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A Deadly Balancing Act Between Club and Family:
Neutralization Technique Use in *Sons of Anarchy*

Mia Kelly

University of Wisconsin Eau Claire

Abstract

This analysis explores the various ways different characters in the FX television series *Sons of Anarchy (SOA)* (2008-2014) neutralize their criminal actions. Sykes and Matza's (1957) Neutralization theory asserts that people who violate the law learn to neutralize the conventional attitudes and values of society. Neutralizations allow individuals to drift between outlaw and orthodox behavior. In an analysis of the complete series of *SOA* (92 episodes), I asked (1) *which neutralization techniques are used by characters to justify their criminal behaviors* and (2) *do the techniques differ when societal attachment levels change?* The article identifies how 10 of the shows' characters, with a variety of attachment levels, differently justify and explain their continued criminal actions relating to Neutralization theory. In addition, the findings indicate that individuals with higher levels of societal attachment will use different neutralization techniques than those with lower levels of attachment, offering evidence reflecting Copes' (2003) argument that attachment level would impact which neutralization technique was being used.

Keywords: Techniques of neutralization, societal attachment, *Sons of Anarchy*, cultural criminology, content analysis, television

Introduction

In 1957, Gresham Sykes and David Matza published an article arguing that despite engaging in wrongdoing, delinquents maintain a strong bond to conventional society and to preserving a perception of themselves as good. Delinquent individuals would use neutralization techniques to alleviate any guilt associated with their wrongdoing. Other have since applied neutralization theory to other populations (Copes, 2003; Copes et al., 2013; Topalli, 2005, 2006) and expanded its application exploring additional variables such as level of societal attachment and frequency of offending (Copes, 2003). While empirical support for neutralization theory is mixed, it has been incorporated into many mainstream criminological approaches, giving weight to its inclusion as a social phenomenon. The current study identifies how neutralization theory and its extensions as social phenomena are reflected in an entertainment television program.

In September 2008, Kurt Sutter's biker-themed crime drama premiered on the FX cable channel. *Sons of Anarchy* (SOA) portrays a violently brutal world inhabited by drug cartels, gangsters, a variety of law enforcement agencies, and numerous rival motorcycle clubs. Motorcycle clubs are a very distinct subculture of American life that few in the general public understand. Outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs) were first established in the middle of the 20th century. Back then they were small clubs comprised of social outcasts and petty criminals who were also American-made motorcycle enthusiasts. Over time, some of these clubs evolved into hierarchically structured criminal organizations involved in various illicit activities including drug manufacturing and trafficking, possession and trafficking of illegal weapons, and money laundering. The American Motorcycle Association claimed that true "outlaw clubs were typical of only one percent of the American motorcycling population" (Quinn, 2001, p. 380).

As FX's *The Shield* was preparing to end its final season one of the show's writers, Kurt Sutter, had fully immersed himself in academic literature on "one percent" motorcycle clubs. Sutter even became a participant observer of a Northern California chapter of Hells Angels. Kurt Sutter was gathering as much information as possible in order to create a genuine and authentic television portrayal of an outlaw motorcycle club (Kurutz, 2009). The result was a television series reflective of the scholarly literature on OMGs and depicted the culture of brotherhood and loyalty found among outlaw motorcycle clubs. Many of the characters are morally complex making the show one of the most watched dramas on basic cable (Bibel, 2013). During its seven-season run, SOA became the highest-rated show in the history of FX network with 200 percent audience growth over time (Patten, 2014). Since its finale in 2014, streaming services, including Netflix and Hulu, have hosted the series on their platforms, ensuring the continued presence in the current television media landscape. Drawing on the concepts put forth in Sykes and Matza's (1957) Neutralization theory, this article assesses how ten characters in *Sons of Anarchy* (SOA) neutralize their drifts into and participation in criminal behavior.

Literature Review

Techniques of Neutralization

C. Wright Mills (1940) first suggested that one could lessen moral culpability or feelings of guilt for violating societal norms or laws by verbally rationalizing socially disapproving behaviors. Sykes and Matza (1957) originally applied neutralization theory to youth who simultaneously engaged in delinquent activities while maintaining commitment to conventional norms. They argued that in order to maintain commitment to conventional norms and not feel the guilt and shame associated with violating the norms, one must find a way to rationalize the behavior or neutralize the guilt. However, research has shown that neutralizations are also utilized by adult offenders (Bohner et al., 1996; Copes & Vieraitis, 2009, 2012; Cromwell & Thurman, 2003; Klenowski et al., 2011). Neutralization techniques have been analyzed for a range of criminal offenses (Copes,

2003; Copes & Vieraitis, 2009; Copes et al., 2013; Cromwell & Thurman, 2003), including bias crimes (Byers et al., 1999), sexually abusive priests (Spraitz & Bowen, 2016; Spraitz et al., 2016; Vollman, 2011) and honor crimes (van Baak et al., 2018).

Neutralization theory is comprised of five techniques: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties (Sykes & Matza, 1957). The first neutralization technique, *denial of responsibility*, is used when an offender justifies the behavior by attributing it to acts or forces beyond their control (Sykes & Matza, 1957), including mental illness or substance use. *Denial of injury* questions whether harm has actually occurred. The third technique, *denial of victim*, occurs when an offender believes that their actions were a form of rightful retaliation or punishment and the victim deserved it. When offenders shift the blame from themselves to law enforcement and other people in positions of authority is known as the fourth technique, *condemnation of the condemners*. In essence, offenders view the system as lacking the moral authority to condemn anyone else's behaviors. Sykes and Matza's final neutralization technique, *appeal to higher loyalties*, occurs when an offender justifies their criminal acts because they're done on behalf of a nonconventional social bond such as loyalty to friendship or family. The years following the original study have resulted in the identification of many other neutralizations such as "defense of necessity," "everybody does it" (Coleman, 1998), and "justification by comparison" (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003). Maruna and Copes (2005) argued that it is more important to recognize that neutralizations are being utilized than to have an inventory of all possible neutralizations.

Since the original formulation of neutralization theory, research has shown that even offenders with little to no commitment to the conventional moral order may use neutralizations (Agnew, 1994; Copes, 2003; Copes et al., 2013; Cromwell & Thurman, 2003; Presser, 2004; Thurman, 1984). Neutralizations were most effective at neutralizing guilt for individuals who had less commitment to moral order (Thurman, 1984). Copes (2003) proposed that individuals with different levels of attachment to conventional social order will use different types of neutralizations and with a different desired outcome. Specifically, individuals with less attachment to social order will use neutralizations to manage their identity to others, while those who remain attached to conventional social order will use neutralizations to protect themselves from a negative self-identity (Copes, 2003). Further, offenders with low attachment will be more likely to use denial of the victim neutralization, while offenders with high attachment will favor appeal to higher loyalties. More recently in a study of white-collar offenders, those living as conventional citizens utilized different justifications compared to those living a lifestyle akin to "street hustlers" (Copes et al., 2013). Offenders classified as street hustlers were more likely to use denial of injury, while offenders classified as conventional were more likely to use appeal to higher loyalties (Copes et al., 2013).

Sons of Anarchy

The seven seasons of *SOA* encompass years of gunrunning and numerous other illegal exploits conducted by members and friends of the Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club Redwood Original (SAMCRO) motorcycle club (mirrored after the real Hells Angels motorcycle club). Throughout the series the main protagonist, Jax Teller, struggles with conflicting desires of loyalty, having to reconcile how to be a husband and a father while simultaneously trying to overcome the moral dilemmas associated with the increasing amount of violence and instability involved in the club's activities. Previous research has explored *SOA* in the context of masculinities (Bassett, 2014; Cox & DeCarvalho, 2016; Elsby, 2013; Nijjar, 2018; Wayne, 2014), morality and ethics (Bassett, 2014; Jensen, 2013; Mahon, 2013; Wayne, 2014), Shakespeare's tragedy (Corn, 2013; Sloboda, 2012; Withers, 2010), and other philosophical and theoretical lenses (Dunn & Erbel, 2013; Erbel, 2013; Fosl, 2013; Gravett, 2017; Zanin, 2013).

Discussions of morality and ethics are a central theme of the show. Erbel (2013) analyzed how Aristotle's ethics of virtue and vice were understood in *Sons of Anarchy*, taking on the perspective in which people are neither inherently good nor evil, but have the capacity for both. All the characters in the show exemplify the mixture of virtue and vice found in every human being, which Erbel (2013) argues is part of the show's main appeal. Bassett (2014) analyzed *SOA* through the lenses of Terror Management Theory and Moral Foundations Theory (MFT). The analysis included discussion of how many moral complexities found in *SOA* and how they relate to dimensions of MFT. Mahon (2013) emphasized the importance of loyalty including self-sacrifice for fellow SAMCRO members, as one of the most valued traits a member of the club should possess. Bassett (2014) explains how an individual may experience additional moral ambiguity, according to MFT, when different moral foundations result in competing moral responses to the same situation. This scenario is a core theme for *SOA*, where characters attempt to find a way to feel okay with doing conventionally bad things.

Current Study

Most of the extant literature on *SOA* discusses its connection to various philosophical and theoretical lenses emphasizing morality and ethics. However, no research to date has explored how Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization are reflected in characters from this program. The present study examines how ten major characters in *SOA* (2008-2014) use neutralizations techniques to explain and justify to their drifts into and participation in criminal behavior. In addition, the current study sought to explore whether Copes' (2003) argument, that attachment level would impact which neutralization technique was being used, would apply to these characters. In an analysis of 92 episodes of *SOA* (the complete series), I asked (1) *which neutralization techniques are used by characters to justify their criminal behaviors* and (2) *do the techniques differ when societal attachment levels change?*

Methodology

The objective of the current study was to quantify the presence of Sykes and Matza's techniques of neutralization used by characters in the television series *Sons of Anarchy*. A total of 92 episodes (seven seasons comprising the entire series) were analyzed. The actions of ten major characters (Jax, Tara, Gemma, Clay, Opie, Juice, Chibs, Tig, Bobby, & Unser) were analyzed within each episode based on the following categories: (1) denial of responsibility, (2) denial of injury, (3) denial of victim, (4) condemnation of the condemners, and (5) appeal to higher loyalties. A second coder was used to establish inter-rater reliability by coding a portion of the sample (3 seasons), using a shared codebook and iterative coding consistent with Deterding and Waters' (2018) flexible coding procedures. Three seasons were watched, re-watched, and independently coded to develop any common themes by two separate coders. If there was disagreement over the coding of a scene, the coders would discuss it within the context of the scene and explain our reasoning for the selected code until we were in 100% agreement for all episodes in the sample. Codes were compared until any differences were resolved, resulting in the final codebook outlined in Table 1, which was applied to all episodes in the series in a second viewing by this author. Previous research has indicated that the timing of justification statements are not important when examining neutralization techniques (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003); consequently, statements made before, during, and after the actions were all included in the analysis.

The ten characters selected for analysis included an amalgamation of main characters some of whom were members of the MC, as well others who were outside of it. Jackson "Jax" Teller, Clay Morrow, Harry "Opie" Winston, Juan Carlos "Juice" Ortiz, Filip "Chibs" Telford, Alexander "Tig" Trager, and Robert "Bobby Elvis" Munson were all patched members of SAMCRO. As an "old lady" or the partner of a member, Tara

Knowles and Gemma Teller-Morrow were oftentimes pulled into the criminality of the club. Wayne Unser was the Chief of the Charming Police Department, who retires and becomes more tied to SAMCRO in later seasons.

The ten individual characters being assessed are the units of analysis for this study. The ways the characters explained their criminal actions in a single scene referring to a specific offense, not general characteristics or backstories, were used to evaluate how they justified their criminality. A scene, as defined by Weaver (1991) is, “an uninterrupted sequence of behaviors occurring within a given physical context in the absence of lengthy edits or cuts to other characters or events. Transitions from one physical content to another [...] represented the beginning and ending parameters of a scene” (p. 388). The codebook (see Table 1) was comprised of five neutralization techniques adapted from Sykes and Matza (1957) including *denial of responsibility*, *denial of injury*, *denial of the victim*, *condemnation of the condemners*, and *appeal to higher loyalties*. During the coding process I differentiated between loyalty to the motorcycle club (MC) and loyalty to another social group such as family. I also kept free text notes in the coding key document to denote any relevant descriptions and details to offer qualitative examples of the codes. The free text notes allowed for better qualitative and descriptive comparisons between the neutralization techniques and how certain characters justified their actions. Emerging patterns were checked against any previously completed coding, consistent with a modified grounded approach (Charmaz, 1983; Glaser, 1987; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A third, and final, viewing was conducted to ensure all episodes were coded with all potential themes.

Table 1 *Neutralizations Codebook*

Neutralization Technique	Description
Denial of Responsibility	Justifies their criminal behavior by stating that forces beyond their control made them do it and do not take accountability.
Denial of Injury	Justifies their criminal behavior by downplaying the injuries of the victims as something as a joke or as not serious.
Denial of the Victim	Criminality is justified based on insistence that the victim was deserving of the behavior or there was no victim. (e.g., retribution or racial differences; victimless crime).
Condemnation of the Condemners	Criminality of is justified because law enforcement officials in Charming are corrupt.
Appeal to Higher Loyalties	An individual’s loyalties to a particular social group (family, Motorcycle Club, etc.) outweigh need to abide by the law.

In addition, for each of the ten characters analyzed, I incorporated a measure of societal attachment adapted from Copes (2003) study categorizing offenders using employment, marital status, parental status, and education. If a character was depicted participating in legitimate employment outside of the criminal enterprises of the MC, they were assigned a value of one. If their only source of employment depicted in the episode was the illicit activities of the MC, they were assigned a value of zero. If a character was married, they were assigned a value of one. If they were single or divorced, they were assigned a value of zero. Characters were assigned a value of one for the final measure, education, if they graduated high school or obtained a GED, and zero if they did not. Each of these measures was assessed in every episode giving each character a societal attachment score for each episode that was maintained in the codebook.

Based on previous research (Copes, 2003; Thurman, 1984) individuals with less attachment to conventional moral and social order will use neutralizations more often. Copes’ (2003) findings suggested that individuals with high attachment to conventional moral and social order would use more neutralization

techniques, including appeal to higher loyalties, to protect themselves from the guilt of violating societal rules. Meanwhile, individuals with low attachment use fewer neutralization techniques, but most frequently denial of the victim and denial of responsibility. Based on these previous findings, I hypothesized that individuals with lower levels of attachment would more frequently use *denial of victim* as their neutralization, while individuals with more societal attachment with use *appeal to higher loyalties*. However, I also hypothesized that changes in attachment level would be accompanied by a difference in source of loyalties. Specifically, for low-attached individuals the use of *appeal to higher loyalties* will be tied to criminal enterprises (i.e., the MC). Whereas high-attached individuals using *appeal to higher loyalties* would be referring to their loyalty to their families or the community.

Analysis & Findings

The current study examined what neutralization techniques were most common and if type of technique use changed, dependent on a character’s societal attachment levels. Table 2 includes societal attachment values, MC connection, and basic demographic information for each of the ten characters analyzed. The show primarily focuses on how these different individuals attempt to strike a balance between conformity to the outside world and the criminality and deviancy that comes with the club. *Sons of Anarchy* depicts a variety of criminal activities including murder, robbery, aggravated assault, rape, drug use, robbery, and blackmail, that characters justify in different ways. It is important to also note that a character’s societal attachment score had the potential to fluctuate between individual episodes, as well as from season to season. Despite the changing differences in attachment to society, each character used neutralization techniques to justify their criminal actions.

Table 2 *Sample Demographics*

Name	MC Connection	Average Societal Attachment Score	Employment Type	Education Level
Jax Teller	Member	3.21	Auto Mechanic	GED
Tara Knowles	Affiliate	2.83	Doctor	Grad School
Gemma Teller-Morrow	Affiliate	2.11	Shop Manager	High School
Clay Morrow	Member	2.09	Auto Mechanic	High School
Opie Winston	Member	2.94	Auto Mechanic	GED
Juice Ortiz	Member	1.74	Auto Mechanic	High School
Chibs Telford	Member	2.03	Auto Mechanic	High School
Tig Trager	Member	1.93	Auto Mechanic	High School
Bobby Munson	Member	1.76	Auto Mechanic	High School
Wayne Unser	Affiliate	1.79	Chief of Police	High School

The ten characters analyzed in 92 episodes of *SOA* utilized justifications consistent with Sykes’ and Matza’s neutralization theory 1,262 times (see Table 3). The most used technique in the show was appeal to higher loyalties (46.83%) followed by denial of victim (32.09%). Denial of responsibility (9.75%), denial of injury (8.32%), and condemnation of condemners (3.01%) were all utilized, however, not close to the levels of the other techniques used. For all ten characters, appeal to higher loyalties was the most frequently used technique followed by denial of victim. However, two characters diverted from this pattern. Gemma’s second most utilized neutralization technique was denial of responsibility (27.38%) while former Chief of Police Wayne Unser’s was denial of injury (14.00%). The use of appeal to higher loyalties for some of the characters was split between legitimate sources such as family and community, and loyalty to a source that is inherently

criminal, such as the MC. Of the 152 references to appeal to higher loyalties for Jax, 42 of them were referencing loyalty to his family. Similarly, nearly 13 percent of Tara’s use of appeal to higher loyalties was referenced as loyalty to her family.

Table 3 *Frequency of Neutralization Techniques Used*

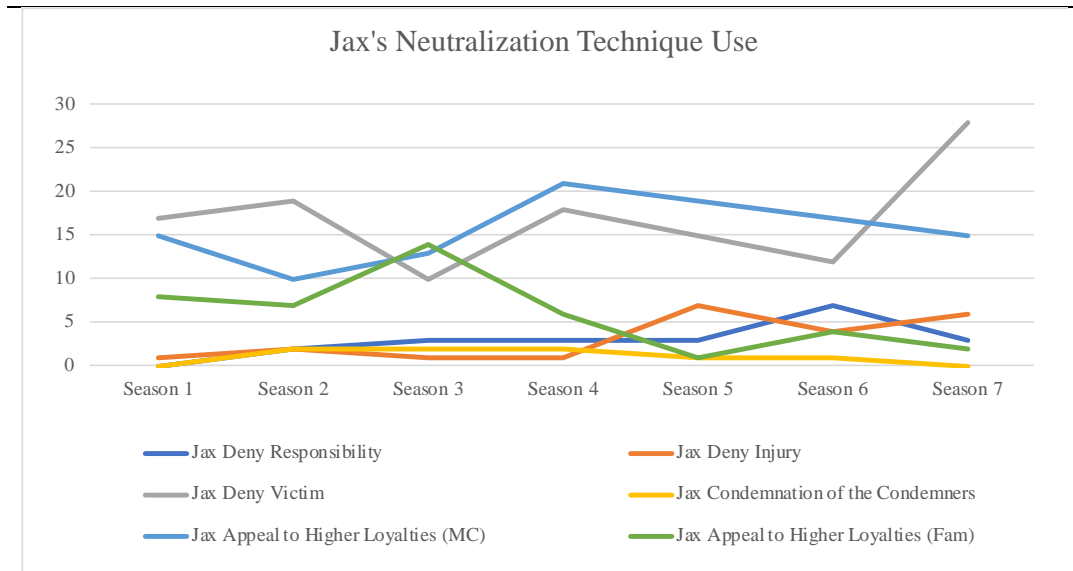
Name	Deny Responsibility	Deny Injury	Deny Victim	Condemnation of the Condemners	Appeal to Higher Loyalties	Total
Jax*	21	22	109	8	152	312
Tara*	6	4	10	5	29	54
Gemma*	23	13	16	2	30	84
Clay	38	13	51	5	52	159
Opie*	4	1	37	3	48	93
Juice	7	4	27	3	46	87
Chibs	7	10	59	4	80	160
Tig*	9	22	58	5	68	162
Bobby*	4	9	34	1	53	101
Unser*	4	7	4	2	33	50
Total	123	105	405	38	591	1,262

*Indicates characters’ neutralization technique use was consistent with the hypothesis.

Eight of the ten characters analyzed were consistent with Copes (2003) in that fewer societal attachments led to greater use of certain neutralization techniques including denial of victim, denial of responsibility, and appeal to higher *criminal* loyalties. For Tara, as her attachments increased by getting married and becoming a mother, her use of appeal to higher loyalties to a legitimate source, such as her family, to justify any criminal behaviors. When Jax’s attachment levels were at their lowest, there was greater use of denial of victim and appeal to higher loyalty to the inherently criminal source, the MC (see Figure 1).

Opie’s neutralization technique use was similar to Jax’s. When Opie’s wife is murdered, his attachment level decreases and he becomes more attached to the MC, and his use of appeal to higher loyalties shifts from loyalty to his family to the MC. In addition, Opie uses denial of victim much more frequently after his wife is murdered. Three characters deviated from the expected pattern. For Juice, a younger member of the MC, there was no discernable pattern to his neutralization techniques relative to his attachment level. Two other characters, Clay and Chibs, neutralization technique use was inconsistent with what I had hypothesized. When Clay’s attachment levels were high, he actually used more denial of victim and denial of responsibility compared to when his attachment levels were low.

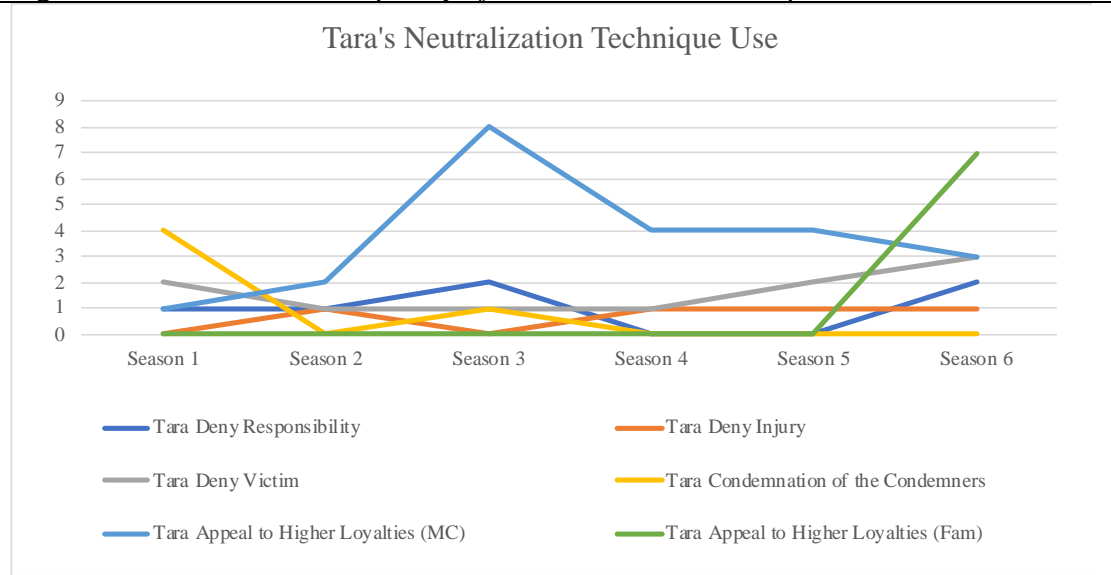
Figure 1 *Jax Teller's Frequency of Neutralization Technique Use*



Appeal to Higher Loyalties

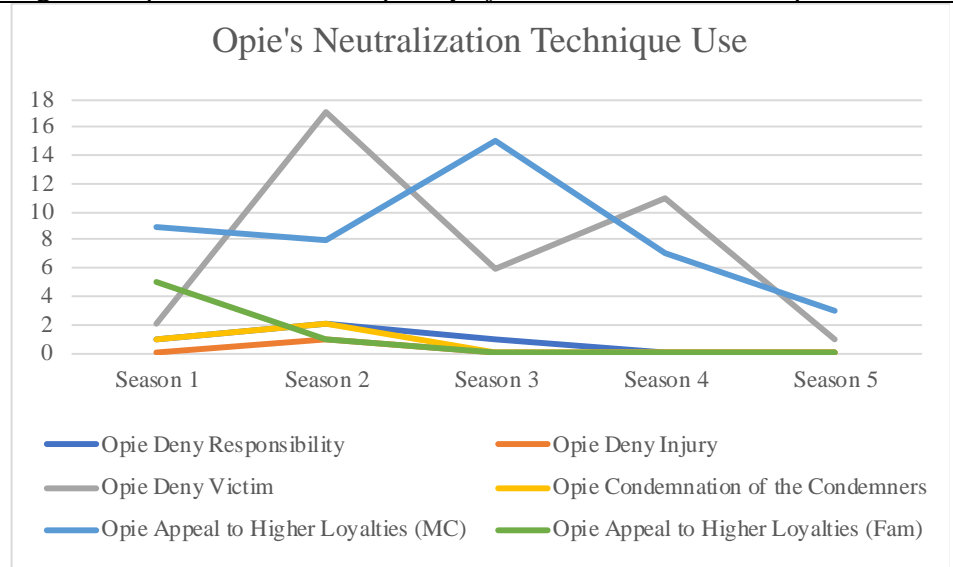
Nearly 46% of justifications used by *SOA* characters were based on their appeal to higher loyalties. Eight of the ten characters analyzed used this technique in more than one way. During the coding process I differentiated between loyalty to the MC and loyalty to another social group such as family. Approximately 13% of the appeal to higher loyalties justifications referenced loyalty to a social group other than the club, such as family or the community at large. Former Sheriff Wayne Unser defended some of his more questionable actions during his tenure explaining, “I was never in nobody’s pocket. I learned how to work with the club. It was about what was best for Charming” (Collins, Corrado, & Ferland, 2011). In season one, Opie describes this rift to Jax, “You know this club means everything to me [...]. But everything else, Donna... the kids, work... they're all heading in the opposite direction. Just can't hook shit up. Feel like I'm missin' on every front” (LoGiudice & Hunter, 2008). Jax and Tara were the two characters who utilized this differentiation the most (27.64% and 24.14% respectively). Tara Knowles, the mother of Jax’s children and his wife, also experiences a shift of loyalties from the MC to her family (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Tara Knowles' Frequency of Neutralization Technique Use



Although Opie Winston experienced the most trauma because of the club, he was also one of the most beloved characters on the show, at least in part due to his never-ending loyalty to SAMCRO (see Figure 3). When we first are introduced to Opie it is following a five-year stint in Chino state prison after a former member of SAMCRO abandons him when cops arrive. Upon release, Opie attempts to earn straight, outside of the club, in order to appease his wife Donna. However, between financial struggles and his friendship to Jax and by extension loyalty to the MC, it doesn't take long for Opie to be drawn back into club actions. Jax explains the brotherhood to Opie's wife, Donna, saying "Opie's not a rat. Brothers don't turn on each other. He did the time. It's what we do. Opie will never walk away from the club" (LoGiudice & Hunter, 2008). Part of Opie genuinely believes the only way to successfully take care of his family is through the club as he explains to Jax, "I can't keep doing this. Half our goddamn fights are about money. And I can't get ahead without the club. I need back in. Guns, protection runs, all of it" (Conrad & Giegart, 2008). Opie even makes this point clear to Donna, "I earn with the club. That's what I know. That's how I support this family. I'm doing this because of you! Because I love you and the kids. If you can't get behind that... keep packing" (Charles & Van Peebles, 2008).

Figure 3 *Opie Winston's Frequency of Neutralization Technique Use*



Denial of Victim

Approximately 32% of justifications used in *SOA* contained elements of a denial of the victim for any criminal behaviors. Many of these justifications included references to a person or entity deserving the victimization or retribution for a previous wrongdoing. In the pilot episode, Jax physically assaults multiple men in a bar after learning that they sold drugs to his ex-wife, Wendy, while she was pregnant with his son. As Opie once said in season two, “Retaliation is what we do” (Collins, Green, & O’Hara, 2009). In the following episode, Jax agrees with this notion saying, “Someone hurts us like this. We retaliate. We have to” (Corrado, Green, & Gierhart, 2009). Jax, Opie, Chibs, and other members of the MC physically assault members of the League of American Nationalists, including murdering another at a separate encounter as part of the retaliation for Gemma having been abducted and gang raped earlier in the season.

While retaliation was a common motivator and form of justification for members of the MC, characters who were not members, such as Tara Knowles sometimes would use this justification to explain their wrongdoing. For example, Tara’s former partner Agent Kohn, who stalked her in Chicago after their relationship got violent and she ended it, arrives in Charming and attacks her ending in his death. In the aftermath of his murder, Jax and Tara discuss how Kohn should not be able to claim the victim identity as it was his own wrongful actions that led to his death. Gemma, who was deeply entrenched in the MC’s mindset of retaliation being the only response to wrongdoing, justified her brutal attack and murder of Tara when she believed that Tara had betrayed Jax and made a dealer to turn in the club the law enforcement.

Denial of Injury

Denial of injury as a justification for criminal behavior was used less frequently than other justifications (8.32%), however the inclusion of this justification appeared in an interesting manner. When characters utilized denial of the injury it involved a downplaying of the victim’s injuries as not serious or as a joke. When Gemma smashes a girl’s face into the counter, in response to the horrified looks she says that the girl will be fine, denying the clear injuries she sustained. In other instances, rather than downplay the injuries, Gemma considered her actions to be a funny joke. Gemma assaults two deputies in order to see her partner, Nero, in jail.

Upon her arrival she jokes and tells Nero that she thought she's drop by and say hi. In season 2, Gemma and Wayne Unser smoke weed and joke about whether he'll be arresting them as chief of police for their illegal drug use.

Typically, denial of injury for members of the MC involved making jokes about the harm caused by the criminal behavior. In an early episode of the series while being detained at the auto shop by law enforcement, Jax, Tig, and Clay drug the deputies watching them so that they can leave and continue illegal work for the club in the community. As they drug them, the three members laugh and joke about their actions, downplaying the seriousness of what they're doing. In season 7, Jax and Chibs, members of the MC, make jokes about "staging a sloppy suicide," to cover up a pimp who was impaled on broken glass after Jax threw him through a window. Members of the MC were capable of frequently denying the injury in their actions by viewing their wrongdoing in a lighthearted manner, which was less common for other characters who were not as deeply embedded in the MC for which these actions may still hold some weight.

Discussion and Conclusion

Sons of Anarchy was a television program that made the highlighted the importance and complexity of morality. When viewers feel connected to characters enough to want criminal activity to occur, it is unsurprising that the characters themselves can justify their own actions. Despite the different ties to societal structure (e.g., outlaw, surgeon, law enforcement, etc.), each character utilized some sort of neutralization technique to justify their criminality. Consistent with previous research (Agnew, 1994; Copes, 2003; Cromwell & Thurman, 2003; Presser, 2004; Thurman, 1984) even the characters with minimal commitment and attachment to the conventional moral order frequently used neutralizations to explain their criminal behaviors. Appeal to higher loyalties was the most frequently used neutralization technique to explain the criminal actions of characters in *SOA* (46.83%). The second most frequent was denial of victim (32.09%).

Seven out of the ten characters analyzed used certain neutralization techniques in a manner consistent with Copes' (2003) argument that attachment levels have an impact on which neutralization techniques are utilized. When characters had lower attachment levels, there was greater use of denial of victim, denial of responsibility, and appeal to higher loyalties to the MC. For example, in season three when Gemma's attachment levels were lowest (1.00 season average), Gemma frequently shifts the responsibility for some of her criminal actions including murder, lying to law enforcement, and evading arrest, onto others forces beyond her control. Part of Gemma truly believes that an outside force like God wants her to participate in these actions: "This is how I do my part. God's put her in my path, so I can fix that part of me that they ripped open. I'm supposed to do this" (Sutter, 2009). After Jax finds his wife brutally murdered, resulting in a decrease in attachment levels, he begins a retributive path full of violence towards those he believes were involved in her murder. The ebb and flow of Jax's neutralization technique choices followed an interesting pattern consistent with Copes' (2003) claim. People will utilize different neutralization techniques dependent on their attachment levels.

Early in the series, Tara begins crossing lines in order to help Jax, and by extension the club. In season two, after Gemma is assaulted, Tara helps her at the hospital without properly signing her in, in order to avoid a paper trail. Similarly, she is frequently portrayed taking medical supplies from the hospital to help members of the club away from the hospital. However, after the birth of her son and Jax expressing a legitimate desire to leave Charming and the MC, Tara's priorities take a clear shift away from the club to her family beginning in season four. Tara can no longer ignore that her boys are not safe so long as they are connected to the MC. These feelings are amplified by numerous instances including Gemma driving stone and wrecking the car with the boys inside, Wayne Unser being attacked by neo-Nazis at the Teller-Morrow garage, as well as an explosion at the SAMCRO clubhouse. Tara's actions become increasingly more problematic, going as far as giving Jax a

blood thinning agent to kill Clay, as well as telling him how to stage the scene so it appears to be an accident. She then says, “You kill him and then you come get me and our boys and drive us out of this poisonous town” (Sutter, Collins, & Sutter, 2011a).

However, after Jax’s multiple failed attempts to extract himself and his family from the club, Tara is driven further into extreme behaviors. In season six, Tara plans and executes an elaborate scheme, involving a fake pregnancy and miscarriage at the hands of an attack by Gemma, in order to keep Gemma from gaining custody of the kids. When Wayne Unser learns of the truth and confronts Tara, she justifies her actions saying, “What I did gives me legal precedent to separate my kids from Gemma and the club. I know how brutal it seems, but it was the only way. [...] I did it to protect my kids, Wayne” (Patino, Sutter, & Weller, 2013). Tara was willing to falsify medical records and stage attacks in order to substantiate a custody hold and successfully keep her children away from Gemma, who she believed to be a danger to her family. Unfortunately, these extreme measures became the fuel that would lead to Tara’s tragic demise.

During *SOA*’s seven-year run, loyalty was presented as a highly valued trait for characters. Loyalty in the form of self-sacrifice for fellow SAMCRO members was previously established as a key component of a member’s identity (Mahon, 2013). However, the show also frequently depicted the struggle to identify what is right when an individual may have competing loyalties. Jax Teller frequently struggled with competing loyalties to his family and to his club. He explains to Piney Winston, “I’m trying to find some kind of balance, Piney. The right thing for my family, the club. Every time I think I’m heading in the right direction, I end up in a place I never even knew could feel this bad” (Sutter & Kay, 2010).

As the show’s main protagonist, it is unsurprising that Jax struggled to find a balance between his loyalty to the club and his loyalty to his family the most. After a 14-month stint in Stockton prison, Jax realizes that what is best for his family is to leave SAMCRO. He explains his changed perspective of the club to Tara saying, “The bond that holds this club together isn’t about love or brotherhood anymore,” and that his desire to get out and be a real family has been at the forefront of his mind for the last 14 months. Jax tells Tara, “I’m gonna finish up with SAMCRO, then we’re gonna take our boys and we’re gonna get out of here. Start fresh somewhere. Be a real family” (Sutter & Barclay, 2011).

However, by the end of that season, the imbalance is made clear again with Jax feeling compelled to stay in Charming with the MC saying to Tara, “Walking away from my club is one thing, but letting it die... I can’t. It’s part of me. I’m so sorry” (Sutter, Collins, & Sutter, 2011b). The schism between Jax the father and Jax the MC President continues to grow, with Jax’s competing loyalties. He explains, “It’s getting more and more difficult to be a brother when my decisions are the ones a father has to make” (Sutter & Barclay, 2013). Other characters also notice Jax’s extreme behaviors for his sons, including his ex-wife Wendy who tells Jax, “...I know how much you love your sons. And-and I know that everything you do, good and bad, is about taking care of them” (Patino, Sutter, & Weller, 2013).

When Opie is inaccurately perceived as a rat due to actions from a corrupt ATF agent, then-president Clay Morrow orders Tig to murder Opie. However, Tig accidentally murders Donna instead. Even after learning that his wife was murdered by a member of the MC and on orders from another member, Opie remains an active member of the club and continues to commit crimes on behalf of SAMCRO and its members. After Donna’s murder, Opie’s loyalty to his family drastically diminishes, while his loyalty to the club expands. Despite all of the loss Opie suffered because of the club, including deceased loved ones, time in prison, disconnect from his children, he remained boundlessly loyal to SAMCRO until the end. As a final act of loyalty to Jax and SAMCRO, Opie volunteered to give his life in payment of a blood debt the club owed to drug kingpin Damon Pope. By volunteering to sacrifice himself, Opie absolves any responsibility on Jax’s behalf to pick a member to die while simultaneously ensuring that SAMCRO’s debts are paid.

As a former President of SAMCRO, it was not surprising to see Clay Morrow justify most of his instances of criminality on loyalty to the club and retribution for past wrongs. Interestingly, Clay’s loyalty to the

club began to wane when he lost control of the MC and he directed his criminality inward to hurt the club. He orchestrated home invasions in Charming, resulting in seriously destructive consequences, to make Jax look like a bad leader. In the most twisted sense of loyalty, Clay justified some of those decisions as being “for the good of the club” if it meant Jax would be forced out of his leadership role. Previous research found that the authority and power in practice results in increased loyalty for men at a law firm (Kay & Hagan, 2003). Clay’s shift in loyalty when he loses his place of authority and power over the MC is consistent with the notion found in research on group loyalty (Kay & Hagan, 2003; Stern, 1995 Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001).

Violence and crime quickly became linked to biker culture in the United States. Although bikers keep their violence limited to those involved in the life, there are those that seemingly enjoy the intimidation over others that comes with being a member (Quinn, 2017). Consistent with previous research (Copes, 2003; Thurman, 1984), Tig Trager had one of the lowest average attachment levels (1.93) and utilized neutralization techniques frequently ($n = 162$), second only to Jax Teller, the show’s protagonist. Tig also seemed to be the character that most enjoyed the criminal behavior and found it to be a joking matter, frequently denying any injury to the victim ($n = 22$). Tig utilized denial of injury (13.58%) more frequently than other techniques more than any other character analyzed. Copes (2003) findings suggested that individuals with high attachment to conventional moral and social order would use more neutralization techniques, including appeal to higher loyalties, to protect themselves from the guilt of violating societal rules.

As the protagonist, it was not a surprise that Jax oftentimes struggled with the morality of his decisions. As early as the beginning of the series after reading his late father’s manuscript, it became clear that Jax wanted to move the club away from the violence and toward more legitimate business interests. In a letter to his sons in season six, Jax wrote:

I have tremendous remorse for the acts of violence I’ve committed, both planned and spontaneous. But I think what brings me the most sorrow is that I’ve learned to justify this behavior. I always find a reason, a cause, a need that allows me the karmic lubrication to stuff my guilt into its savage compartment. I’ve become the thing... the one I hated (Sutter & Collins, 2013).

While Jax’s best intentions involved moving the club away from the violence and illegal activities, he ironically became the embodiment of what he despised. The amount of violence and murder in the attempts to move the club in the right direction, led to Jax having the highest confirmed body count on the show with 46 murders. Many of these murders came as a result of rage and grief following the brutal murder of Jax’s wife, Tara. Jax attempts to exact revenge on the people he believes are responsible without a hint of remorse for his actions. It was not a surprise to also see Tig and Chibs make the top four of greatest confirmed body counts at 28 and 17 respectively.

Conclusion

Kurt Sutter successfully created a television series reflective of the brotherhood culture and loyalty found among outlaw motorcycle clubs with *Sons of Anarchy*. It quickly became a cultural phenomenon as one of the most watched dramas on basic cable (Bibel, 2013) and the highest rated show on its home network FX (Patten, 2014). The continued cultural impact of *SOA* makes it an interesting source for researchers at the intersection of popular culture and crime. This research incorporated traditional criminological theories (Copes, 2003; Sykes & Matza, 1957) into the analysis of a popular culture product that that a huge impact on societal relationships to crime, motorcycle gangs, and flawed protagonists. Drawing on Sykes and Matza’s (1957) Neutralization theory, this research served to identify neutralization technique use in the television series *Sons*

of Anarchy. It also revealed how the use of specific techniques varies when attachment levels change. The findings indicated that attachment levels for eight of the ten characters analyzed were consistent with Copes (2003) argument. Fewer societal attachments led to greater use of certain neutralization techniques including denial of victim, denial of responsibility, and appeal to higher *criminal* loyalties. I correctly hypothesized that changes in attachment level would also be accompanied by a difference in source of loyalties. Specifically, for low-attached individuals the use of *appeal to higher loyalties* was tied to their criminal enterprise (i.e., the MC). Whereas high-attached individuals using *appeal to higher loyalties* were referencing their loyalty to their family or the community.

Cultural criminology has often argued that popular culture constructions of crime frequently demonize criminals. However, contemporary popular culture has moved away from only portraying perpetrators with monstrous identities, to incorporating complex characters that are part of a wider social context, with families, friends, and feelings, that take on a more nuanced ambiguous moral role: an anti-hero who embodies traits of both heroism and evil (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Meier & Neubaum, 2019). Many of the characters in *SOA* were criminals who were represented as morally ambiguous in many instances by drawing on emotional rationales that make them less dislikable, making it easier for the viewer to root for the criminal. The inclusion of social attachments like spouses and children, created opportunities characters justify their criminal behaviors in ways that are more easily accepted by the viewer. The presence of Copes' (2003) observations in a contemporary media portrayal is evidence of how media is making strides toward understanding the complexities of criminal behavior and ensuring that they are portraying a more holistic understanding of criminal activity. Previous research has shown that morally ambiguous or anti-hero fitting characters resonate with viewers and are more appreciated and liked compared to traditional villainous constructions of criminals (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Meier & Neubaum, 2019). Similar research has identified representation of popular culture criminals as antiheroes through clashes between familial and social structures and individual codes of conduct (Balanzategui, 2018; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Walderzark, 2016; Welsh et al., 2011).

This research serves as an empirical contribution to media studies, but also analyses of popular culture in criminology and criminal justice studies. However, there are some limitations that warrant mentioning that are inherent to all content analyses and case studies. First, content analysis is subjective and open to the interpretation of the researcher. While attempts were made to ensure IRR and improve the rigor of the analysis, different researchers may interpret the data differently. In addition, is an analysis of one television program, and its findings are only reflective of this show, and cannot be generalized to all biker gangs, or crime dramas. Although only one television program was analyzed, future research could examine the extent to which similar programs convey, replicate, or deviate from the mirrored social phenomenon present in this study.

Jax's father, JT, wrote a manuscript describing his thoughts on what SAMCRO was intended to be and criticizing the path it was on before his death. Although SAMCRO was originally established holding loyalty and brotherhood in the highest regard, it became clear that over time the importance of these values diminished. Clay, who became President after JT's death, valued money and personal power above the club and had no qualms about betraying and framing fellow club members. Their focus on revenge became solely about anger, rather than what JT had described as a balance between passion and reason, creating additional problems for the club. JT warned that the choice to act when a loved one has been wronged comes with "daunting responsibility" and that "some men cave under that weight, others abuse the momentum" (Sutter & Kay, 2008). By series end, Jax truly understood the struggle his father wrote about describing the war in his mind "when you try to get right with both family and patch. That fear and guilt crippled me. I realized, as I think you did, a good father and a good outlaw can't settle inside the same man" (Sutter, 2014). When a person, like Jax, has societal attachments, the behaviors needed to be a good outlaw run counter to those needed to be a good husband or father. As a result, people utilize neutralization techniques to justify or explain their actions to neutralize any guilt they may experience to themselves or to other people. JT wrote in his manuscript, "...when you move your

life off the social grid you give up the safety that society provides. On the fringe, blood and bullets are the rule of law, and if you're a man with convictions violence is inevitable” (Sutter & Haid, 2008). The inevitability of violence and deviance for those connected to the MC guaranteed the use of neutralizations. For each character, their differences in attachment levels and current storylines altered which neutralizations were most utilized.

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