender, if not by the legal system or wider society (Sykes & Matza, 1957). The authors articulate five techniques of neutralization: the denial of responsibility, the denial of injury, the denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and the appeal to higher loyalties. When one or more techniques of neutralization is employed by the offender, the authors assert, the social controls that serve to inhibit deviant motivational patterns are rendered inoperative, leaving the individual free to engage in delinquent behavior without serious damage to his or her self-image (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

The denial of responsibility translates into an account of deviancy and offending that negates personal accountability where blame is placed on, for example, bad companions or unloving parents. The denial of injury questions whether anyone has clearly been harmed by the deviant act or actions. When this technique is employed, then the offender may feel as though his behavior has not caused any great harm, even if it does run contrary to the law. The denial of the victim entails questioning the injury; it may be claimed, instead, as a rightful retaliation or punishment. In such instances the victim might be transformed into someone as deserving of injury, as an appropriate target for harm. In condemnation of the condemners, the offender shifts the focus of attention from himself on to those who accuse him, on their own motives and behavior. With this technique of neutralization, the police, as an example, may be painted as brutal, stupid, and corrupt. Finally, when appealing to higher loyalties, the offender places the demands of a smaller social group above those of larger society. In an example of this technique, the offender will give precedence to the demands of his or her gang, friendship group, or clique.

Somewhat contentiously, James and Gossett posit that the serial killer need not believe in the neutralizations he offers to mitigate his actions,

Even if serial killers feel no guilt due to their crimes, or believe any of the neutralizations they provide, they may still offer these when discussing their crimes because they know that normal people would offer neutralizations, feel guilt or shame over killing, and there are social rewards for admitting remorse and/or giving reasons and motives to their actions. (James & Gossett, 2018, p. 4)

However, techniques of neutralization are called upon to protect the self-image, such protection, such neutralization of guilt or shame is what allows the killers to drift back

into conformity, to continue about their daily lives without damage to their sense of self. As such, there must, logically, be some conviction behind the neutralizations for them to be functional.

Although it has been 60 years since the articulation of neutralization theory, it continues to be a well-researched facet of offending (see, for example, Gottschalk & Smith, 2011; Leeper Piquero, Tibbetts, & Blankenship, 2005; LI Chi-mei, 2008; Shoenberger, Heckert, & Heckert, 2012). Indeed, specific criminal and deviant behaviors have been the subject of a neutralization analysis: domestic violence (Wood, 2004), animal rights activism (Liddick, 2013), shoplifting (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003), sexual violence (Boyle & Walker, 2016), and war killing (Kooistra & Mahoney, 2016). Yet, serial killing, with some exceptions, remains somewhat free from a neutralization analysis despite such techniques appearing in widely circulated interviews with notorious offenders. von Beroldingen, for example, recalls when interviewing serial killer Edmund Kemper, he lamented being let down by his mother, by the courts, and by society and, in so doing, rejected full responsibility for his crimes (von Beroldingen, 1974).

There have been some recent attempts at applying Sykes and Matza's techniques of neutralization to serial killing, in the abstract (Edelstein, 2015) and practically, to offender accounts of their crimes. However, those attempts at practical application are of limited utility owing to deficiencies in research design and/or analysis. For example, James and Gossett (2018) gathered their data on 40 serial killers from a range of serial killer encyclopedias produced for the mass market; the information on which they base their conclusions has been edited by a third party. It is not even adequately stated that the authors are referring to the actual words of the killers. Moreover, as an example of weakness in analysis, their conclusions regarding the prevalence of denial of responsibility are premised on a literal interpretation of the phrase to include offenders who claim their innocence. In the original articulation of the theory, however, it is not innocence that is proclaimed but responsibility denied, owing to forces outside the offender's control; bad parenting or being raised in a poor neighborhood, for example (Sykes & Matza, 1957). In another example, Coston (2015) administered surveys to serial sex murderers to assess the prevalence of neutralization techniques; of the 75 surveys dispatched, 38 were returned and included in the study. Notwithstanding the financial inducement for participation, the survey listed the techniques of neutralization, and respondents were asked to rank those techniques in order of their applicability. It is entirely possible that some offenders had never considered such techniques; it is possible that they suffered from mental illness, psychosis, or personality disorders, for example, and no caveat is made in that regard. Although self-report measures have a demonstrated utility (see, for example, Culhane, Walker, & Hildebrand, 2017, and their investigation into psychopathy and homicide), neutralization techniques need not be consciously enacted but can be a subconscious defense of self-image. The data here are in an interview format, a police interview, in which the offender presented neutralization techniques in a conversational style, without being given the opportunity to ponder his response and specifically consider how those techniques might apply.

## Method

This article analyzes the confession offered to detectives by a serial killer who targeted homosexual men in London over a period of 5 years. Initially, the killer would tell detectives that he had murdered 15 men, a total he later reduced to 12. The suspect was in his mid-30s who lived alone and worked in a semiskilled occupation. He was a moderately open homosexual; he would not hide his sexuality but would not readily disclose it either. Unable to find and maintain a mutually fulfilling relationship, as his resulting depression, and social isolation, increased, so did his alcohol consumption. Prison records would subsequently describe him as mentally sound and of above average intelligence.

That the killer was able to operate for 5 years without detection, killing and then dismembering and storing bodies in his own home, while maintaining an outwardly normal persona as a competent worker and helpful, friendly neighbor makes this case somewhat ideal for a neutralization analysis; how two extremely different public and private lives were reconciled in the same person. This case not only offers insight into how a serial killer managed to incorporate his homicidal activity into his daily life without any damage to his sense of self but also provides a window into understanding how some serial killers are able to operate for so long without arousing the suspicion of those around them. Some serial killers are apprehended relatively quickly, Peter Moore was active for 4 months before being identified, Steve Wright for 2 months, and Joanna Dennehy for less than 2 weeks. The killer presented here, however, was active for half a decade and, until discovered, police were unaware that a serial killer was at large. He was able to engage in homicidal activity for a sustained period and still lead an apparently conventional life without arousing suspicion of those around him.

Through qualitative analysis of his confessions to two detectives from the Metropolitan Police, given over several days, stored at the National Archives, it is found that the killer made several covert mitigations and excuses for the murders he committed. After reading and rereading the confessions, a line-by-line analysis, adopting an open coding approach, generated categories of rhetorical mitigation. Specifically, these rhetorical devices can be grouped into categories under the umbrella of techniques of neutralization first articulated by Sykes and Matza (1957). By grouping together the suspect's comments on (a) victims, (b) responsibility and the circumstances of the killer, (c) the homicides, and (d) references made to the police and evading detection, the words of the killer could be analyzed for attempts at justification, mitigation, and rationalization.

It is noted, that the results from one case cannot be generalized and uniformly applied to all serial killers. In addition, it is also noted that in the time since these confessions were given to detectives, the structure of police interviews has evolved, as have the rules and regulatory procedures surrounding them. As such, the atmosphere of police interviewing has progressed from a relatively comfortable conversational style here, with the suspect being allowed to smoke, for example, to a much more regulated setting, making case-by-case comparisons, across time, somewhat problematic.

## Results and Discussion

In the early 1980s, drainage engineers were called to a property to investigate reports of a blocked drainage system, which serviced a communal apartment block. On inspecting the drains the engineers found remnants of human flesh and notified the police. Detectives visited the property to question residents, and on visiting the suspect, found him to be storing dismembered human remains of three victims. Before reaching the police station, he told detectives that he was responsible for the deaths of 15 men. Taken into custody, detectives sat down to interview the suspect whom, one recalls, “could not stop talking”; he is described by the same detective as intelligent, well educated, and articulated (Chambers, 1985).

### *Denial of the Victim*

The detective asks the identity of the men found at his home and he elaborates, in particular, upon the background and circumstances of one victim,

. . . He had on him a bail sheet from the Met. Police . . . He had drugs on him, I think he was a drug addict . . . He had cuts on his arms and had been to the hospital to have them stitched.

He went out the room at some stage and into the bathroom. I realised afterwards he was probably injecting himself with drugs . . .

The suspect was asked about the identity of other victims, and he describes one as,

19/20 years old. He said he'd been in trouble with the police and he'd had psychiatric treatment . . . he seemed to have a persecution complex. He'd been in a home for kids who couldn't be controlled.

Later, when asked to describe another victim whom he attempted to murder he says,

. . . he was a male prostitute. He said that he was very short of money. He gave me a hard luck story . . . [he was] into bondage.

In describing another he says,

His facial features were pale, hollow, withdrawn and he had a general appearance of looking grossly undernourished . . . he intimated to me that he was living rough. He looked like a vagrant. He was a vagrant type.

After this victim was murdered, the suspect told detectives,

I remember thinking to myself that “you’ve got no more trouble now squire” or something like that. At that moment I thought I was doing him a favour. I had this impression that his life was one long suffering.

When the status of a victim is undermined, when the character of the victim is tarnished in some way, then the perpetrator is lessened in his or her accountability, the level of accountability the offender places up himself. Child killers evoke such public hatred and vitriol because their victims cannot be tarnished, their innocence cannot be questioned, particularly, the younger those victims are. The more the character of a victim can be undermined, the more responsibility that can be attributed to them. This phenomenon is well known in rape cases; victims can often have their integrity questioned in relation to allegations of sexual promiscuity, his or her reputations—and testimony—tarnished by prosecution lawyers (Lee, 1997; Temkin, 1993; Winter, 2002). In the context of serial killing, the same principle operates in relation to victims. Myra Hindley, for example, convicted in 1966 for the murders of two children and as an accessory to another became, over time, the icon of evil for the British public,<sup>1</sup> and it was one victim, in particular, who caused widespread revulsion of her, and her appeals for freedom (Pettigrew, 2016). The sexual abuse of a 10-year-old girl, Lesley Ann Downy, was recorded by Hindley's partner, and it was Hindley's voice that could be heard on the tape directing the child, which, it has been reported, the couple would play before they had sex (Cooke, 2001). Hindley remains the icon of feminine evil even now, 15 years after her death (Pettigrew, 2016). That status was not even threatened by the crimes committed by Rosemary West and her husband, Fred West, discovered in 1994. Routinely, the pair were involved in the prolonged sexual torture and murder of young women. Fred West committed suicide before his trial, Rosemary West was convicted of 10 counts of murder. The details of West's crimes, even in comparison with Hindley's, are shocking in their depravity (Campbell, Masters, Persaud, & Wilson, 1996) but West has never been vilified in any way approaching that of Hindley. The difference between the two cases and the feeling toward the two women is their victims. West's trial was underpinned by attempts at victim blaming, the murdered women were destitute, sexually promiscuous women; the same could not be said of Hindley's victims, particularly 10-year-old Lesley Ann Downy (Winter, 2002). Thus, Rosemary West could not replace Myra Hindley as the icon of feminine evil (Birch, 1993). The same principle is evident in this case, the suspect himself reduces the status of his victims and their worth.

All but one of the victims in this case were, according to the interviewing detectives, on the "fringes of life," they were either "alcoholics or drug addicts" (Chambers, 1985, p. 144). The killer tells detectives, of his victims, they were addicted to drugs, in trouble with the police, the product of children's care homes, mentally ill, prostitutes, homeless, vagrants, and sexual deviants. These were people whom he infers were a drain on society; one victim, for example, had recently been discharged from hospital when cuts on his arms required stitches. In targeting such people, there is the rational thought that they are less likely to be missed, to be reported to the police as missing. More though, by ridding society of such social undesirables, then the actions of the offender are not, to him, wholly wrong in light of his victim's circumstances. In the murder of one particular victim, a vagrant, the killer recalls that he thought he was doing him a favor, thinking to himself, "you've got no more trouble now squire." The killer was not targeting anyone of any social consequence, he was ending people's

misery, he was performing a community service. According to Sykes and Matza, “To deny the existence of the victim, then, by transforming him into a person deserving injury is an extreme form of a phenomenon . . . namely, the delinquent’s recognition of appropriate and inappropriate targets for his delinquent acts” (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 668). By denying the victim, in this case, the killer is not only mitigating what he has done but reveals an element of his *modus operandi*, how victims were selected, the criteria that made them attractive targets.

### *Denial of Responsibility*

As the interview opens, the suspect is immediately asked how the human remains came to be in his apartment; his reply is immediate, but with a caveat to killing,

There’s some more in a tea chest in a corner of that room . . . the total of which is the remains of three people. I killed them by strangulation—quickly. I get nothing from inflicting pain. It’s just a compulsion when I’ve drunk [alcohol]. I used something like string to do it. It was quick.

When asked how he had met the victim in question, or the other two, he again lays some preparatory groundwork for mitigation, which could be called on at a later date,

I can’t really remember when you go on the piss you can’t remember. When I drank a Bacardi at home I would then go out.

The detective asks if, when he was out drinking, he had invited the men home with him,

Sometimes they would invite themselves.

The suspect was asked to describe those men whose body parts had been recovered from his home, and in describing one of the victims, he recalls,

He was 5"11 approx. perhaps between 5"9-5"11. He was stronger physically than I was.

When the detectives ask for more details about the death of the first victim found at his home, the suspect explains what happened,

I sat with headphones on listening to music . . . I can’t remember anything else until I woke up the next morning. He was still in the armchair and he was dead.

The detective later challenges the suspect,

I think you went out looking for these people with the express intention of luring them back to your flat, plying them with drink and then killing them.

To which he replies,

I can agree with part of what you say. I do go out in search of company. When I voluntarily go out to drink I do not have the intention at that time to do these things. Things may happen afterwards drink-wise but they are not for-planned. My main purpose is to have a good drink. I'm certainly not consciously aware of what you are saying. I seek company first and hope everything will be alright.

The detective asks the suspect, quite plainly,

Why did you kill them?

To which he replies,

I've been trying to work it out . . . I'm under great pressure. I drink to relieve the pressure. I think I'm a chronic alcoholic. I have been drinking large amounts over the years . . . I can drink a bottle of Bacardi, but I'm still mobile. I've never been thrown out of a pub. I need more and more alcohol to get the feeling of being drunk. Even after a bottle I can still talk rationally.

He goes on to elaborate,

I think something must trigger when I'm drunk to stir me to commit those killings but I don't know.

At several stages in the interviews, the suspect tells detectives that he is drunk when he kills. His main purpose when he goes out drinking is not to lure victims to their death, at his hands, but "to have a good drink"; he drinks, he seeks company and hopes "everything will be alright."

As noted by Beauregard and Proulx (2007), the consumption of alcohol by both offenders and victims in the sexual homicide of men is not uncommon, as with homicides generally (Flowers, 2012). In a study of 1,594 homicide perpetrators in England and Wales, Shaw et al. (2006) found that 42% had a history of alcohol misuse or dependence; a similar finding is reported in other jurisdictions (Dearden & Payne, 2009). The killer in the case presented here told detectives he believed he was an alcoholic. Borne out in this case is the assertion of Cartwright, "alcohol is best understood as functioning like a disinhibitor, making manifest what otherwise may have been controlled. Therefore its role needs to be considered within the context of other variables such as personality" (Cartwright, 2014, p. 76). Similarly, Amir (1971) suggests that killers may want to use intoxication as a way in which to excuse their offending behavior, as the killer does in this instance.

Perhaps more applicable though, in this context, is the assertion of Langevin, Ben-Aron, Wright, Marchese, and Handy (1988) that substance abuse can, reasonably, be a factor in the commission of homicide by disinhibiting rage and stimulating sexual desire. That the killer blames alcohol, and an intoxicated state, is a denial of full responsibility for his actions. It is, of course, a rational choice for someone to drink to the point of intoxication, knowing what the consequences of that state might be but,

pivotaly, the killer offers some mitigation for even that decision. On his own account, he is a chronic alcoholic, he drinks to relieve pressure but he can drink a bottle of Bacardi and still be rational. So, on that point, killing is inferred as something that cannot be controlled or decided by the killer; it is, in effect, the intoxication that is responsible. Moreover, in the context of alcohol dependency, a physiological need and craving for alcohol (Verheul, van den Brink, & Geerlings, 1999), the killer did not say merely that he likes to drink but uses the particular phrase “chronic alcoholic.”

Although later determined to be untrue, the offender denied being homosexual when asked by detectives. Similarly, a survivor of an attack by the killer was interviewed by detectives, and his witness statement reveals his first words to be, “I am a married man and would like to say at the outset that I have no homosexual tendencies whatsoever.” Recorded later in his witness statement, he says “I certainly didn’t get the impression that [the killer] was homosexual and if I had got that impression I wouldn’t have gone off with him. The subject of homosexuality never entered any part of our conversation either then or subsequently.” The topic of sexuality is important in so much as it relates to image and responsibility, particularly the responsibility of the heterosexual man to fight off any attack by a homosexual predator. Studies have found that people, particularly heterosexual men, blame a heterosexual victim when he does not fight back (see, for example, Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2001, 2006; Davies, Rogers, & Bates, 2008; Parkinson, 2014). In this instance, the killer, with regard to one victim, specifically recalls his height as 5'11 and the victim being stronger, physically, than he was. There is in that statement an inference of responsibility for the victim to successfully repel his attack. The suspect’s intoxication and the expectation that men, particularly those physically stronger than the suspect, should be able to successfully defend against the sexually motivated attack of another male, combine to reduce the full responsibility of the suspect.

### *Condemnation of the Condemners*

In some attempt at mitigation, the suspect voluntarily offers additional information,

Not all incidents have resulted in death. On about seven occasions I have made unsuccessful attempts to kill people. People have woken up in my flat with marks round their necks and said to me, “what happened?” Police were called a couple of times and allegations made but nothing ever happened.

Later in the interview, the suspect recalls how he felt while he was carrying out the killings and, in particular, after he had killed his seventh victim,

On reflection, the next day, because there seemed to be little or no interest in my activities, being allowed to carry those things out unhindered that I was taking on a quasi God role. I thought I could do anything I want. While this was going on there were people upstairs, people next door but nobody knew. I went to bed, had some sleep and within a few hours I was up again and I put him under the floorboards.

In the 5-year period in which the killer was operating, several men successfully escaped after he attempted to strangle them. As noted by the interviewing detective,

... when he had several other victims under the floorboards, he invited a man back who he attempted to strangle and who in fact had not had sufficient drink to render him almost unconscious. He came round and there was a bit of a fight and [he] got a bit of a bump on the head with a candlestick. The police were called in the persons of an inspector and a sergeant, but [he] was quite well educated and quite articulate and he was able to convince the police officers who came there that it was more or less a lovers' tiff—a homosexual tiff, as it were—and they departed without having had their suspicions aroused. (Chambers, 1985, p. 140)

So, police officers were called to a residence where a man reports that someone has attempted to strangle him. Officers enter the property that contains the decaying corpses of five men, but are satisfied on the testimony of the suspect that nothing has happened. The police, at that time, inferred that if anything had taken place, it had been nothing more than a quarrel between lovers. When interviewed, the killer says that police were called more than once. Still, until the day that detectives were called to make enquiries in relation to the pieces of human flesh that had been discovered in the drains, there was no suspicion that anybody had been murdered, no suspicion that a serial killer was at large. As his activities went without suspicion, the killer felt like he was in a “quasi God role,” free to do as he wanted. That victims had escaped from him and notified police, on more than one occasion, speaks to the efficacy of police work at that time. Sykes and Matza note, particularly, that in condemning the condemners, the delinquent may accuse the police of being “stupid” (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 668). Police were called, allegations were made, but nothing happened; there is, in that comment, an insinuation that if the police had been more efficient in the handling of complaints, then a number of men would not have been killed. There is, thus, a responsibility placed on the police to stop the killer; when they fail to do so, they take on some blame for the deaths of additional victims.

## Conclusion

**Interviewer:** I still can't understand you picking up a dirty scruffy hungry vagrant—for what purpose, because you felt sorry for him?

**Suspect:** Temporarily maybe. The thing is I can put somebody under the floorboards and forget about it. I can meet new people afterwards.

The techniques of neutralization articulated by the killer in his confession to detectives are significant in a number of ways. First, when the killer can rationalize his behavior to some measurable degree, using such techniques, individually or as a group, then they free him to continue killing. Second, by rationalizing the killing of particular victims, drug addicts, criminals, or prostitutes, those who could be categorized as socially marginalized, by denying the victim, then it is possible to observe how victims

were selected. It is the selection of those particular victims that further psychologically frees him toward homicidal action, people who are of no consequence, who would not be missed, who would, on the killer's assessment, be better off dead. Third, when the killer denies full responsibility and shifts, somewhat covertly, blame onto the victim by suggesting it was their action, in inviting themselves to his home, or inaction, in failing to defend themselves, that facilitated their murder, then he is able to convince himself that actions and victims are fated to occur, again contributing toward the continuation of killing. Similarly, this denial of responsibility can also be achieved, as was done in this case, by blaming an intoxicated state. Finally, when activities go undetected for some period of time, when the police can be blamed for failing to apprehend him, the police who are condemning his behavior can be condemned themselves as allowing him to kill and costing the lives of additional victims. When the police fail to apprehend him, he feels emboldened and killings can escalate in their frequency, as they did in this case. This affords the killer an omnipotent God-like feeling, he was allowed to keep killing with no efforts made to stop him. This feeling too, allows the offender to go about his daily life without the burden of guilt or remorse, psychologically freeing him to continue killing.

As Sykes and Matza note in their presentation of their theory of techniques of neutralization, those devices, those techniques may not fully shield the offender from the full force of their own internalized values, or the reactions of others who do conform, but they are critical in lessening the effectiveness of social controls prior to the act, and then reducing guilt and shame after it has been committed. Using techniques of neutralization in the analysis of a killer's confession reveals not only how an offender is able to mitigate his actions retrospectively but also how he is able to protect his self-image during the commission of his crimes. As such, James and Gossett's assertion that the offender need not believe in the techniques of neutralization he articulates is undermined (James & Gossett, 2018). That the suspect in this case was so ready to divulge information that, in the words of an interviewing detective, "he just could not stop talking" (Chambers, 1985, p. 137) is not without significance. The readiness with which he spoke strongly correlates with his actions over the 5-year period in which he carried out his murders. He was able to kill men, leave bodies at home, sat in arm-chairs, while he went about his daily activities. He was able to dismember corpses on the floor of his kitchen and then prepare an evening meal. He was able to sleep in the same room as the rotting dissected parts of his victims. For 5 years he was able to continue his everyday life with the same normality as before without arousing the suspicion of friends or coworkers. The deployment of the neutralization techniques outlined above is perhaps an indicator of how he was able to do so. Through the use of those techniques, his self-image could be protected from significant damage, he could view himself as still a functional member of society, proficient worker, friend, and neighbor. With the help of neutralization techniques, the killer was able to compartmentalize his homicidal activity he could, in his own words, "... put somebody under the floorboards and forget about it."

When the offender can find a persistent reason for his actions, particularly one that renders his actions beyond his control, such as drugs or alcohol, then he is

psychologically freed to continue killing. When that reason is combined with a denial of the status of his victims, when he can convince himself he is performing some sort of service to society, then the barriers to offending are overcome. In addition, the employment of those techniques reveals a significant element of his modus operandi, in particular through the denial of his victims and their status. Targeting those who might be deemed socially undesirable, the homeless, prostitutes, vagrants, those who are less likely to be missed and reported as missing to the police, is instructive on how victims are selected. If law enforcement are aware of a serial killer at large, then this point is significant and can be particularly relevant in constructing a profile of the offender.

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### Note

1. Hindley was convicted alongside her partner, Ian Brady, for whom she would procure children for him to sexually abuse and murder. Although only ever tried for her role in three murders, in 1988, Hindley would admit to two further victims and a greater participatory role than she had previously acknowledged regarding the three murders for which she was imprisoned.

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