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BREAKING LOCKDOWN DURING LOCKDOWN:
A NEUTRALIZATION THEORY EVALUATION OF MISBEHAVIOR DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic constitutes a global crisis that has necessitated many nations to adopt and enforce various strategies to reduce the spread of the virus, protect citizens, and alleviate pressures on healthcare systems. Central to such reactions are 'lockdown' regulations that limit travel, require restricted movement by citizens, and enforce stay-at-home rules. However, while evidence suggests general (but not unanimous) support for the principles of such lockdowns, reports also indicate that individuals are far from universally compliant. In this regard, lockdown rule breaking may be viewed as a form of misbehavior. The aim of this study is to explore and explicate if, and if so, how and why citizens deviate from espoused lockdown rules and neutralize or justify their guilt. In order to do so, we utilize the theory of neutralization as our conceptual lens of analysis. Using in-depth interviews of individuals experiencing lockdown conditions, we analyze neutralization techniques to lockdown infringements. Our analysis suggests that the guilt of rule transgressions are neutralized in two main ways; via the denial of deviance and the negation of the espouse lockdown norm. Insights are generated in specific forms of neutralization and wider implications discussed.

Keywords

Neutralization

Neutralization theory

Lockdown breaking

Deviance

Misbehavior

Covid-19

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In December 2019, the World Health Organization Chinese Office received reports of a previously unknown pneumonia that had emerged in the city of Wuhan in the Hubei province of China. Within weeks, cases were reported in other countries including Thailand, South Korea, and Singapore (W.H.O., 2020). Initially, it has been argued the global response was slow with most national governments and regional assemblies merely noting events rather than proactively gearing themselves up for what would emerge as the first global pandemic of the digital era (see Gates, 2020). Eventually, in addition to other wide-ranging policies (from medical testing systems to food supply rules to orders requiring compulsory medical equipment manufacturing – see USA.gov, 2020), most nations ordered citizens to isolate themselves beginning with Wuhan in China in 23rd January 2020, to most of Europe in late March, concurrent with most US stay-at-home orders beginning with Puerto Rico on March 17th, shortly followed by numerous states and territories.

While pandemics have been recorded since the Antonine Plague (165-180 BCE) to the Black Death (1347-1351 BCE) to the Spanish Flu (1918-1919 BCE), Covid-19, as it has become labeled, constitutes the deadliest pandemic of the modern era. While responses varied across nations in terms of timing, comprehensiveness of response, and outbreak responses, most societies, for the first time in modern times experienced state-enforced 'lockdown' procedures. The amorphous term 'lockdown' originates from prison contexts where prisoners are locked in their cells during periods of unrest or disruption but the term has become more widely used to refer to periods where, for short periods, the movements of citizens is restricted and they are confined in certain places (such as during a shooting event or terrorist threat). In contrast, while approaches differed across nations, most Covid-19 lockdown practices included requiring citizens for extended periods, socially to isolate themselves via stay-at-home orders, restrict their travel movements, and enforced business shutdowns (see W.S.J.,

2020). Evidence suggests that lockdown polices have proved effective in reducing virus transmission and protecting health services, with China's Wuhan city lockdown often presented as an early example of effective practice (Gunia, 2020).

While most virologists and epidemiologists support stay-at-home orders as effective means of lockdown and thus virus spread and transmission (see Adam, 2020), throughout lockdown periods, most countries have found that some citizens resist such rules (often on constitutional bases -see Chaudhary and Kumar, 2020), while other citizens fail to adhere to such rules. In the UK, a family have been caught flouting lockdown rules by driving 300 miles for a sightseeing tour while another couple were caught driving a similar distance to buy cheap secondhand windows (see B.B.C., 2020). In France, 800,000 fines were issued in two months to mid-April, while in the US faces ongoing resistance to lockdown rules across many of its states (see McGuinness, 2020; Vogel *et al.,* 2020). In this regard, citizens flouting lockdown rules constitutes a novel and topical form of misbehavior that has yet to be explored in detail.

As widely-reported news reports and commentaries suggest that many citizens deliberately or unintentionally flout espoused or required lockdown rules and regulations, the aim of this study is to explore and explicate if, and if so, how and why citizens deviate from espoused lockdown rules and neutralize or justify their guilt.   The lens of analysis we feel is best suited to this analysis is the theory of neutralization which explains how otherwise law-abiding individuals justify their deviant behavior and avoid self-blame.

EXPLAINING MISBEHAVIOR: TECHNIQUES OF NEUTRALIZATION

In studying the various forms of misbehavior, researchers have employed a range of perspectives to explicate or model the drivers of such actions (see for example, Reynolds and Harris, 2009; Fisk *et al.,* 2010; Fombelle *et al.,* 2020). However, Harris and Reynolds (2013) argue that employing neutralization theory can provide especially pertinent insights into misbehavior.

The roots of scholarly interest in neutralization theory lies in early studies of sociological deviance and criminology (see Curasi 2013; Kaptein and van Helvoort, 2019). The seminal work of Edwin Sutherland (1940; 1941) into white collar crime forms the catalyst for a burgeoning body of studies that built on his notions of differential association driving learned-deviance and rationalization as the principal mechanism of behavior justification (see Cressey, 1953). Sykes and Matza (1957) explore such issues in their analyses of how juvenile delinquents interpret formal and informal social norms, behave within social contexts, and justify their actions. Their research, importantly, rejects the then prevailing paradigm that deviance is merely an unusual, societal abnormality that is attributable to aberrant sub-culture. In contrast, Sykes and Matza (1957) forward the position that perpetrators of deviance interpret social norms as guidelines rather than inviolate rules that they might ordinarily follow and that, moreover, subsequent behaviors as pre-justified rather than post-hoc rationalized. Such pre-event, mechanisms neutralizing behaviors permit norm-breaking as acceptable (if not necessarily 'right') and permit misbehaving individuals to drift back and forth between deviant and otherwise functional behaviors while avoiding any deep-rooted sense of guilt (see Piquero *et al.,* 2005).

While the original position of Sykes and Matza (1957) regarding norm-interpretation by formal and informal social rule infringers has proved robust, studies have eroded the fallibility of exclusively pre-behavior processes of neutralization. Although some studies support this view (see Minor, 1981; Pogrebin *et al*., 1992), concurrently researchers have found evidence that neutralization practices can occur *both* before *and* after episodes of deviance (see Vitell and Grove, 1987; Grove *et al*., 1989). In this regard, both Maruna and Copes (2005) and Fritsche (2005) observe that pre-event deviance can be viewed as proactive 'neutralization' while post-episode reflections can be judged as 'rationalizations' of behavior. However, the seductive simplicity of such distinctions is eroded by arguments of Cromwell and Thurman (2003) who note that such crude temporal distinctions are arbitrary as justifications employed as neutralizations in one case, may be used as rationalizations by

the same offender in a later incident. Consequently, we will follow the cogent and structured thesis of Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019, p. 1261) who argue against adopting *"a distinction between neutralization and rationalizations, as such terms are increasingly used interchangeably in the literature covering both ex ante and ex post arguments"*. Accordingly, in this text, we make use both neutralization and rationalization to cover pre- and post-event norm-infringing justifications.

The original study of Sykes and Matza (1957) identified five individual techniques of neutralization. Misdemeanors justified by *'denial of responsibility'* entailed individuals claiming that they did not mean to deviate. *'Denials of injury'* involves the denial of harm. *'Denial of victims'* centered on abjuration of casualties. *'Condemning the condemners'* entailed attacking critics while *'appeals to higher loyalties'* focused on elevating other norms. Reflecting Sykes and Matza's (1957) contention that their five techniques were illustratively rather than exclusive, subsequent research has identified a plethora of additional techniques in a wide array of contexts and settings (for example, Scott and Lyman, 1968; Klockars, 1974; Minor, 1981; Henry and Eaton, 19889; Bandura *et al*., 1996; Goffman, 2009; Harris and Reynolds, 2011).

In reviews of this literature, three main attempts have been made to categorize and organize this literature. First, Schönbach (1990) employed an inductive approach to collate and analyze failure events leading to the forwarding of a categorization of concession, excuses, refusals, and justifications. Second, Fritsche (2002) utilized a deductive approach and presented a taxonomy of thirteen techniques. However, the most comprehensive approach is the third, recent contribution of Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019) who adopt both an inductive and deductive approach to develop a model of neutralization techniques that structure neutralization into denials of deviance and denials of responsibility that subdivide into four categories, twelve broad techniques, and sixty subtechniques. This final model of neutralization techniques is both detailed and provides a solid basis for studying

the important aspect of neutralizations – *how* they occur rather than *if* they occur (see Kaptein and van Helvoort, 2019, p. 1280).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

As our key aim was to explore and explicate if, and if so, how and why citizens deviate from espoused lockdown rules and neutralize or justify their guilt we reasoned that an exploratory research design was most fitting and elected to utilize qualitative research methods, in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews, as the most apposite method of collecting data.

Data Collection and Sampling

We undertook 52 in-depth interviews with UK citizens who, at the time of the interview, had been living under some form of lockdown conditions for at least two weeks. Data were collected during the first phase of lockdown in April-May 2020. Lockdown rules and guidelines varied from context-to-context but all involved some degree of stay-at-home orders, social isolation, limited travel, and reduced activity outside of home settings. To prepare for each interview, informants were asked to read, in advance, any material provided by their governing authority (pamphlets, online advice, etc.) to refamiliarize themselves with the rule/advice for their location. As a driving aim of our data collection was to attain deep and rich insights, efforts were made to collect data from a range of informants. Informants were recruited online via advertisements requesting volunteers to discuss 'life under lockdown'. While no claims of empirical generalizability are made, efforts were made to draw informants from a broad spectrum of cultural backgrounds, settings, and ethnicities. The sample was equally divided into male and female informants of ages ranging between 18 to 76. Informants self-identified as white (37), black (9), Asian (6), and two declined to comment. Most were employed or self-employed (40), while 8 were retired, three were unemployed, and three were students. For ethical reasons, confidential and anonymity clauses were adopted and so narratives have been edited to conceal names, locations, amongst other identifying details. Informants agreed to permit, limited anonymized reporting of some details for contextual understanding (nonetheless,

some elements have been changed to disguise the identify of informants).

Data collection during lockdown regulations were somewhat challenging. As different locations, at different times, had varying rules and regulations, and at the explicit requirement of our University's Research Ethics Committee, data was only collected via video links and under strict socially-distant conditions. Interviews began with clarifications of data collection ethical rules, the collection of demographic details, and informants explaining their interpretations of the current lockdown rules, regulations, or guidance at their current location. Informants were also questioned regarding their self-evaluations of their pre-lockdown typical behavior and the behaviors of their friends, families, and local communities. Thereafter, informants were asked to describe their activities over the last week and then to explore their interpretations, reflections, and descriptions of their thoughts, opinions, attitudes, motivations, reasonings, behaviors, and actions. A key theme of such questioning centered on informants' interpretations of rule/law/regulation breaking. In this regard, attention was paid to whether informants believed that their actions were rule transgressions and in this sense, how neutralization was framed. Given the complexity of the rules in some contexts, 'objective' judgments regarding transgression were difficult but for the purposes of this study, secondary in importance to informants self-judgments of transgressions   Thus, while data collection was broadly structured around key themes the research approach was intentionally flexible to permit the exploration of emergent themes and issues.

Given the scope of interest and the difficulties of data collection, informants were asked to set aside at least one hour for their interview. However, most interviews took longer and some were interrupted by informants to deal with family issues. Audio recordings indicate that the average time per interview was 74 minutes (ranging from 52 to 122 minutes) All informants were advised that their comments were confidential but should they wish to pause audio-recording, for any reason, they could do so. Five informants requested (and were granted) a brief pause (all used the break to seek further reassurances of confidentiality). All five interviews restarted audio recording within 3-4 minutes after assurances were restated. Data collection was

discontinued immediately after the point of 'theoretical saturation' (Strauss and Corbin 1998) at which no additional insights were gained.

Data Analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Thereafter, transcriptions were annotated with notes made during interviews. Annotations largely centered on interpretations of tone variations (such as sarcasm or irony), perceived body language, and assessments of emotional conditions and states. In this regard, data analysis incorporated both interview transcripts and interviewer observations (see Merton *et al.,* 1990). Given that our research design was exploratory and was driven to explicate central themes, our data collection and analysis procedures incorporated aspects of analysis throughout data collection and post data collection. In this way, our data procedures were guided by the tenets of both constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and naturalistic inquiry (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985). A key advantage of such procedures is that they constitute a strong basis for rigorous data collection/analysis while forming a robust basis for delineating themes and elucidating/comparing key issues (see Isabella, 1990; Gioia *et al*., 1994)

Although it is somewhat artificial to deconstruct data collection and analysis, as they (as in the current study), tend to be, at least in part, concurrent (see Langley 1999; Gioia *et al*., 2012), our data analysis process incorporated elements of both the recommendations of Gioia *et al*. (2012) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). In analyzing the dat, this study relies on and is deeply indebted to the exemplary work of Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019), whose detailed analysis of techniques of neutralization constituted an essential and pivotal deductive guide that formed the structure of analysis categories. The first order concepts, second order themes, and dimensions are presented in summary diagrammatic form in our findings (see Figure 1). Importantly, our approach was deliberately non-linear but incorporated iteration and re-iteration to build depth and insight (see Locke, 1996; Corley and Gioia, 2004).

Neutralization of Behaviors

Data analysis reveals that while informants initially maintained that they closely obeyed lockdown rules, on further probing, 48 out of 54 informants accepted that they had broken the rules in some way at least once every two days, with 24 eventually accepting that they had not followed the lockdown regulations for most days of the lockdown period. Conversely, on questioning, all informants self-evaluated themselves as normally law-abiding members of their communities. Lockdown transgressions were subjective with informants interpretating behaviors and actions according their judgments regarding rule/regulation/law adherence. While these interpretations could be (equally subjectively) judged by third parties as 'too harsh' or 'too lax' or 'entirely accurate', informants' subjective realities informed and framed their neutralizations. As such, the focus of this study is on the mechanism of informants' neutralizations of behaviors they *believed* to be transgressions (albeit not necessarily 'deviant' transgressions).

Consistent with the framing of Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019), the analysis of informant's lockdown breaking actions revealed two major categories of behavioral neutralization. Our analysis concepts, themes, and dimensions are presented in Figure One.

INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE

First, using a variety of techniques, informants argued that their particular actions did not constitute deviant behavior. Second, again in an array of ways, where informants accepted that their acts violated social norms, the guilt associated with such behaviors was neutralized via contentions that individuals were not responsible for their actions. These two categories of techniques merit further elucidation. To guide the subsequent presentation of data, Table One presents an overview of the main categories of techniques and a general description of such neutralizations.

INSERT TABLE ONE HERE

Table One: An Overview of Uncovered Techniques of Neutralization

TECHNIQUE OF NEUTRALIZATION:	BRIEF DESCRIPTION:
Denials of Deviance:	
Fact distortion via nuancing the facts	Informants argue that the 'real' facts about key issues are unknown, unknowable, or simply too variable to explain (also see for example Williamson, 2015).
Fact distortion via claims that rules may be interpreted.	Informants assert that rules or regulations are complex and can be interpreted subjectively and therefore do not constitute consensus based norms (also see for example Williamson, 2015).
Fact denial regarding the consequences/harm of actions.	Informants contend that their actions cause no harm and are therefore not deviant (also see for example Schönbach, 1990).
Fact distortion via the creation and espousal of new or alternative facts and rules.	Informants claim that espoused facts are incomplete, while their own interpretations of 'reality' are more complete/informed and where norm violations no longer fully apply (also see for example Banerjee et al., 2012).
Negating the Norm:	
Negating the norm via norm reduction.	Informants reducing the norm to ideological taste or to relative morality such as via claiming that individualism outweighs needs of norm adherence (also see for example. Harry and Eaton 1999).
Negating the norm via alternative norm espousal.	Informants condemn accusers as immoral and thus, hypocritical, deviant, or duplicitous (also see for example Sykes and Matza, 1957).
Negating the norm via norm violation relativizing.	Informants negate norms via the espousal of alternative, and more plateable, norms (also see for example Bandura *et al.,* 1996).
Circumstance Blaming:	
Circumstances limit available options.	Informants argue that their range of behavioral options are extremely limited by circumstances (also see for example Topalli *et al*., 2014).
Circumstances limit available choices.	Informants rationalize deviance on the grounds of circumstances that limit choice (also see for example Fritsche 2002).
Circumstances limit available roles.	Informants contend that they could have avoided infringing rules but their role in such deviance made them not responsible in some way (also see for example Maruna and Copes, 2005).
Self-hiding Neutralization:	
Claiming imperfect knowledge.	Informants justify their actions on the basis that their deficient knowledge makes them not fully responsible for their rule infractions (also see for example Gannett and Rector 2015).
Imperfect capabilities.	Informants claim that inner mental urges and needs drives them to deviant behavior (also see for example Rice 2009).

Denial of Deviance

The highest order dimension of behavior neutralization, pivots on the cognitive vindication of actions as non-deviant (that is, as behaviors that do not break explicit or implicit contextual norms, no guilt-generating deviance occurs) (see Kaptein and van Helvoort, 2019). In such cases, informants argue their actions during lockdown regulations are non-deviant and therefore do not cause remorse. Two sub-categories of deviance denial are observable; fact distortion and norm negation.

Fact Distortion

Analysis of data indicates that informants refute suggestions of personal deviance by distorting facts in numerous ways. First, informants nuance the facts to vindicate their behavior. In this technique, 'facts' are interpreted in a variety of ways to rationalize actions. First, informants argue that the 'real' facts about the dangers and transmission of Covid-19 are unknown, unknowable, or simply too variable to explain simply. Such interpretations mean that espoused social norms regarding lockdown are viewed as unproven and therefore non-applicable. For example, in justifying the disregard of social distancing rules, Jose claims:

> *Well, they say that you have to keep one or two meters apart from each other but how can they be so precise? I mean if somebody is coughing in your face that's one thing but if you just walking past someone that's another! They don't really know! It's just guesswork!* [Male, 20, in lockdown with one family member]

A variation of such nuancing are explanations by informants that espoused rules are open to interpretation and therefore are not accepted norms that are agreed by consensus. For instance, Linda argues that her visiting a relative (despite rules prohibiting such visits) is warranted as her interpretation of 'vulnerable' is subjective:

> *You're allowed to go out to help another vulnerable member of your family. When was she vulnerable? That's open to interpretation. My sister needs a break. She's on her own with three kids and she needs some help. That's vulnerable to me!* [Female, 32, in

lockdown with no family members]

The second way in which facts are distorted was via a simple denial of the veracity of such facts. Such denials are linked to self-deceptions regarding the outcomes of behaviors (see Fooks *et al.,* 2013; Kaptein and van Helvoort, 2019). Such denials of harm are commonly used techniques to neutralize the guilt associated with such deviant behavior and have been observed in a variety of settings from aggressive behavior (White *et al*., 2009) to the over-use of tanning beds (see Banerjee *et al*., 2012). Interviews with lockdown rule infringers finds that they used variations of this neutralization technique to justify their behavior on the grounds that the purported facts (in the form of rules) are invalid. For example, Betty and Jane respectively explain how their rule breaking causes no harm and is therefore not deviant (as the rules regarding dog walking and socialization are illogical):

> *I just can't see how it can do any harm! If I'm allowed to walk my dog once and it's safe, how is that different to taking my dog out to 3 or 400 times? I just don't think the risks of doing that are real. It just doesn't stand up logically.* [Female, 57, in lockdown with three family members]

> *Take the idea that you're supposed to self-isolate. It's a great example of what I've been saying. For the first couple of weeks we stayed at home and had no symptoms and were completely safe. Our neighbors were exactly the same they did the same we did - all the stay-at-home rules. After two weeks we are safe, so sure as hell we can socialize together? I just don't see how that can do any harm.* [Female, 64, in lockdown with one family member]

The final way in which informants are found to distort facts regarding lockdown rule breaking centers on the creation and espousal of new or alternative facts and rules. Such behaviors, while decried by some commentators as misleading, dangerous, and anti-social (see CNN News, 2020), are also labelled responses to 'fake news' or unwarranted and even unconstitutional state interference (see ABC News, 2020). A number of informants, often based on a distortion of news-based commentary, contend that their suffering via stay-at-home orders is affecting their mental health/happiness which outweighs the *potential* harm of catching and/or spreading the virus. Alfred explains his decision; based on his interpretation of the most important fact – his mental health:

It's all about balance. They say 'going out is not something you're supposed to do too much' but, on the other hand, lots of the doctors on TV are talking about on mental health suffering because we're not getting out enough. So, from my perspective it's about balancing what is good and bad for you. I've just got to the point where if I stay there all the time I'll go stir crazy. I need to go out and talk to people and see things that 'aint in my four walls. [Male, 68, in lockdown with no family members]

Other informants, deliberately flaunt lockdown rules while denying that such behaviors are deviant by claiming that contact with seemingly healthy people is acceptable. This new self-created reality (see Williamson 2015) allows rule-breaking behavior to be viewed as non-deviant:

I just can't see the harm in it. If people are coughing sure I'm gonna stay away from them and if I was there, not feeling well, then I'm not going to be out and about. But you know when you're talking to some guy who's just been out for a 10 mile run and you know he's healthy – hell, he looks better than I do! What's the harm talking to him? [Male, 42, in lockdown with one family member]

In this case, the informant invents new facts and a rule that the appearance of heath equates to non-infected and non-infectious.

Negate the Norm

The second mechanism of behavior neutralization, also pivots on claims of non-deviance but centers on the refutation, and thus negation, of the espoused norm. Consistent with the typology of Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019), Covid-19 lockdown citizens, who transgress guidelines, are found to refute lockdown norms using three techniques; norm reduction, alternative norm espousal, and norm violation relativizing.

Norm reduction revolves around either reducing the norm to ideological taste or to relative morality. In the first case, informants argue that the lockdown rules and guidelines espoused by officials are ideologically motivated and an unfairly-imposed control over citizens. This equates to that which Harry and Eaton (1999) label deviance neutralization via 'claims of individualism'. An illustration of this view of Hank, a blue collar worker, incensed by lockdown rules:

The government is not my boss. They're supposed to work for me not tell me how to lead my life! It's none of their business how many times I go outside and when I drive my car!

[Male, 28, in lockdown with one family member]

The second approach to norm reduction is equally confrontational, in that it hinges on condemning those who accuse as immoral and thus, as hypocritical, deviant, and duplicitous (see Sykes and Matza, 1957; Kvalnes, 2014).   Those adopting this technique, often target the disseminators of lockdown rules as exemplars of such deceit. Mary observes:

> *All those newsreaders trying to shame people into hiding away at home and watching their livelihoods falling apart! Hypocrites! How did they get to work? What they're doing is a hellva a lot worse than me just working away, keeping the firm going. They're just making a career out of criticizing blue-collar workers for doing their jobs!* [Female, 39, in lockdown with two family members]

Data analysis also reveals that lockdown and stay-at-home norms are negated via the espousal of alternative, and more plateable, norms. These, more plateable norms,§ are commonly presented as higher, more virtuous goals that out-weigh the espoused lockdown rule. This equates to what has been labeled, neutralization via 'appealing to a higher moral principle' (see Bandura *et al.,* 1996; Liddick, 2013). Janey claims that the need to visit her ailing Mother, despite guidelines that prohibit such visits (on the grounds of the risk of infection), constitutes a higher, moral good:

> *I have seen my Momma every Saturday for twenty years. Every Saturday morning without fail. I've been doing it so long that the sun wouldn't come up if I weren't there! She'd think the world had stopped! She expects me there and I will not disappoint her.* [Female, 52, in lockdown with one family member]

Similarly, Bubba and his best friend collectively neutralize their guilt for such lockdown breaking activities through claims of joint normalcy (see Henry and Eaton 1999) or that which Rice (2009) labels an 'abuse defense' wherein potential abusive behaviors are justified and defended on the grounds that 'others' would behave similarly if they were able:

> *Jack [best friend and close neighbor] and me talked it through. Let the sheep follow the rules but me and mine are going to keep afloat during this. If the sheep had brains, they'd be out there too. Jack and I shared what we got and that's kept us going.* [Male, 53, in lockdown with two family members]

Finally, norms are negated via relativizing norm violations to the point of deviance denial.

Analysis of interview data led to the emergence of two variations of this approach. First, lockdown rule breakers compare their 'minor' deviations to the more serious or major acts of others. This constitutes a form of behavioral neutralization which has been labeled 'relative acceptability' (Henry and Eaton, 1989) and 'selective social comparison' (Anand *et al.*, 2004). Illustratively:

> *We've broken the rules but others on the street have done a lot worse. One guy had a party for, must have been, ten-twenty people. We just went out for a few trips.* [Female 27, in lockdown with three family members]

Second, informants compare their norm breaking behavior in terms of balance with their non-norm breaking behavior. This equates to that which Klockars (1974) refers as the 'metaphor of the ledger' or what Coleman (2005) calls neutralization via 'claims of entitlement'. Nicole, defends her breaking of social distancing rules:

> *Sure, we had a few friends around but only the once. We've spent five weeks on our own. Compared to one evening, we've done pretty good. We deserved time off for good behavior!* [Female, 23, in lockdown with one family member]

In both forms of neutralization, norms are compared relatively and deviance justified as non-deviant in comparison with other behaviors.

Denial of Responsibility

In contrast to the higher level denial of deviance, neutralization via denial of responsibility constitutes a lower-order and less robust means for deviance justification (see Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019). Specifically, while denial of deviance pivots of the refutation of deviance, the lower-order denial of responsibility series of techniques requires a cognitive acceptance of misbehavior and the subsequent justification of behavior on the ground of diminished responsibility. So, the high order denial of deviance refutes any deviance while the lower order denial of reasonability admits guilt but justifies actions on the grounds of diminished responsibility. Consistent with Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019), two main forms of responsibility denial are found; circumstances blaming and self-hiding neutralization.

Circumstance Blaming

While accepting that lockdown breaking behaviors constitute deviance, informants commonly contend that the circumstances of lockdown mitigates their deviance and responsibility. Reflecting, the framework of Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019), evidence emerged of three main ways in which the constraints of lockdowns are emphasized to justify rule breaking. These are limited options, choices, and roles.

Under various lockdown conditions, many informants claim that their range of options are extremely limited by circumstances. Under such a position, informants argue that their norm breaking deviance is justifiable and even regrettable. As such, informants contend that their flouting of lockdown rules is a rational response to limited prospects. For example, Liz explains her multiple trips to various outlets each day:

> *So, I shop around. The local store is really expensive and I've been furloughed for Heaven's sake. I've got to watch the pennies until things get back to normal. It just isn't realistic to expect me to pay premium prices for things when a little effort can get me the same good for a fraction of the price.* [Female, 34, in lockdown with four family members]

A variation of such neutralization is also found when informants argue that their breaking of lockdown rules is justifiable as very special opportunities creates unique circumstances. For instance:

> *My neighbor said that they'd had a delivery, so I didn't have any option. It was now or never. We'd not had freshly baked bread for two weeks and a flour delivery is too good an opportunity to ignore. Special circumstances applied!* [Male, 54, in lockdown with one family member]

Such neutralizations, via limited option rationalizations, have previously been observed in cases of theft and other illegal behavior (see Hinduja, 2007; Topalli *et al*., 2014).

A subtle variation of limited options neutralization centers on rationalizations for deviance on the grounds of circumstances that limit choice. Examples emerged of lockdown rule breaking that is justified by a range of peer or group pressures; from neighbors to family members. For example, Tom

claims that his breaking of social distancing rules while experiencing Covid-19 symptoms is due to family pressures that meant that he has 'no' choice:

The choices are wait until a delivery slot came free – fat chance - or just go out a few times myself. I just didn't see that I had much of choice. The kids are desperate for pizza and are nagging away, so off I went! [Male, 36, in lockdown with five family members]

Similarly, the guilt linked to such lockdown breaking behavior is neutralized on the basis of an inability to resist temptations, particularly after a number of weeks of isolation. Joan claims that the temptation to shop (to relieve boredom) is simply too powerful for her to resist:

I'd been cooped up in my apartment for two weeks. Netflix has run out of movies; my head is about to explode with boredom. The temptation of a supermarket with racks of DVDs and stuff to occupy my mind is just too tempting for words. I succumbed! [Female, 25, in lockdown with no family members]

In such cases, deviance is acknowledged but cognitively excused due to constrained choices caused by special or unique circumstances.

Finally, the circumstances of lockdown are also blamed for lockdown infringements on the grounds of role limitations. That is, informants contend that they could have avoided infringing lockdown rules but their role in such deviance made them not responsible in some way. Often such neutralization hinges on the attribution of blame to others – typically family members but in other cases political figures or commentators whose opinions and views supported lockdown infringements. John discusses a pool party held at his home (to which, contrary to local regulations, John himself invited two friends) that directly contravenes local rules on social distancing:

I didn't really have a choice – my parents had the neighbors over for an evening or two, so I couldn't really object! [Male, 19, in lockdown with five family members]

Other informants suggest that their lockdown breaching behavior, while knowingly deviant, can be justified as other parties (such as police agencies) have the ultimate responsibility for enforcing rules. Jeff discusses a three hour long ball game at a quiet local park:

If nobody stops people playing ball in the park then who am I to be the one that says stop it? Of course, we joined in! We were only there for a bit so it was exercise and good fun

too. Non-contact – just touch football with Dads and the kids. [Male, 34, in lockdown with two family members]

These neutralizations specifically blame special circumstances that mean that deviance is understandable and defendable as the role of the perpetrator is lesser compared to that of a more responsible figure or agency (from parents to politicians to police forces) (see Maruna and Copes, 2005; Moore, 2008).

Self-hiding Neutralization

The final set of neutralization techniques are similar to justifications for behavior via blaming the circumstances in that they also accept the occurrence of deviant behavior but, in contrast, validate actions through blaming aspects of their character or persona (see Maruna and Copes, 2005; Cohen, 2013). Evidence emerged of two main ways in which lockdown rule infringers adopted this practice, through claiming; imperfect knowledge and imperfect capabilities.

The neutralizing claim of imperfect knowledge is used by informants to justify their actions on the basis that their deficient knowledge makes them not fully responsible for their rule infractions. Past research has found numerous similar justifications for deviant behaviors ranging from unsafe sexual activities (see Rhodes and Cusick, 2002) to shopping habits (see Gannett and Rector 2015). In the case of lockdown rules, informants often claim that the information supplied to them is confusing, overwhelming, or contradictory. In such circumstances, some informants acknowledged that they had knowingly failed to follow, either the rule or spirit of the rule, of key elements of state-espoused lockdown rules which led them to hold self-inflicted imperfect knowledge which justified their rule transgressions. For example, Beth asserts that (certainly contrary to the spirt of individually, mailed and targeted lockdown information documents) she cannot be held responsible for failing first to read and then, second, contradictorily, to interpret the (deliberately unread or avoided) imperfect advice:

I've not read all the material they sent through and I just get switch off but the news channels. I know that there are rules, I'm sticking to staying in a lot, I'm not seeing

friends but how many times is frequent hand washing? I just can't keep up with everything. [Female, 46, in lockdown with no family members]

Other informants claim that imperfect knowledge of rules and guidelines is irrelevant as their imperfect knowledge of themselves superseded such concerns. Such personal imperfect knowledge is forwarded by a number of theorists as automatic or non-thinking deviance (see Cavanagh *et al.,* 2001; Kaptein and van Helvoort, 2019). Marty explains his rule-infringing dog walking habit:

I just didn't think about it. I always walk the dog twice a day – I do it on autopilot. Not thinking about it – just doing it. My mind was totally blank. I didn't really think about until now. [Male, 59, in lockdown with one family member]

The second form of self-hiding entails an acknowledgement of imperfect capabilities as a basis of denial of responsibility for behavior. The most common form of neutralization here is imperfect self-restraint (see Kaptein and van Helvoort, 2019). In such cases, informants argue that, while their behavior is demonstrably contrary to espoused lockdown rules, inner mental urges and needs drives participants to deviant behavior; thus, negating any guilt as such needs/urges cannot be suppressed. For example, Tony justifies his increasingly frequent excursions away from his home in direct breach of stay-at-home, lockdown rules:

I just couldn't stop myself – I just need to get out. So, I hopped in the car and just drove for an hour – I just needed to see the sky and sun. I couldn't face the back yard any more. I know it's against the rules but I just couldn't hold back anymore! [Male, 27, in lockdown with no family members]

Finally, informants also adopt that which Rice (2009) labels the 'ten beers and 3 joints too many' neutralization technique to defend their actions. In short, a number of informants argue that after the consumption of intoxicants, their willpower is eroded to such an extent that rules and regulations are ignored. Gilly explains her driving outside of her local lockdowned neighborhood to find a particular brand of tequila while under strict lockdown conditions:

I know that I shouldn't have but I'd had a drink and when you feel like a drink, you've got to go with it! The temptation was to great and my will-power to weak after a tequila or three! [Female, 23, in lockdown with one family member]

In such case, it would appear that judgment is affected by intoxicants which permit rule-infringers to justify their, self-admittedly, deviant behavior

CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The aim of this study is to explore and explicate if, and if so, how and why citizens deviate from espoused lockdown rules and neutralize or justify their guilt. Data analysis reveals that citizens adopt a range of neutralization techniques to justify their behaviors during lockdown conditions. The remainder of this paper is dedicated to discussing the contributions of this research.

The first contribution of this study lies in the findings regarding misbehavior lockdown infringement propensity and proclivity. Within the sample studied, data collected indicates that the citizens interviewed commonly broke espoused lockdown rules. As such, for this set of informants, lockdown deviance is far more prevalent that rigid, lockdown stay-at-home compliance. In this way, the current study highlights how the guilt or shame associated with (albeit often) covert or clandestine rule-breaking can be neutralized by perpetrators. This generates interesting insights into the efficacy of neutralization techniques. Although studies of neutralization have often been employed better to understand risk-taking or potentially self-harming human behaviors (e.g. drug-taking, alcohol abuse), the current study supplements this research through finding that neutralization techniques may be adopted to justify rule infringements despite exhaustive efforts of authorities to promote and encourage compliance. In this sense, the neutralizing justification techniques of individuals outweighs the espoused norm of absolute compliance to crisis-driven, emergency rules. That is, individuals who otherwise consider themselves 'normally' law-abiding, employ neutralization techniques to justify their actions and reduce, negate, or even eliminate guilt or remorse.

In theoretical terms, a contribution also emerges via the categorization of neutralization techniques (see Figure One) that mirror the model and categorization of Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019). The findings of the current study strongly support the analysis of Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019) in that citizens infringing lockdown, stay-at-home rules neutralize their guilt via either rejecting notions that

their behavior constituted deviance (therefore avoid guilt generation) or via denying responsibility (therefore avoiding guilt by justifying their deviance). In this regard, the current study owes much to the work of Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019) while providing empirical support for their analysis and conceptualization. Such support, is however, non-universal, in that, in contrast, our findings did not support, in full, the suggestion of Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019) that subdimensions can be ordered into a hierarchy of effectiveness. The design and nature of the current research did not permit the temporal analysis such neutralization ranking within dimensions and only tentative support emerged to suggest that individuals consciously or subconsciously denied deviance before negating espoused norms. More research is clearly needed in this regard.

A contribution is also made to the deviance literature through the study findings that rule infringement in the face of compelling safety and societal arguments may be interpreted as endemic to human nature. Researchers of human nature and society have long since embraced the notion that deviance is not limited to a sub-stratum of society. The current study reflects these notions in uncovering deviance by otherwise law-abiding and societally-focused individuals. This support the view that rule infringement is inherent to our individualistic and family-oriented society which supports the rights of the individual to be free to choose and act as they deem fit. Indeed, many informants argue that their actions are for either their own good or for the benefit of their family. In this regard, the deviance uncovered in the current study is not merely irrational or anti-social but logical in the view of the perpetrator, albeit, neutralized in terms of harm and responsibility.

The findings of the current study suggest a number of implications for practitioners and public policy makers. Post-pandemic, it seems likely the actions of enforcing authorities may well be lauded for their efficiency and civic good, and the actions of first responders and medical organizations will be acknowledged and recognized. Post hoc analysis of lockdown enforcement seems to support the merits of this approach in that most citizens follow most of rules, most of time. However, the current study indicates that rule infringements are common despite general support. That is, interviews found lapsing behaviors to be far more

common than complete contravention. In this way, while supporting the general tactic of lockdown and while the policies and procedures adopted seem generally successfully, most citizens undertook actions and behaviors that eroded the effectiveness and efficiency of the strategy. In identifying denying of deviance and denying of facts as the two key main tenets of deviance neutralization (see Figure One), the current study suggests that citizen-focused enforcement campaigns should focus on these to increase compliance. In this regard, public authorities should emphasize two key issues. First, communications should stress that rule infringement *is* deviant and harmful and that lockdown norms over-ride other norms – both of which reinforce the message that infringement behaviors are deviant. Second, to emphasize individual responsibilities, communications should stress the need for self-control and responsibility in the face of challenging circumstances. While authorities have clearly emphasized elements of these messages in their efforts to enforce stay-at-home and lockdown rules, evidently such communications have only been partly successful.

While many studies will undoubtedly emerge into lockdown effectiveness and behavioral compliance (or not), three particular future avenues of research appear especially worthy. First, further research is needed into the categorization and modeling of Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019). This study both relies and supports this framework but more work is needed to explore and detail the robustness and generalizability of their model. Second, researchers could focus on distinctions between transgressions and inadvertent and possible post-act realizations of deviance or transgression. Third, future research should focus on conformity to contrast with studies of deviance. In studying the nature and dynamics of conformity, insights will be gained into deviance (just as the study of deviance supplies insights into conformity).

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