Neutralization and empiricism

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The concept of neutralization, which has been widely used in the context of cheating, comes from the work of Sykes and Matza (1957) in the field of criminology. When one reads their article, the overwhelming impression is that the authors made a number of observations regarding delinquents and concluded that extant explanations were simply not supported by facts. In the case of the literature on cheating the impression is not one of insight, but rather that the model precedes the facts: ‘we know that our results will confirm this model’ superseded ‘let’s find a model that matches our observations.’ This may mean writing “This attitude, called neutralization, has been found to be an important influence on college students’ cheating behavior. Our results also support this finding” (Passow et al., 2006, references removed) without ever mentioning neutralization again in the article. Saying that one’s results show neutralization is as necessary as writing that cheating is wrong and on the rise. It seems a matter of good manners, not of empirical results.

Neutralization lacks empirical ground

Davy et al. (2007, p. 295) state that “Prior Cheating has a significant positive effect on Neutralization (.792).” In their study, they determine whether students neutralize by asking them whether cheating is acceptable in a number of circumstances (see their Table 1). The positive correlation they found empirically is thus between cheating (here in the past) and belief that cheating is acceptable in some cases. If one does not frame this in terms of ‘neutralization’ one will simply conclude that students who hold cheating as acceptable cheat more. (One can notice that Davy et al. probably have the causation backwards.) The only reason why they found that “prior cheating was also positively related to neutralization, further supporting arguments that the more individuals engaged in unethical/dishonest behaviors, the greater was their need to rationalize and justify those behaviors” (p. 297) is because they lose sight of their own empirical criterion for neutralization: they use a meaning of ‘neutralization’ in their discussion of the results which is completely different from that used in the empirical study. If one uses the same definition consistently, one gets completely different results.

They also write: “If one is not engaging in unethical behavior, there is no need to develop rationalizations to neutralize any sense of disapproval by oneself or others” (p. 286). (This is very similar to claiming that innocents do not need a lawyer, so someone with a lawyer is guilty.) If one removes the negative connotations of “rationalizations” and “neutralize,” this gives: if one is not engaging in unethical behavior, there is no need to provide justifications to counter any sense of disapproval by oneself or others. But this statement is obviously false. Someone killing in self-defense will have to provide justifications so as not to be sent to jail. The statement of Davy et al. holds only in the case of rationalizations, not for valid justifications, i.e. they can prove that there is neutralization only by assuming that there is neutralization.

They write that “those who neutralize profess to support a societal norm but rationalize to permit them to violate that norm” (p. 285). This is indeed what Sykes and Matza (1957) hold: the neutralizing delinquent holds that crime is wrong but looks for justifications. Consequently, someone who would not believe crime to be wrong could not neutralize (it would be logically impossible). So Davy and her coworkers, who never check that cheaters support the norm against cheating (no question in their

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survey addresses this point), cannot show that there is neutralization based on their own definition of it. Similarly, Haines et al. (1986) claim that “the use of such [neutralization] techniques conveys the message that students recognize and accept cheating as an undesirable behavior.” But to show that there is neutralization, one must first show that the students “accept cheating as an undesirable behavior” (by definition). So this is blatantly circular. (Moreover, recognizing that a given behavior is generally deemed undesirable is not the same as believing that this behavior is actually wrong: Jews fleeing Germany in the 1930s and 40s recognized that the Nazis held them to be an inferior race, but they did not thereby accept that the Nazis were right.)

As a rule of thumb authors assume neutralization and interpret their results in its light. For instance, Carpenter et al. (2006) found that “71.0 percent of students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, ‘it is wrong to cheat no matter what the circumstances’” and concluded that “students are willing to engage in behavior that they believe to be wrong.” In fact, this implies that 29% of college students do not agree that cheating is always wrong, so if these students cheat they need not “engage in behavior that they believe to be wrong” (they simply engage in behavior the authors believe to be wrong). “Once we’ve decided that someone’s action is morally wrong, her efforts to challenge that premise, no matter how well-reasoned, merely serve to confirm our view of her immorality” (Kohn, 2007).

Neutralization lacks theoretical ground

As already mentioned, neutralization could be invoked in situations other than cheating: one may for instance speak of neutralization in the case of self-defense, saying something like ‘some murderers shift blame to the victim by claiming that they had no choice but to murder the victim.’ Evans and Craig (1990) found that teachers are less likely to hold themselves responsible for the cheating of their students than students are to blame the teachers. Can one conclude that teachers use neutralization to shift blame to the students? Sykes and Matza (1957) noted that “the individual can avoid moral culpability for his criminal action—and thus avoid the negative sanctions of society—if he can prove that criminal intent was lacking,” i.e. they recognize that self-defense (e.g.) is not a form of rationalization. They draw a line between valid and invalid justifications: the latter are what they call neutralization. This is in sharp contrast with research on cheating, which assumes that all cheating is wrong, that there can be no legitimate reason to cheat, no extenuating circumstance. For instance, Davy et al. label the questions regarding situations in which cheating may be acceptable ‘neutralization’ and assume (but do not show) that all of these are illegitimate. The original theory makes no such claims, and in fact would not be compatible with them. Modern authors missed this important point, who do not account for the possibility of valid justifications.

In fact, no empirical study can show certain deeds to be wrong, so that no empirical work can distinguish between rationalization and justification. Some theory is needed to determine whether certain circumstances can justify cheating. In the case of delinquency, such theoretical work exists in ethics and in the philosophy of law, but so far nothing has been done concerning cheating (see Bouville, 2007). It is not the point of the present article to ask whether there actually are valid justifications: the point is that unless one proves that these do not exist one cannot know where to draw the line between valid justifications and rationalizations. Consequently, one cannot show that neutralization occurs. Some theory is thus necessary — empirical studies are not sufficient.

Neutralization or incoherence?

Carpenter et al. (2006) found that 30% of students strongly agree that “it is wrong to cheat no matter what the circumstances” yet only 23% strongly agree that cheating is wrong “even if the instructor has done an inadequate job of teaching the course” or “even if the instructor assigned too much material.” Nearly a quarter of the students who hold cheating to be always wrong thus disagree that it is wrong in these circumstances. These answers are not ‘neutralization’: they are incoherent. They mean
that cheating is wrong no matter what the circumstances, yet it is not wrong in more than half the circumstances mentioned. One can therefore safely conclude that there is no way one can safely draw conclusions from such data.

One may change the questions slightly and ask about killing rather than cheating. One would ask people whether killing is wrong and people would answer positively. One would then ask if killing in self-defense is wrong and they would certainly answer negatively. If one points out the discrepancy they would likely say that killing is wrong in general even though there are special cases, such as self-defense. This situation is similar to that of cheating: some students answer that cheating is always wrong but find circumstances in which cheating is not wrong. So if one wishes to conclude that the students who say that cheating is always wrong but not wrong in certain circumstances neutralize, one also has to talk of neutralization in the case of self-defense. It is in fact likely that when asked about killing or cheating out of the blue and in a very general way, people will give an unreflective answer, possibly the answer they think they are supposed to give. When asked about specific cases, they will be more likely to think about these situations in more precise terms and to ponder whether killing or cheating is in fact wrong in such cases. It is thus quite possible that when students say that cheating is wrong we should not interpret this as meaning that cheating is always wrong with no possible exception. Yet, surveys are not interactive and cannot point out possible incompatibilities and ask the students what they really mean. So they cannot tell if students neutralize or answer too fast.

Stephens and Nicholson (in press) interviewed a student who “sees cheating as wrong but finds himself doing it and feeling guilty about it.” The student says: “When I cheat, it’s like I don’t want to but then it still happens but then at the end I feel bad that I did it because I know that I’m not really learning anything.” Another student is “simply not very interested in learning (or working hard at it) and he isn’t much emotionally affected by his cheating, which he acknowledges is wrong.” Both students cheat and say that cheating is wrong. But neither seems to rationalize his cheating: one is too overwhelmed and the other is too underwhelmed. While their attitude toward cheating is as different as it can get, these students may answer questions on cheating in a similar manner and thus look the same to the researcher. This seems to indicate that the equation “cheating + acknowledgment that cheating is wrong = neutralization” is simply far too coarse. Perhaps, understanding cheating is like painting: you cannot do it by numbers.

References


