Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice: How Neutralization Theory Can Inform Reid Interrogations of Identity Thieves

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The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how theoretically driven research can be beneficial to law-enforcement personnel in their day-to-day jobs. Such information can be used as an educational tool to assist students in understanding the value of theory and research and its applicability in the field. Specifically, we show how research guided by neutralization theory can be used by police to better elicit confessions from guilty suspects when using the Reid interrogation technique. Using data from 59 federally convicted identity thieves, we provide an illustration of how interrogators can use this information to develop functional themes during the interrogation.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a tremendous increase in federal funding for police programs and evaluation. Although funding agencies encourage cooperation between police departments and researchers, disconnect between these groups still exists. At the 2006 National Institute of Justice Conference, LAPD Chief Bill Bratton pointed out that "the relationship between police practitioners and researchers was, at best, one of agreeing to disagree on the … best ways to respond to and prevent crime. At worst, we talked past each other and didn't connect at all" (Ritter 2007:28). Evidence of this gap is also found in student perceptions of criminological theory and research. Many who have taught criminology and criminal justice theory courses have been faced with questions from students regarding the relevance or applicability of theoretical and empirical research to their future employment. Students often ask, either directly or implicitly with various non-verbal cues, "why does theory matter" or "when am I ever going to use this?" This perception of theory's irrelevance may be

warranted as academics often suggest policies that are either too broad or too vague to be of much practical use. But this certainly does not have to be the case. In fact, theory and research can be beneficial to law-enforcement personnel in a direct and practical way, supporting their day-to-day jobs. But in order for this to occur, researchers must be willing to make theory applicable to the needs of police, and in return practitioners must be willing to hear what is being said.

The purpose of this paper is to provide current law-enforcement practitioners, students pursuing careers in law enforcement, and professors teaching criminological theory with an illustration of how theoretically driven research can be directly relevant to practice. Specifically, we show how research guided by neutralization theory can be used by police interrogators to elicit confessions from guilty suspects when using the Reid Technique of Interviewing and Interrogation. We present data from a sample of 59 federally convicted identity thieves to illustrate how law-enforcement practitioners can enhance their interrogations of identity thieves by understanding the mindset and justifications that these offenders use both prior to their involvement in crime and following the event. With this knowledge, interrogators increase their chances of obtaining confessions from guilty suspects. Closing the real and perceived information gap between research and practice will help law-enforcement practitioners maximize the potential for extracting incriminating information from culpable suspects during interrogations guided by the Reid Technique.

Neutralization Theory

One of the most important elements in the decision to commit crime is the psychological process of sanitizing the conscience so that it can be accomplished. For this reason, much has been written in criminal social psychology about the ways that offenders make sense of or account for their criminal acts and related behaviors (for a detailed review, see Maruna and Copes 2005). Fifty years ago, Sykes and Matza (1957) developed what is now referred to as neutralization theory to explain this process. They believed that everyone, even law violators, retains some commitment to the dominant cultural system. Because of this commitment, contemplating committing illegal behavior can negatively impact actors' self-concepts through experiences of guilt or shame. It is these negative appraisals, and their potential for producing negative self-feeling, that prevent most people from engaging in crime or deviance. However, people *do* engage in criminal behavior. Sykes and Matza provide an explanation for how this is possible.

According to Sykes and Matza (1957), when offenders contemplate committing criminal acts they find ways to neutralize the guilt associated with their actions. To do this, offenders use linguistic devices that blunt the moral force of the law and neutralize the guilt of criminal participation. These neutralizing techniques precede behavior and make criminal conduct possible. Through the use of these devices, "social controls that serve to check or inhibit deviant

motivational patterns are rendered inoperative, and the individual is freed to engage in delinquency without serious damage to his self-image" (Sykes and Matza 1957: 667). Thus, actors can remain committed to the dominant normative system by interpreting their actions as acceptable.

Offenders use a range of techniques to make sense of their actions and to minimize internal and external controls.[1] First, offenders can rid themselves of a negative self-image through the *denial of responsibility*. Offenders deny responsibility by claiming their behaviors are accidental or due to forces beyond their control. Corporate officials often attempt to shirk their responsibility in pollution cases by maintaining that pollution laws are too complex or too vague, or that the pollution happened by accident and was not intentional (Friedrichs 1996: 231). Similarly, offenders who are part of a larger, complex organization deny responsibility by claiming that their role was minimal or that they were forced to do so by superiors.

A second technique is the *denial of injury*. Here, the wrongfulness of one's behavior is determined by whether anyone was hurt and by whether the actor intended to do any harm. Offenders can excuse their behaviors if they believe that no one was truly harmed. In his study of embezzlers, Cressey (1953) found that embezzlers frequently justified their behavior by classifying it as "borrowing" money that would be repaid, therefore denying that they caused any actual harm or injury. Offenders who use this technique may claim that their behavior is inappropriate in general, but in this particular instance it is acceptable because no real harm was done.

Sometimes offenders admit that their actions cause harm but neutralize moral indignation by *denying the victim*. This can be done in one of two ways. First, offenders may contend that some victims act improperly and thus deserve everything that happens to them. Offenders define their own actions as a form of rightful retaliation or punishment, thereby claiming the victim does not deserve victim status. Offenders may see their victims as wrong-doers and perceive themselves to be avengers of the wronged. For example, offenders may claim that because their employer failed to give them a raise, the company deserved to be victimized (Greenberg 1990). Denial of the victim also occurs if the victim is absent, unknown, or abstract. In these situations, the offender can ignore easily the rights of victims because the victims are not around to stimulate the offender's conscience. Many employees are able to insulate themselves from guilt associated with theft by defining the objects they steal as being of "uncertain ownership" (Dabney 1995; Horning 1970).

A fourth technique is the *condemnation of the condemner*. Instead of focusing on their own actions, offenders focus on the motivations or behaviors of the people who disapprove of them. Offenders claim that their condemners are hypocrites or "deviants in disguise" (Sykes and Matza 1957: 668). White-collar

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1. In addition to the five original neutralizations presented by Sykes and Matza, criminologists have identified several other common neutralizations used by offenders, including the defense of necessity, the claim of normality, and the claim of entitlement (Maruna and Copes 2005).

offenders often claim that the government impedes the efforts of businessmen through its strict regulation of business practices, thus inhibiting free enterprise (Conklin 1977: 93). Doctors convicted of defrauding Medicaid point to the irrationality of the system when justifying their crimes (Jesilow, Pontell, and Geis 1993). The importance of this technique is that the offender shifts the focus to the actions of others while making their behavior seem less important or "lost to view" (Sykes and Matza 1957: 668).

The final technique described by Sykes and Matza is the *appeal to higher loyalties*. Offenders shield themselves from internal and external controls by claiming that their behavior is consistent with the moral obligations of a specific group to which they belong. Here, the offender acknowledges the conventional norms of society and may agree with them, but chooses to violate the law because "norms, held to be more pressing or involving a higher loyalty, are accorded precedence" (Sykes and Matza 1957: 669). White-collar crime offenders can easily become absorbed in the workplace climate where success and accomplishing business objectives becomes higher loyalties than following government regulations. Likewise, providing for one's family often overrides all other moral and ethical decisions.

While the use of neutralizations is nearly universal, there is much variation in the specific neutralizations used based on the type of offense committed. In fact, Sykes and Matza (1957: 670) called for research into the relationship between neutralization techniques and various types of illegal or deviant behavior. They wrote, "Certain techniques of neutralization would appear to be better adapted to particular deviant acts than to others." This implies that offenders do not have a general acceptance of neutralizations that they carry around with them. Instead, neutralizations are crime-specific and are used in specific situations and contexts, depending on the type of crime that is being or has been committed (Agnew and Peters 1986). Offenders are thought to accept neutralizations only for those types of wrongdoing that they themselves engage in and not to accept neutralizations for all types of crime. Identity thieves likely will only accept those neutralizations for identity theft and not those for armed robbery, assault, or other confrontational crime. Thus, it is important for interrogators to be familiar with the most common neutralizations used by specific types of suspects interrogators are questioning, as general knowledge of neutralizations may not be sufficient.

Reid Technique of Interrogation

Around the same time that criminologists were exploring how offenders made sense of their crimes, law-enforcement personnel were developing an interrogation technique that involved offering justifications or rationalizations to suspects to obtain confessions. This interrogation technique, known as the Reid Technique of Interviewing and Interrogation, made use of similar concepts that criminologists were discovering, specifically that offenders relieve their feelings

of guilt about their criminal behavior by utilizing specific linguistic techniques (i.e., neutralizations). The Reid Technique—developed through analysis of suspects' responses during polygraph examinations—consists of a series of behavior-provoking questions that assist interrogators in determining a suspect's truthfulness. Once interrogators have enough information to believe reasonably that a suspect committed a crime, interrogators verbalize moral justifications to the suspect to explain why the interrogators think a suspect committed the crime (see Inbau et al. 2005 for a thorough review of the technique). This technique has been shown to be highly effective in gaining confessions from guilty suspects (Leo 1996).

The technique begins with the Reid Behavior Analysis Interview during which the interviewers (interrogators often work in pairs) attempt to establish rapport with the suspect. Typically, this is accomplished by asking non-threatening questions, such as personal background information or developing a conversation on a topic of mutual interest. The goal of the interviewers is to get the suspect to answer questions more openly and then proceed to ask "behavior-provoking" questions. While asking these questions, the interviewers elicit information about the suspect's involvement in the incident in question. The purpose of behavior analysis is to ask questions that evoke both verbal and nonverbal behavioral responses from the suspect (Inbau, Reid, and Buckley 1986: 63). These responses give the interviewers an opportunity to assess the suspect's involvement in the crime. Once the interviewers are reasonably certain of the suspect's guilt, they can use this information and move to the interrogation phase of questioning, which consists of a series of nine steps.

During the first step of the Reid Interrogation, the interrogators tell the suspect that they think the suspect committed the act in question and then listen to the response to the accusations. These statements should be phrased as direct, positive confrontations. Typically the suspect responds in one of two ways: either with an emphatic denial of guilt or with a more passive denial of guilt using weak statements such as "I couldn't have done it." After hearing the suspect's responses, the interrogators repeat the allegation that the suspect is guilty.

Regardless of the suspect's reactions in Step 1, the interrogators should continue with the second step of articulating "themes" or moral excuses as to the possible reasons the suspect committed the crime. To accomplish this step, the interrogators should offer a variety of moral justifications attempting to determine why the suspect committed the crimes. The interrogators place the "moral blame for the offense upon some other person (e.g., an accomplice), the victim, or some particular circumstance" or downplay the seriousness of the offense (Inbau et al. 1986: 79). Predictably, before admitting guilt, the suspect usually denies involvement in the crime.

In Step 3, the interrogators attempt to reject the suspect's denials of guilt and, more importantly, to gauge the strength of the denials. The interrogators should consider a suspect who refuses to listen to the themes as innocent

because innocent people usually will not allow someone to tell them why and how they committed a crime they did not commit. Conversely, the guilty will often offer weak denials and allow the interrogator to continue probing with themes. "The guilty suspect who realizes the futility of merely uttering a plain denial usually resorts to a change in tactic in order to achieve some control over the conversation" (Inbau et al. 1986: 153). Step 4 of the process begins when the suspect attempts to control the conversation by offering objections to explain why they could not have committed the crimes. For example, if the crime under investigation is identity theft, the suspect may claim not to have committed the crime because they did not have access to sensitive information. In order to obtain information to mold earlier themes into new ones that the suspect may respond to, the interrogators should allow the suspect to explain why the accusations are false.

Next, the interrogators explain why the suspect's objections are invalid. For instance, in the identity theft scenario, if the interrogators had specific information on how the suspect gained access to information, the interrogator would explain to the suspect why the objections are invalid and why and how the act was committed. After a while, a guilty suspect will psychologically withdraw from the interrogation setting. "The suspect may exhibit signs of this psychological resignation, such as moving into a head and body slump, taking deep breaths, beginning to nod the head in an affirmative manner as the interrogator describes how he [she] thinks the suspect committed the crime" (Senese 2005: 35). As the suspect contemplates the seriousness of the situation and determines what to do next, the interrogators should continue to talk to the suspect, to maintain attention (Step 5). In Step 6, if the interrogators have not already done so, they should physically move in closer to the suspect and concentrate on narrowing the themes into a specific reason the suspect committed the crime. When the suspect indicates or acknowledges responsibility for the crime, the interrogators should focus more intently on how the suspect responds to their (interrogators) words. This allows the interrogators to further narrow down the reasons the suspect committed the crime and to obtain more details about the event (Inbau et al. 1986: 162).

In Step 7, the interrogators present the suspect with "alternative questions." After having spent much time downplaying the seriousness of the crime and offering justifications for why the suspect committed the crime, the interrogators present the suspect with alternative questions. These questions are phrased so that the suspect's guilt is assumed but also includes offering the suspect "two incriminating choices concerning some aspect of committing the crime" (Senese 2005: 35). The choices are phrased so that one of the choices seems morally acceptable, while the other choice is reprehensible and repulsive. After the suspect makes an initial admission of guilt (by choosing one of the reasons, usually the morally acceptable reason), the interrogators use open-ended questions to allow the suspect to describe the details of the offenses, first orally (Step 8) and then in a written statement (Step 9). Although there are nine steps in the Reid Interrogation process, due

to the dynamic nature of interrogations, the steps and sequence will be different in each interrogation (Inbau et al. 1986: 79).

Development of Themes

Themes are the heart of interrogations in that they serve to psychologically excuse the suspect's behaviors. By voicing excuses as to why the suspect's behavior is acceptable, interrogators may be able to break down some of the existing mental, psychological, and physical barriers. Once the suspect realizes that interrogators understand and are sympathetic to the situation, there is a greater chance the suspect will discuss the crime or incident. The objective of the interview is to uncover the truth, and themes are one of the most effective methods to get the suspect to explain the act or situation in question (Leo 1996).

Reid defines a theme as "a persuasive technique designed to reinforce the guilty suspect's existing justifications for committing his crime, thus creating an environment in which the suspect feels more comfortable telling the truth about his criminal activity" (Senese 2005: 43). The goal of interrogators is to determine which neutralization(s) the suspect uses to justify his/her actions so that the suspect becomes comfortable verbalizing his/her thoughts, words, actions, and intent surrounding the crime. Interrogators continue presenting justifications that they (interrogators) think the suspect used to rationalize the crime, until the suspect responds to one of the themes.

When interrogators mention the theme that accurately portrays the suspect's view of the situation or crime, often the suspect's demeanor and body language will change. The suspect may nod his/her head, or look the interrogators in the eye, indicating that the theme is what the suspect used as justification. Once the suspect acknowledges that the theme is accurate, interrogators continue to encourage the suspect to make an admission of guilt. Overall, Step 2 allows interrogators "to establish the psychological foundation to achieve an implicit, if not explicit, early, general admission of guilt" (Inbau et al. 1986: 97). Finally, when interrogators have defused the situation so that the suspect is comfortable, the suspect may confess and accept both responsibility and the harm caused by the crime.

As previously explained, themes are detailed scenarios developed by interrogators that are based on the neutralization (or neutralizations) that offenders use to make sense of their actions. By increasing their knowledge on the varying types of neutralizations that offenders use for different types of crimes, interrogators will increase their chances of obtaining confessions. In what follows, we show how research examining the neutralizations used by identity thieves can inform and guide police in their interrogations using the Reid Technique. Specifically, we provide law-enforcement practitioners information to enhance their understanding and development of functional themes to obtain confessions from suspects who have engaged in identity theft. Armed

with this information, interrogators can then seek out research about other crime types so that their interrogations can be conducted more effectively (see Appendix for a list of offense-specific research studies).

Methods

The present study is based on data collected from interviews with 59 inmates incarcerated in federal prisons for identity theft or identity theft-related crimes. Since there is no comprehensive list of identity thieves, investigators interested in learning about identity thieves and their activities cannot draw random samples for study. Therefore, it is necessary for investigators to be creative in how they locate suitable participants. We followed the strategies of past researchers who have employed non-probability samples to locate hard-to-reach criminal populations (e.g., Shover, Coffey, and Hobbs 2003; Shover, Coffey, and Sanders 2004).

We located federally convicted identity thieves by examining newspapers (via Lexis-Nexis) and legal documents (via Lexis-Nexis and Westlaw) from across the Nation and by searching press releases from each US Attorney's website for the 93 US districts. We used the Lexis-Nexis electronic database, which organizes newspapers from around the Nation by region and state, as our source for the newspapers. In addition, we searched the Lexis-Nexis Legal Research database, which contains decisions from all federal court levels, and the Westlaw database using the search term "18 USC § 1028," which is the federal statute for identity theft. We also searched the official website for US Attorneys (http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/) for press releases and indictments for individuals charged with identity theft. Lastly, we searched the websites of each individual US Attorney's Office to locate persons charged with, indicted for, and/or sentenced to prison for identity theft.

Once we completed our search of newspaper articles and legal documents, we looked for these individuals on the Federal Bureau of Prisons Inmate Locator (http://www.bop.gov) to determine if they were currently being housed in federal facilities. Our search yielded the names of 297 identity thieves who were being housed in federal prison. Because it was not possible to interview all 297 individuals, it was necessary for us to sample people from this list. We visited the facilities that housed the largest number of inmates on our list in each of the six regions defined by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (Western, North Central, South Central, North Eastern, Mid-Atlantic, and South Eastern) and solicited the inmates housed in these places. In addition, some of these facilities were located near other federal prisons that housed individuals on our list. When this was the case, we went to these facilities to interview offenders. We visited a total of 14 correctional facilities.

We used semistructured interviews to explore the offenders' decision-making processes. Our goal was to have the participants tell their stories in their own words. While we tried to ask the same questions to all participants, this was not

always possible. For example, questions pertaining to entering banks to cash checks were not applicable for those who engaged in mortgage fraud. Also, many of the participants began describing the events of the thefts even before we asked. On several occasions, they would describe how they became involved in their crimes before we could ask all background questions. In these cases, we either tried to ask them at the end of the interview or left them out. This was done because we did not want to disrupt the flow of the conversation regarding the details of the thefts and their perceptions of their crimes. When possible, we audio-recorded interviews and then transcribed them verbatim. However, some wardens denied us permission to bring recording devices into their facilities, and some offenders agreed to the interview only if it was not recorded. To ensure inter-rater reliability, we read each transcript independently, to identify common themes. We then convened to determine the overarching themes that had been identified.

Our final sample of 59 inmates included 23 men and 36 women. This discrepancy in gender is likely due to our sampling strategy and the higher response rate from female inmates. In addition, more males were unavailable for interviews because of disciplinary problems. Offenders in our sample ranged in age from 23 to 60 years, with a mean age of 38 years. They included 18 White females, 16 African American females, 2 Asian females, 8 White males, and 15 African American males.

Neutralizations of Identity Thieves

Overall, nearly 60 percent (*n* = 35) of the offenders interviewed used at least one technique of neutralization, and several (*n* = 14) used multiple techniques. Not all of the techniques were mentioned, and some techniques were used more frequently than others, which is consistent with what others have found, regarding the use of neutralizations (Maruna and Copes 2005). It should be noted that neutralization techniques used by offenders emerged naturally during our conversations. No deliberate attempt was made to elicit these responses. It is possible that if respondents had been asked about these devices, more offenders would have reported using them. However, because they occurred naturally in the conversation, it is clear that offenders did, in fact, use such devices and were not merely detailing them simply because we asked.

While there are a number of ways that offenders can justify or excuse their crimes, identity thieves tend to rely on just a few. The techniques that these identity thieves mentioned, in order of frequency, were: denial of injury (*n* = 21), appeal to higher loyalties (*n* = 14), denial of victim (*n* = 9), and denial of responsibility (*n* = 6).

The most common way respondents made sense of their crimes was by denying that they caused any real harm. It was not uncommon for identity thieves to make statements such as, "I always thought that just because it was white collar crime it didn't hurt nobody" and "Everything that I did was based on

grabbing the identity and then opening separate accounts. It affected them, but it was different." Many of them were secure in their belief that stealing identities was only a minor hassle to victims and that no real harm came to them because, with a few telephone calls, the victim could repair damaged credit, be reimbursed by the bank, or have unauthorized charges dropped by credit card companies.

When identity thieves did acknowledge victims, they described them as large, faceless organizations that deserved victimization. Identity thieves argue that the only people who actually lose from their crimes are banks, corporations, or other deserving victims:

> I mean, like real identity theft, that I was talking to and I'm just like, "Man I can't do that." You know what I'm saying. Intentionally screw someone over, you follow what I'm saying. It's just, it's not right to me. So I couldn't do it. But corporations, banks, police departments, government—oh, yeah, let's go get 'em. Because that's the way they treat you, you know what I'm saying. If they done screwed me over, screw them.

When victims are faceless or "plastic," distancing one's self from the crime becomes remarkably easier.

Many identity thieves also seek to make sense of and justify their crimes by pointing out that their actions were done with noble intents—helping people. They set aside their better judgment because they thought helping friends and family was more important at that time. Three offenders explain:

> And it's like I tell the judge, I regret what I had put my family through, but I don't regret at all what I did because everything that I did was for the safety of my kids. And I don't regret it. As a mother, I think you do whatever needs to [be done] to keep your kids safe.

> I mean there be a couple of cases where I have felt bad. Some people, I mean a lot of them, I help out. There's a girl that stay in the projects, I met her at the bus station … . Her old man was a drug dealer. He wasn't doing nothing for her … . I went in her apartment. Man, she didn't have anything in there. Nothing. No furniture, no TV. She was drinking out of glass jars and stuff. I'm talking about poor. I'm talking about poverty to the lowest. I felt sorry for her. I ran into the bank a couple of times. She made some money and I let her keep the money. Last time I seen her, she had a car. She had moved up into better place. I just didn't do everybody wrong.

> I did it for my son. I thought if I had money and I was able to live, have a nice place to live, and not have to worry about a car payment, I could just start a new life and that life is for him because when I left [my ex-husband], we argued a lot and I just wanted my son to be happy and loved.

Individuals who work within an organization to carry out their crimes sometimes rely on the diffusion of responsibility to excuse themselves. Although large amounts of money are eventually appropriated, many of the self-proclaimed low-level organizational members in our sample claimed that they

only played a minimal role in the crime. Thus, by comparison, they should not be judged like the others. Additionally, these individuals point to the small amount of money they made as evidence that they "really didn't do anything." According to two offenders:

> I never believed that I would be listed on the indictment … . I didn't go into it saying okay, I'm gonna make a ton of money off of this, you know … . When I saw the indictments and some of the amounts of the money that these folks were making, I mean 1.2 million dollars, you know. And I'm a struggling just-out-of-school student. I lived in an apartment that was barely big enough for me, you know. My car was still owned by Mazda, you know what I mean? … Everybody I knew that worked in real estate as an attorney that's the kinda money they were making.

> I'm an outside guy. I'm not really involved. I don't know what's going on. I'm not making no transactions. None of this money is coming into any of my bank accounts. So I don't have nothing to do with it. But now I look like I'm the main guy.

Reid Interrogation of Identity Thieves

Although every offender is different and more than one neutralization could apply to each situation, the following case study provides an example of how interrogators could utilize research on neutralizations when interrogating suspected identity thieves. A full Reid Technique is certainly longer and more complicated than the one presented here, but space precludes us from relaying how a full interrogation would be conducted. What we present is the section of the interrogation that is related directly to neutralization theory (Step 2: Theme Development).

The following illustrative case comes from one of the participants of our study. This individual was chosen because he best articulated the most commonly used neutralizations: denial of injury, denial of victim, and appeal to higher loyalties. The case involves an ex-convict named Bill[2] who was placed in a halfway house. Bill was required to maintain a job until he completed his sentence and was released. Approximately 1 year ago, Bill decided he "wanted his life back," so he absconded. To sustain the livelihood of his family, which included his wife, three kids, and five dogs, Bill created fake bank accounts, fake checks, and fraudulent forms of identification (e.g., driver's license and social security card). In total, Bill created and used false identities in over 25 states. Prior to interviewing Bill, the interrogator had enough background information about Bill to know that he had not held any jobs since his escape and that his family had relied solely on his crimes for living expenses. Thus, early in the interview, the interrogator would tell Bill, with a direct, positive confrontation that she believes Bill turned to identify theft because it was an

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2. To protect the participant's identity, all identifying information has been removed.

easy way to obtain quick money without alerting law enforcement as to his whereabouts. After telling Bill this, the interrogator should "read" Bill's behavioral responses.

During step 2 of the interrogation, the interrogator should present a moral excuse, or neutralization, that is common among the types of offenders in question. In this case, the interrogator should present some combination of the appeal to higher loyalties, the denial of the victim, and the denial of injury. For instance, the interrogator could say:

> Bill, I know that a year ago you had a job and were trying to finish your sentence while living in the halfway house. But we both know you weren't happy and you were struggling to pay your bills while working at the grocery store. You desperately wanted your life back. You wanted to live with your wife and children. Due to your desperation to live a normal life and to be free again, you decided to be with your family. By doing that though, you had to move your family around constantly. To avoid getting caught by law enforcement and to keep your family together you had to frequently move at a moment's notice. This meant that neither you nor your wife could hold a normal job to support your family. You had to do something to get money.

If the offender does not "bite" on this theme, the interrogator should continue developing themes, such as:

> Bill, I think because you were desperate, you decided to do something totally out of character. You decided to create fictitious accounts and checks to make ends meet. I think you decided that the best way to do it without anyone getting hurt was to create new accounts using people's personal information. You didn't steal directly from them or use their credit cards. Instead, you created false accounts so they didn't really lose anything. You had to do this and your only goal was to survive. In fact you were thinking of others when you chose to create accounts ensuring the least harm to anyone. I think you have only been doing this for a short time and that it was a deviation from your normal behavior and personal ethics. Bill I think this is something completely out of the ordinary for you and that you didn't mean to hurt anyone—that is why you created fake accounts. Have you been doing this your whole life or was this a short term solution that you only did as a last resort?

After explaining to Bill how the interrogator thinks the identity theft began, the interrogator offers Bill the alternative question. This scenario allows the interrogator to show the suspect that she can empathize with his situation because she understands the appeal to higher loyalty, the denial of victims and the denial of injury excuses. The interrogator shows Bill an awareness of the pressure that he was under once he decided to abscond with his family. The interrogator explains to Bill that he did not steal from others; instead he created fake accounts in his attempt to avoid harming anyone. By offering Bill the appeal to higher loyalties and the denial of injury neutralizations, the interrogator is likely to reinforce Bill's existing justifications for committing the crime. After the interrogator has shown that she understands why he had no

choice but to take illegal actions to support his family and to survive, Bill will likely be more comfortable telling the truth.

In the scenario just presented, the interrogator is presenting themes centering on how identity thieves are likely to excuse their criminal behavior. These types of excuses are effective because they permit suspects to accept responsibility for committing their crimes while simultaneously protecting them from the pangs of conscience that is associated with cognitive dissonance, shame, guilt, and stigma.

Conclusion

We have provided an example of how theoretically guided research can benefit practitioners in their day-to-day jobs. When thinking of practical lines of inquiry in criminology, neutralization theory may not be the first to come to mind, but even here the leap to "real world" applications is not as far as some may assume. We think that by being familiar with research on offender neutralizations, law-enforcement officials can conduct more effective Reid interrogations and thus benefit tremendously. Knowledge of neutralization theory and its accompanying research combined with the Reid Technique gives interrogators the essential skills they need to move a suspect from their denial of guilt to admitting involvement in a crime. Gaining confessions is beneficial to law-enforcement practitioners because doing so can "eliminate lengthy trial preparations, help the case rapidly move to sentencing, and allow the investigators to move on to another assignment, focusing critical resources in other directions" (Bowling and Resch 2005: 7). In addition, a confession from a suspect increases greatly the chance of successful prosecution.

What we have provided is merely a guide to show interrogators how they can incorporate academic research into their work. Ideally, interrogators could take this information and then locate other research that describes the most common neutralizations used by the type of suspect they are interviewing. As cultural perspectives change, so too do the neutralizations that criminals use. As criminologists discover new neutralizations, law-enforcement practitioners will benefit by keeping abreast of the changes in perspective. As Scott and Lyman (1968: 62) point out, "Since it is with respect to deviant behavior that we call for accounts, the study of deviance and the study of accounts are intrinsically related, and a clarification of accounts will constitute a clarification of deviant phenomena." By developing a more thorough understanding of the accounts used by specific types of offenders, investigators will have another tool with which to extract confessions from guilty suspects. We have provided a brief list of offense-specific neutralization research to serve as a starting point for those interested in learning more about how specific types of offenders account for their crimes (see Appendix).

While we think that interrogators have much to learn from academic research on offender neutralizations, we do not believe this knowledge transfer

is a one-way street. On the contrary, we believe that academics have much to learn from interrogators. Experiential knowledge from conducting interrogations likely has taught interrogators which themes work best for specific offenders. This is a valuable source of information that can be used to inform theory and research about the cognitive processes of offenders. Thus researchers would be well advised to talk to interrogators as well as offenders when trying to understand criminal thinking. Doing so would certainly advance knowledge for both academics and practitioners.

We have provided an example of how theoretically driven research may be applied directly to the "real" life work of law-enforcement officials. Such information can be used as an educational tool to assist students in understanding the value of theory and research and its applicability in the field. In addition to students planning careers in law enforcement, current law-enforcement officials can benefit from the findings of our research that demonstrates the specific neutralizations employed by identity thieves. The findings of our research on how identity thieves use neutralizations to make sense of or account for their crimes may be utilized by law-enforcement officials to inform their interrogations of offenders. By beginning in the classroom, professors can help bridge the gap between research and practice by providing students with practical applications of theoretically driven research findings to common law-enforcement practices.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix. Reference List for Neutralization Research by Offense Type

Offense type	Source
Economic crime	
Embezzlement	Benson (1985); Cressey (1953)
Medicaid fraud	Jesilow, Pontell, and Geis (1993)
Tax Fraud	Thurman, St. John, and Riggs (1984)
Telemarketing fraud	Shover et al. (2003)
Employee theft	Dabney (1995); Greenberg (1990)
Software piracy	Goode and Cruise (2006)
Property crime	
Auto theft	Copes (2003)
Shoplifting	Cromwell and Thurman (2003)
Fencing	Klockars (1974)
Poaching	Eliason and Dodder (1999)
Violent crime	
Homicide	Levi (1981); Ray and Simons (1987)
Gun violence	Pogrebin, Stretesky, Unnithan, and Venor (2006)
Hate crimes	Byers and Crider (2002)
Sex crimes	
Rape	Scully and Marolla (1984)
Pedophilia	De Young (1988); Durkin and Bryant (1999)
Statutory rape	Higginson (1999)
Prostitution	Brooks-Gordon and Gelsthorpe (2003)
Professional misconduct	Pogrebin, Poole, and Martinez (1992)
Drug crime	Peretti-Watel (2003); Priest and McGrath (1970)