

Techniques of Neutralization and Cheating in a National Pool League

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Abstract

This paper explores “Techniques of Neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1957)” and cheating in a national pool league. The American Poolplayers Association, founded in 1979, is a nationwide pool league with more than 250,000 members. The most difficult problem facing the APA operators is the deliberate cheating by the competing players. Players cheat to lower their skill levels which allow them to win more easily in important pool matches such as the APA national championships. Qualitative interviews revealed that when asked about cheating behavior, the players used all five “Techniques of Neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1957)” to rationalize their actions.

Keywords: Neutralization Techniques, Cheating, Pool League, Rationalization, 8-ball

Introduction

Cheating behavior, in its many forms, has become a major research issue in academia. Extensive research has been performed in the more popular areas such as cheating in school (Clariana, Gotzens, del Mar Badia, and Cladellas, 2012; Galloway, 2012, Tsai, 2012, Mathison, 2010, and, McCabe and Katz, 2009), cheating on one's spouse (Carr, 2010, Oppenheimer, 2007, and Sprecher, Regan, and McKinney, 1998), cheating on taxes (Yaniv, 2013, Houser, Vetter and Winter, 2012; Rubenfield and Pandit, 2007, and Slemrod, 2007), and how cheating in school can affect one's future (Lovett-Hooper, Komarraju, Weston and Dollinger, 2007).

When examining deviant behavior such as cheating, Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957) theorized that when juveniles behaved in this manner, they recognized that their behavior violated society's norms, thus they developed a variety of face-saving techniques to neutralize or justify the deviant behavior. Sykes and Matza's (1957) theory is known as “Techniques of Neutralization.”

Although Sykes and Matza's (1957) original theory was limited to explaining juvenile delinquency, it has since been expanded to include adult criminality, especially in the areas of white collar crime. Benson (1985) linked “Techniques of Neutralization” to tax evaders' behavioral explanations. Willott, Griffin and Torrance (2001) and Nichols (1990) showed that numerous corporate executives, upon committing a variety of corporate crimes, utilized several of the “neutralization techniques” to rationalize their criminal behavior, while Grabosky (1990) used it for professional legal crimes, and Cavender, Jurik, and Cohen (1993) for political crimes. It has been shown; that adults, after committing a non-violent economic crime, will utilize “neutralization techniques” to justify or rationalize their behaviors in an attempt not only to save face but to mitigate against the sanctions, both formal and informal, that may be imposed by the community. However, it has not been definitively determined whether these adults are utilizing these justification techniques to escape either formal or informal sanctions, or both.

This research analyzes individualized cheating behavior in a nationwide pay-to-play pool league and the various techniques those adults use to justify or rationalize their deviant behavior. It attempts to determine if adults will utilize the same “neutralizing techniques” of Sykes and Matza (1957), in an attempt to avoid minor informal sanctions when there is no chance of formal sanctions being assessed against the person. Further to what extent will these individuals utilize these “neutralizing techniques” in an attempt to reinforce their justifications, since they are not only attempting to saveface, but to uphold their reputation in the community as moral and ethical people.

The American Poolplayers Association (APA) is a nationwide handicapped pool league, which expanded to Canada in 1989, and is now the largest amateur pool league in the world with more than 250,000 participating players (2013APA Official Team Manual). The APA was founded in 1979, by Terry Bell and Larry Hubbart, two professional billiard touring players. The APA is an adult pool playing league. APA members must be at least 21 years of age since the vast majority of pool teams play in establishments that serve alcohol (2013 APA Official Team Manual).

“The APA operates the league through a network of independent entrepreneurs called League Operators (2013APA Official Team Manual, p. 8.)”The League Operator is a professional administrator, trained by the APA National Office, and given the authority to make rulings concerning all aspects of the league and may hire assistants or representatives to aid him/her in this regard (2013APA Official Team Manual). The APA pool league is a handicapped league which, in theory, allows pool players of all different skill levels to compete on an equal basis anywhere in the country. The APA has a patented “equalizer” software system that creates equality among all pool players through a handicapping system which affords every player an equal chance of winning against any other player regardless of that player’s skill level(2013APA Official Team Manual). Through the matches played in the league, the franchised league operators compile the data that is used in creating a player’s individual handicap (Boyle 2013).

The APA divides the US and Canada into regions, which may be as large as two or three counties or as small as one city. The APA then sells each of these regions or franchises to a league operator who becomes the owner of the APA pool league in that area. The league operator is then in charge of the day to day operations of the league in his/her area. The operators must work closely with bar owners, social clubs or pool halls to create pool teams who wish to compete on a weekly basis (Boyle 2013).

The APA is a pay-to-play league. The more competing teams that the operators find, the more income they derive from the leagues. Therefore, building the number of teams playing and retaining them is the biggest priority for the operators (Boyle, 2013). For the league players however, the tasks expected of the league operators are much different. They must perform a number of duties, such as divide teams into playing divisions, schedule matches and playoffs, run tournaments, and most importantly, keep team and division records, and a computerized record of how every player performs in every single pool match in which they compete so as to provide an accurate skill level for every player, to ensure that all match competitions are fair. This data is compiled locally by the league operator who then submits this information through the nationwide computer network to the APA national database in St. Louis, MO (Boyle, 2013).

The league operator must create team divisions and weekly match schedules for the teams in his/her area. Depending on the number of teams that an operator has and the enthusiasm of the players, there may be divisions playing one night per week or every night of the week (Boyle, 2013). Each team must consist of a minimum of five players and a maximum of eight players. Whether playing in an 8-Ball or 9-Ball league, each team match consists of five players from each team playing individual matches, with the individual match results combined to create a team score(2013APA Official Team Manual).

Every year, the APA distributes a player manual to each team containing all the rules and regulation for their 8-Ball and 9-Ball leagues. The manual details the APA’s specific rules regarding both types of games, including breaking rules, what constitutes a foul, how to win a game, how to lose a game, how to keep score for a match, etc. (2013APA Official Team Manual).

Each 8-Ball player is ranked or handicapped according to his/her skill level. The skill levels range from 2 to 7, with a 2 being a player just beginning to play pool and a 7 being an extremely skilled player, one of the best in the league. There are a number of factors that determine a player’s skill level. The entirety of factors considered in determining one’s skill level are unknown to the players (2013APA Official Team Manual), however three of the biggest factors that the APA does allow all players to know, are: match winning percentage, the number of turns to the table it takes to win a match (innings), and the number of defensive shots taken (this is a shot where the player is not attempting to make a ball, but is trying to place his/her ball such that it causes the opponent to foul). When two players compete, their skill levels determine how many 8-Ball games that each must win to prevail in the match. For example, a player rated as a 5 skill level must win one game more than someone rated as a 4 skill level. The minimum number of wins that a player must have to win a match is 2 games, thus a player rated as a 2 playing a player rated as a 4, must win two games before their opponent wins four games (2013APA Official Team Manual).

In 9-Ball the skill levels range from 1 to 9, with skill level 1 being a player just beginning to play pool and a 9 being an extremely skilled player, again, one of the best in the league. As with 8-Ball, the entirety of factors considered in determining one's skill level are unknown to the players, however as stated earlier, three of the most important factors that the APA does allow all players to know, are: match winning percentage, the number of turns to the table it takes to win a match or innings played, and the number of defensive shots taken. In the APA version of 9-Ball, a player scores one point when they legally pocket any ball numbered one through eight (in order of lowest to highest), and they score two points for legally pocketing the nine ball. When two players compete in 9-Ball, their skill levels determine how many points each must score to win the match. For example, a player rated as a 5 must score 38 points to win the match, while someone rated as a 4 needs only 31 points. The minimum number of points that a player must have to win a match is at skill level 1, at which 14 points is needed, and the highest skill level is a 9, needing 75 points (2013APA Official Team Manual).

For both 8-Ball and 9-Ball the overall team matches are made up of five individually competed matches. Each team alternates announcing their player selection for the upcoming individual match, then the other team selects that player's opponent for the match. When those players complete their match, the match data is recorded and the selection process begins again until five individual matches are completed and the team competition is ended. To make the team competitions as equitable and fair as possible, the APA has a 23 point skilllevel rule, which requires that the skilllevel rankings of the five individuals competing in the team match cannot exceed 23 points, thus a team cannot play five individuals with skilllevels of 7, 7, 5, 5, and 3 as this totals 27 points and is illegal. With this rule in place, all players on a team, regardless of their skilllevel are of equal value and necessary to be competitive. The APA believes that with their "equalizer" software's handicapping process and the 23 point skilllevel rule, all team competition has the capability of being completely equitable(2013APA Official Team Manual).

As previously stated, the APA pool league is a pay-to-play league. Every player must pay a \$25 membership fee to join the APA. Teams are charged a fee for every week that they compete. The fee varies from region to region as it is solely determined by the league operators, and in most cases ranges from \$15 - \$40 per team per match (in Southeastern PA, the fee is \$40 per team, per night). Of that fee, a small percentage goes to the APA headquarters as part of the franchise royalties. The remainder of the nightly match fee goes to the league operator and is divided into two parts: one to pay for salaries, supplies and business operating expenses, and the other is placed in a players' fund which is used solely to benefit the league players such as paying for team and individual trophies, league shirts, team expenses for national championships, etc. (Boyle, 2013). Being a pay-to-play pool league, the APA offers numerous opportunities to win money and prizes. The major league-wide events providing money and prizes are the national team and national individual championships held twice per year in Las Vegas, NV (2013APA Official Team Manual).

For an APA player to compete at the individual national championships, he/she must have at least ten matches of pool league play (which establishes his/her handicap), then win a local tournament, which qualifies that person for a regional tournament (held twice per year). The regional winner is then eligible to compete for a national championship at his/her handicap level. The winner of the regional event receives from the APA, \$350 for air-travel and a private hotel room to compete in the three day APA individual national championships (at their skill level) in Las Vegas, NV held each April. Each individual contestant at the APA national championships receives a number of mementos to commemorate qualifying for this event and each player has the opportunity to compete for the \$10,000 in cash and prizes paid to the champions at their skill-levels or handicaps or the prize money paid to the players based on their finish(2013APA Official Team Manual). The number of participants competing at the various skill-levels for a national championship (1200+ in 2012) varies from year to year depending on how many players choose to compete locally (Boyle, 2013).

Qualifying to compete in the APA national team championships is similar to qualifying as an individual. Any team that is successful in winning the local championship must then compete in and win a regional team competition made up of all local champions in the region. The winner of the team regional event receives free air-travel and hotel rooms (paid for by the league operator, not the APA) to compete in the five to seven day APA team national championships in Las Vegas, NV, held each August(2013APA Official Team Manual).

Each of the 1216 (in 2012) team contestants at the APA national championships receives a number of mementos to commemorate qualifying for this event and each team has the opportunity to compete for the \$25,000 paid to the champions or the prize money paid to the non-winning teams based on their finishing order, with each team receiving a minimum of \$350(2013APA Official Team Manual).

As can be seen, there are numerous benefits accruing to both players and teams qualifying for these national pool events. These benefits can be both monetary and social. The monetary benefits are readily apparent, a free weeklong trip to Las Vegas and the financial winnings that go with participation in the national tournament. The social benefits however, are very subjective in their importance to each individual player. They are accorded bragging rights with other pool playing members of the APA and they may be idolized by the other members of their bar or social club. With all these benefits incorporated into the APA pool leagues, many players may believe that by cheating, they will enhance their chances of winning their way into the APA national championships.

Cheating in the APA pool league is relatively easy to accomplish. In the APA, an individual's skill level is roughly based on winning percentage and how many turns to the table it takes you to win a match (innings played). By measuring the innings played, the APA knows how many balls you pocket in an average turn to the table. The more highly skilled players will make more balls per turn than the lower skilled players. Thus, the easiest ways to cheat in the pool league are to lose games on purpose, to miss balls on purpose (driving down your balls made per inning), or to fail to mark a defensive shot on the score sheet. A defensive shot does not officially count as a turn to the table, thus driving up the innings played measurement and driving down your balls made per inning(2013APA Official Team Manual).

Through cheating, a player can lower his/her official skill ranking, making it much easier to defeat his/her opponents in the playoff and tournament matches. Having just one or two players cheat so that they are playing at skill levels below their true abilities, enhances their entire team's ability to compete successfully in these important matches, robbing the teams that play to their ability a legitimate chance to win in these competitions. If a player is caught cheating by the league operator, at the operator's sole discretion, he/she may: issue a warning to the cheating player, raise the player's skill level, place the player on probation, or suspend the player for a specified period of time (Boyle, 2013).

Theory

Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957) believe that in the US, people generally sense a moral obligation to follow the laws and norms of their society. However, some individuals will find themselves drifting between deviant and non-deviant behavior. Knowing that certain types of deviant behavior are wrong and frowned upon by the majority of society, Sykes and Matza (1957) believe that these deviants will attempt to either rationalize or justify their behavior to both themselves and others in order to feel better about their behavior and to avoid being stigmatized as a bad person. Sykes and Matza (1957) developed five different "Techniques of Neutralization" that people use as both defense mechanisms and as a means of neutralizing or justifying their deviant behaviors. These five techniques of neutralization are categorized as follows:

1. **Denial of Responsibility:** Blaming something outside themselves or circumstances beyond their control
2. **Denial of Injury:** Claiming that everyone else does it and that no one was hurt by the behavior
3. **Denial of Victim:** Believing that someone else started it, they deserved it, or It was done in self-defense
4. **Condemn the Condemner:** Asserting that the authorities or people judging them are to blame, given the same opportunity, they would do the same thing, or the authorities or people judging them are corrupt too, and,
5. **Appeal to Higher Loyalties:** Explaining that others were depending on them to behave in that manner or to perform that action.

Methodology

The author has been a participating member of the APA since 1996. As a participant observer, he gathered the data for this research over the past three years through unstructured interviews with APA pool players at various sites across the country. Sixty interviews ranging from twenty to ninety minutes were performed where the pool players were playing (either in the pool halls or convention centers holding the pool competitions), in Las Vegas, NV (at the APA national team championships in 2010, 2011, and 2012); in Atlanta, GA (at the APA sponsored US Amateur national championships in 2010); in Hoboken,

NJ (at the APA sponsored US Amateur Championship qualifiers in 2010 and 2011); and, in Lehigh, Bucks, and Montgomery Counties, PA (at APA regional championships and qualifiers in 2010, 2011, and 2012).

With the University IRB's approval, the interviewees for this project were not made aware that they were taking part in a research interview as it was believed that they would not have been as forthcoming or candid about their individualized cheating behavior. All of the interviewees' statements were kept confidential and their anonymity was protected.

The interviewees were chosen following the author's observations of a player's match where the author believed that the player was performing at a much higher or lower skill level than the one assigned by the APA. It should be noted that for the past 17 years, the author has been ranked at the highest APA skill levels for both 8-Ball and 9-Ball and has been asked on a number of occasions, for three different league operators, to observe and rank a player's skill level to determine if he/she has been cheating.

The author utilized a subjective method of selecting interviewees called "purposive sampling." After observing a player competing in a match where the author believed that the player was performing to a much higher or much lower level than their skill ranking, the author approached the individual and began a conversation with the player. The interviews began with discussing the players' pool playing abilities and skills and how they enjoy playing in the APA pool league and the tournament in which they are currently participating. The interviewee was eventually steered toward questions of whether they have ever cheated in a pool match and if so, why they chose to cheat. Immediately following each interview, notes were transcribed detailing all relevant information gathered from the interviewee. The details on why the individual chose to cheat were then placed into the best fitting category in accordance with the five different "Techniques of Neutralization" (Sykes and Matza, 1957) and placed in notebooks. Once categorized, numbers were assigned to the interviewees simply to keep track of how many players used multiple techniques to rationalize their behavior. With the categorization complete, all interviewee identification was destroyed to preserve confidentiality and anonymity. It should be noted that this research was not being used to determine how many players or what percentage of players cheat in the pool league, it simply examines how the players who admit to cheating are rationalizing or justifying their actions.

Results

Sixty pool players were interviewed following a match where it was believed that the player was deliberately playing above or below their assigned APA skill level or where the author believed that the player was performing at a much higher skill level than the one assigned by the APA. Of the sixty pool players interviewed, fifty-two admitted to sandbagging or cheating in some form: either through missing shots on purpose, losing on purpose, marking the score sheet with the wrong number of innings played or not marking defensive shots on their score sheets. The players interviewed attempted to justify or explain away their cheating behavior using multiple techniques offered by Sykes and Matza (1957). Overall, each of the techniques was utilized to explain pool league cheating behavior and many interviewees used two, three or even four of the techniques in an attempt to save face for their cheating behavior.

For the fifty-two interviews performed on those who admitted to sandbagging, most individuals used multiple "Techniques of Neutralization" to justify their actions. The most often used technique was "**Appeal to Higher Authority**" (explaining that others were depending on them to behave in that manner or to perform that action). There were forty-one players that mentioned in some way that their teammates were depending on them to win. The interviewees used justifications such as:

"If my ranking went up, our team would have no chance of winning."

"My teammates know that as a three (ranking) I can win any time I want to and they are depending on me to stay a three."

"I may have cheated a little, but it worked, my team is playing for the championship in (Las) Vegas."

"If my ranking went up, we couldn't play the same lineup and we would never have gotten to (Las) Vegas."

"I want to be ranked a five, but my captain tells me that I have to stay a four for the team."

The next highest technique utilized was "**Denial of Injury**" (claiming that everyone else does it and that no one was hurt by the behavior), where thirty-three players referred to no one being hurt by their cheating. These players attempted to rationalize their deviant behavior through statements such as:

"It's only a game, no one got hurt."

“It’s not a big deal; it’s only a game of pool.”

“The only person who got hurt was me. Every week I had to pay money even though I was trying to lose.”

“Everybody I know cheats in this league, I’m not alone.”

“I only cheated in a pool league, it’s not like I committed a crime.”

Twenty-seven players “**Condemned the Condemners**” (asserting that the authorities or people judging them are to blame, given the same opportunity, they would do the same thing, or the authorities or people judging them are corrupt too), referring to many of the players they play against as being cheaters:

“The people that call you a cheater have all cheated themselves.”

“I know a bunch of people that cheat just as much as me, but they like to call other people cheaters.”

“The APA ranking system makes it so that you have to cheat if you want to have a chance at winning.”

“If my league operator tried to stop cheating, things would be different, but she doesn’t, so I have no choice but to cheat.”

“Cheating is built into the APA system, so if you don’t cheat the league, you are just cheating yourself.”

Sixteen players utilized the “**Denial of Victim**” technique (believing that someone else started it, they deserved it, or it was done in self-defense), stating that:

“The person that she was playing against was also sandbagging so that she was forced to sandbag too.”

“Players talk about cheating all the time, so if I don’t cheat too, I won’t be able to win.”

“All the players on my team cheat, so I might as well cheat too.”

“When I see a player that I think is cheating, I will lose to them on purpose to try to move them up a ranking.”

The least used technique was “**Denial of Responsibility**” (blaming something outside themselves or circumstances beyond their control), where only six players stated that

“The team captain told me that I had to cheat to remain on the team (stating that if his ranking went higher, he would have to be replaced with someone with a lower ranking).”

“The League Operator plays favorites so I have to cheat just to stay competitive”

“When I play defense, I don’t mark it, if the other team doesn’t mark them, it’s not my fault.”

In all, of the fifty-two players interviewed admitted to cheating in the pool league, 123 different “Techniques of Neutralization” were utilized to justify their actions. Seven pool players used four different techniques to justify cheating in the league, eighteen players used three different techniques, fourteen players gave two different techniques, and thirteen players utilized only one technique to rationalize their deviant behavior.

Conclusion

Knowing that certain types of deviant behavior are wrong and frowned upon by the majority of society, Sykes and Matza (1957) believe that juvenile delinquents will attempt to either rationalize or justify their behavior to both themselves and others in order to feel better about the behavior and to avoid being stigmatized as a bad person. Sykes and Matza’s (1957) “Techniques of Neutralization” theory was originally written specifically toward juvenile behavior only, however, it has been previously shown that Sykes and Matza’s (1957) “Techniques of Neutralization” can readily be applied to adults attempting to justify or rationalize their criminal behavior (Willott, Griffin and Torrance, 2001; Cavender, Jurik, and Cohen, 1993; Grabosky, 1990; Nichols, 1990; and Benson, 1985). Unfortunately, previous research has failed to definitively show whether these justifications were utilized to mitigate formal sanctions, informal sanctions, or both.

This research has shown that even if there was no chance of formal sanctions being assessed against the individual and with only the possibility of minimal informal social sanctions by a very small segment of the individuals’ overall communities, those people involved in the local APA pool league, adults utilized the same “neutralizing techniques” of Sykes and Matza (1957), in an attempt to avoid even minimal social informal sanctions. It was further shown that depending on the circumstances; adults would utilize multiple techniques to reinforce their justifications since they were not only attempting to save face, but to uphold his/her reputation among their peers as a moral and ethical person.

It appears that adults do not, under any circumstances, want to be perceived as bad or deviant people. Furthermore, adults not only rationalize their behavior by using Sykes and Matza’s (1957) techniques, they will utilize numerous “neutralization techniques” to reinforce their justifications and rationalizations to minimize the risk that they will be deemed an unethical or immoral person.

The subjects in this research project vigorously attempted to rationalize or justify their deviant behavior. In all, 39 of the 52 admitted cheaters utilized multiple “neutralization techniques” to justify their cheating behavior and avoid the giving the impression or perception that they cheated other pool players simply to gain an unfair advantage for their own selfish gain. Most went to great lengths to show a reasonable cause behind their cheating behavior.

This validates the previous research which has shown that Sykes and Matza’s (1957) “Techniques of Neutralization” can be applied as easily and effectively to adult behavior as they can to juvenile behavior, even when there is no chance of formal sanctions, and when the possibility of informal sanctions are minimal and limited to a very small segment of their community, those members of their local APA pool league. Further, it is apparent from this and prior research, that both juveniles and adults, no matter the circumstances, rely on Sykes and Matza’s (1957) “Techniques of Neutralization,” which seems to indicate that these techniques may simply be defense mechanisms used by everyone to protect us psychologically from any form of wayward activity, and to maintain peer acceptance.

Future research should focus on other minor forms of adult deviance such as lying and minor forms of employee theft (stealing pens, taking too long for lunch, personal phone calls, etc.) and whether or not, or to what extent, adults utilize Sykes and Matza’s (1957) “Techniques of Neutralization” to rationalize or justify their actions.

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Interviews

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