

PART VI



Accounts

When people say or do things that appear odd to others, they risk being labeled as deviant. We all engage in instances of deviant behavior, but at the same time we desire to maintain a positive self-image in both our own eyes and the eyes of others. To avoid the negative consequences of being labeled as deviant, individuals may engage in a variety of interactional strategies designed to normalize their behavior. Mills (1940) suggested the people engage “vocabularies of motive” in conversation, where they present legitimate reasons to others around them that explain the meaning of their actions. This motive talk restores a sense of normalcy to interactions that are disrupted by questionable events.

Sykes and Matza (1957:666) suggested that people commonly make “justifications for deviance that are seen as valid by the delinquent but not by the legal system or society at large.” Individuals using these were attempting to resolve the contradictions between what people say and what they do. They offered five **techniques of neutralization** through which people rationalize their behavior, either prospectively or retrospectively: Through (1) *denials of responsibility*, individuals suggest that their deviance was due to acts beyond their control (“I couldn’t help myself”). In (2) *denying injury*, they mitigate their offense by arguing that no one was hurt (“No harm, no foul”). When they make a (3) *denial of the victim*, they legitimate their behavior by suggesting that either no specific victim can be identified (“It’s a huge corporation; nobody will notice it”), or that the persons

hurt do not deserve victim status (“She was a bitch,” “He asked for it”). Some people (4) *appeal to higher loyalties* by casting their behavior as serving a greater good (loyalty to a friend, to higher principles, to god). Finally, in (5) *condemning the condemners*, people turn the table on the accusers, throwing attention away from themselves by focusing on things their accusers have done wrong (“Oh, you think you’re so easy to live with?”).

Scott and Lyman (1968) further refined our conception of accounts by suggesting that all accounts can be seen as either excuses or justifications.

In offering excuses individuals admit the wrongfulness of their actions but distance themselves from the blame. These excuses are often fairly standard phrases or ideas designed to soften the deviance and relieve individuals of their accountability. These may include *appeals to accidents* (“My computer malfunctioned and lost my file”), *appeals to defeasibility* (“I thought my roommate turned my paper in”), *appeals to biological drives* (“I couldn’t stop myself”), and *scapegoating* (“She borrowed my notes, and I couldn’t get them back in time to study for the test”).

In offering justifications individuals accept responsibility for their actions but seek to have specific instances excused. In so doing they try to legitimate the acts or their consequences. In drawing on justifications, individuals may invoke *sad tales* (“I turn tricks because I was sexually abused as a child”) or the need for *self-fulfillment* (“taking hallucinogenic drugs expands my consciousness”).

Hewitt and Stokes (1975) added to our understanding of accounts by explaining the verbal explanations that deviants use to justify their forthcoming deviant acts. They suggested that Lyman and Scott’s accounts were primarily retrospective in nature and that their “disclaimers” were fundamentally prospective. People *hedge*, they suggested, in prefacing their remarks to indicate a measure of uncertainty about what they are going to do (“I’m not sure this is going to work but . . .”). They use *credentializing* when they know their act will be discredited but they are attempting to give a purpose or legitimacy to it (“I’m not prejudiced; some of my best friends are . . . but . . .”). Sometimes people invoke *sin licenses* when they know their behavior will be poorly received but they want to suggest that this is a time where the ordinary rules might be suspended (“I realize you might think this is wrong but . . .”). *Cognitive disclaimers* are used to try to make sense out of something that looks like it might not be well understood (“This may seem strange to you . . .”). Finally, *appeals for the suspension of judgment* aim to deflect the negative consequences of acts or remarks that may be offensive or angering (“Hear me out before you explode”). Disclaimers, then, are conversational tactics that people invoke before they launch ahead into something commonly judged as inappropriate.

In the following section we will look at both applications of these specific accounts and ways the people have identified additional exemplars of them in deviant settings.