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Dogmen: The Rationalization of Deviance

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Dogmen are individuals who fight their pit bulls in matches against other pit bulls. This paper uses neutralization theory to examine the rationalizations of dogmen as they attempt to counter stigma and criminal identity in a world that is becoming increasingly intolerant of dogfighting. To maintain their rationalizations, the dogmen use four recurring techniques: (a) denial of injury; (b) condemnation of the condemners; (c) appeal to higher loyalties; and (d) a defense that says dogmen are good people (their deviance_dogfighting expunged by their good character). The authors conducted interviews with 31 individuals who fight and breed pit bulls and with significant others in the dogfighting enterprise, including Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) officials, veterinarians, and local law enforcement officers. The research also examined newspaper accounts of dogfighting. This article provides some insights into the social construction of reality of individuals who engage in an activity that most of us find reprehensible. As with any criminal/deviant behavior, understanding and subsequent solving of the problem begin with knowledge of the offender's perspective.

In a dogfight, two dogs are put into a square pit, which measures twelve, sixteen, or twenty feet on each side. The dogs fight until one is declared the winner. There are two handlers and one referee in the pit with the dogs. Spectators surround the pit, the sides of which are wooden and three to four feet high.. The dogfight begins when the referee tells the handlers to pit their dogs, at which time the dogs are released and attack. Once the fight begins, the spectators place bets with one another on which dog will win. The dogs continue fighting until one of them makes a "turn," which is defined as turning the head and shoulders away from the opponent.

Once the referee calls the turn, the handlers then handle their dogs when they are out of "holds," which means they are not biting each other. The dog who made the turn must "scratch" to his opponent. Scratching is defined as crossing the scratch line, which is drawn in the center of the pit, and attacking one's opponent within a specified amount of time usually 10 to 30 seconds. If a dog fails to scratch, his opponent is declared the winner. If the scratch is successfully completed, the fight continues. From this point on the dogs are handled only when they are out of holds, and the dogs are required to scratch in turn. If a dog fails to scratch in turn, he is declared the loser.

The fight may end in one of four ways: (a) a dog's failure to scratch; (b) the owner's calling the fight (analogous to the manager of a boxer throwing the towel into the ring, a signal that the fighter has quit); (c) the death of one or both dogs, or (d) one of the dogs jumping the pit. Failure to scratch is the most common way in which a fight ends. Less common is the death of one of the opponents. The least common ending is a dog's jumping the pit, which means the dog literally jumps out of the pit in order to escape the opponent. This is rare because a dogman will not risk humiliation by bringing a cur dog (dog who refuses to fight) to a fight. The dog who jumps the pit will surely die at the hands of his owner.

The American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT) is the exclusive breed employed in pit fights in the United States today. This breed has been bred over several hundred years to produce a dog who has an innate ability to fight and overcome his victim. The APBT is specifically bred to fight. The pit bull is unique in his absence of threat displays when fighting. A pit bull almost never bares his teeth, and rarely will he raise the hair on his back. When fighting, the pit bull neither growls nor barks. The dog does not rear up and snap. Rather, he takes hold, shakes, and punishes with his hold. Dogmen contend he wants to fight and fights to damage (Matz, 1984). This ability is found with such virility only in this particular breed (Foran, 1994).

Method

The data for this study were obtained through field research by using interviews with, and observations of, people who

are, or were, involved in dogfighting, including those who were actively opposed to such activities. Interviews were conducted with 31 individuals who fight and breed pit bulls. All of the participants had been involved in dogfighting for several years. Three interviews were conducted with former breeders and fighters of pit bulls who no longer participate in the sport. Interviews ranged from 2 to 4 1/2 hours. These interviews were conducted at the pre_fight meetings, at the fights, or at the homes of dogfighters. Several informal interviews were conducted with spectators and the wives of men who participate in dogfighting. Additional data were obtained from interviews with officials of the SPCA, members of Legislation in Support of Animals, (LISA), veterinarians, and local sheriff's officers. The research also examined newspaper accounts of those who supported and those who opposed dogfighting.

Observations and Interviews

The research took place in several parishes of Louisiana, recognized by many as the center of dogfighting in the United States, (Kent, 1982a) and in counties of Mississippi. Observations took place at 14 formal dogfights. Respondents were identified through a "snowball" method and represent an available sample. The authors interviewed all individuals who agreed to be questioned. Respondents were asked about various aspects of dogfighting: the reasons they engage in dogfighting and how they started dogfighting; techniques of breeding and training; the negotiation of a contract; the fight; the setting; the choice of a setting for the fight; the types of dogs in general as well as the great fighting dogs of the past; changes in dogfighting; and the career of a fighting dog. Additional questions were intended to elicit responses about the rationalizations and motivations used by dogmen for their continuance in these illegal activities. In addition, the respondents were asked about their confrontations with residents, law enforcement and humane society officials, as well as with other dogfighters. All questions were intended to be guides for gleaning information, rather than for eliciting specific responses.

The purposes of this paper were to examine the neutralization techniques dogmen use as they attempt to counter stigma, criminal identity, and criticisms in a world that has become increasingly intolerant of dogfighting. First, a brief overview of neutralization theory is given. Second, comments from dogmen are framed within specific techniques of neutralization. Third, comments from those who oppose dogfighting are offered. Finally, the paper extends a discussion of the conflict over dogfighting.

Neutralization Techniques

The foundation for neutralization theory was set by Sykes and Matza (1957) when they distinguished five defense mechanisms through which individuals rationalize their deviant behavior. Techniques of neutralization counter the negative impact of deviant behavior.

Major Techniques

Sykes and Matza (1957) cited five major techniques of neutralization:

1. Denial of the victim, wherein the offender maintains that whoever is harmed by an action deserves the harm.
2. Denial of responsibility, wherein one contends acts are caused by forces beyond one's control.
3. Denial of injury, wherein one claims no one was harmed by the action; hence, there is no victim.
4. Appeal to higher loyalties, wherein attachment to smaller groups takes precedence over attachment to society.
5. Condemnation of the condemners, wherein those who denounce a certain form of behavior have, themselves, exhibited worse forms of behavior.

Additional Techniques

Five additional techniques cited by other authors include:

1. Metaphor of the ledger, in which deviance is acceptable once in a while (Klockars, 1974).
2. Defense of necessity, in which some actions are unavoidable (Minor, 1981).

3. Denial of the necessity for the law, in which the behavior is deemed appropriate so that the law is not necessary (Coleman, 1994).
4. Claim of entitlement, in which the behavior is okay because one is “authorized to take,” is “owed,” or “deserves” what is stolen (Coleman, 1994, p. 206).
5. Claim of everyone’s doing it, in which others are doing it and are not penalized for doing it (Coleman, 1994).

Dogmen and Neutralization

Dogmen were found to use three main neutralization techniques: denial of injury, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties. A fourth technique, “we are good people,” (similar to the metaphor of the ledger described by Klockars 1974), was also detected. This fourth technique defends dogmen as good people and maintains their dogfighting is expunged by their good characters and/or good deeds. The following comments are either statements that were made by dogmen whom the authors interviewed or statements that were attributed to dogmen in other sources.

Denial of Injury

Individuals who support dogfighting say they are misunderstood by the general public.

We got to hide. They make us hide....It’s not the blood and gore that people have been led to believe... professional dogs are not allowed to fight to the death.... If I see my dog is whipped I take my dog out of it....I have lost only two dogs because of a fight....(“Dogfighters: Supporters,” 1982, p. C8)

Whether he fights or not is totally up to the dog....You can force a boxer to box, but you can’t force a dog to fight (Ballard, 1982).

A dogman insists that, “the dogs are equally matched by weight and sex and that dogs are not forced to fight if they do not want to.” A Louisiana dogfighter for over twenty years believes fighting comes naturally to pit bulls and that they enjoy fighting. He also stated that when a pit bull is put into the pit, it is left up to the animal to decide if he wants to fight or not (Danos, 1982).

The most commonly used argument of dogmen to deny injury is that pit bulls are natural fighters who have been bred for combat (Kent, 1982b). Any attempt to deny them these contests will make them miserable, and they will not reach their potential as fighting dogs. It is the self-actualization of an animal who was born and bred for fighting. While animal protectionists argue that the dog is a victim and dogmen should receive harsh punishment, dogmen contend there are no victims.

It is natural for pit bull terriers to fight.

It is as natural as a newborn at his mother’s breast....

It is not cruel.

Opponents argue that it is cruel to fight dogs. Dogmen argue that it is cruel to deprive them of the opportunity to display their inborn traits within the confines of the pit.

We’re not hurting anybody and the dogs love to fight, so what’s the harm”?

If you could see the way the animals love it...you wouldn’t think it was cruel.” (Kent, 1982b, p. 12).

...Extreme aggression toward conspecifics is almost universally considered to be an unusual and undesirable trait. In the case of the game-bred American Pit Bull Terrier, it is...highly prized by breeders engaged in pit fighting. This aggression does not...require any of the usual external stimuli, but...is triggered by some innate mechanism....No doubt... environmental factors and positive reinforcement provide a reward system for their antagonistic behavior, but the desire to fight is manifested whether or not these rewards are present.

Likewise, punishment has no effect on dulling the desire to fight....Fatal fighting (or willingness to engage in it) is...the

norm (Foran, 1994, pp. 70_71). Dogmen perceive that most people have concluded that these dogs are vicious and unruly. Most dogmen are adamant in changing this opinion. A veterinarian, who has been in practice for 33 years, claims he has never seen a pit bull all torn up from a fight.

I like to treat them, because they're more resistant to pain. I've never been growled at or bit by one. I've never had any problem hitting a vein. They keep still. I don't even muzzle them (Huggs, 1993, p. 27).

Another individual claimed his family had pit bulls as pets for nine years. He never fought his dogs and contends that these dogs are just misunderstood and it is the way you raise the dog that makes him a fighter.

A person who don't know anything about them is deathly afraid of them. But, you can raise a pit bull to be as gentle as a poodle or you can raise a pit bull to be as vicious as a bear. However you raise them is how they'll turn out (Huggs, 1993, p. 27).

These comments, although seemingly supportive of dogfighting, contradict key points of the dogmen's counterattack, the idea that fighting is natural to the breed and the idea that keeping these dogs out of the pit would be cruel.

The Condemnation of the Condemners

Dogmen claim that people who condemn dogfighting are hypocrites who are attending sporting events such as boxing. Boxing, the dogmen point out, is sadistic because the object of the event is to harm a human adversary. They see themselves as being no different from sport coaches. Dogmen claim they have been maligned by the press and the humane society. They feel that dogfighting is no more inhumane than horseracing or cockfighting (Danos, 1982).

Let's face it. When you get right down to it, the sport of dogfighting is no worse than the sport of boxing. (Davis, 1984, p.13).

Interviews conducted with dogmen by the authors elicited the following comments.

Dogfighters are not cruel people, they are no different than boxing trainers or football coaches. The press has slandered us.

I can remember at least three men who were killed in the boxing ring. I have seen men's faces...a mass of blood, eyes swollen shut....When they get old their brains are scrambled....Boxing is legal in every state. These people who want to outlaw dogfighting enjoy boxing.

Cockfighting is legal, but not dogfighting. What's the difference?

Those SPCA fanatics aren't worried about people They are worried about dogs. Go figure that out.

Some dogmen said those who oppose dogfighting are not to be taken seriously.

People who are against dogfighting are the same group that condemn people for eating meat or wearing fur....They wanted the people in New Orleans to stop killing those nutria rats....Would you pay any attention to someone trying to save a rat...?

Those people who are against dogfighting are just a bunch of silly people with their noses in someone else's business.

Appeal to Higher Loyalties

The ideology of this counterattack has three points:(a) a long history of the sport,(b) loyalty to dogfighting and dogmen, and (c) respectable participants. Dogfighters suggest a long American history of a sport which began in Boston in the 18th century. They also suggest the imported history of the sport from Northern Europe and the sport's cultural significance for a particular group.

Dogfighting is a sport that has been around for a long time, and authorities shouldn't waste their time trying to stop it. Dogfighting around this part of the country is a tradition...It's something that's been here so long, if it wasn't here it just wouldn't be Louisiana ("Dogfighting: Supporters," 1982, p. C8).

Special People

The loyalty of dogmen to their sport is evident in the comments describing "old_timers."

The old_timers know all the champions and the great bloodlines. They have produced most of the champion dogs. If

they don't like you, you are not going anywhere in dogfighting. You have got to show them the respect they deserve. In dogfighting you start at the bottom and...work your way up to be an old_timer. If they accept you an old_timer will take you on like an apprentice. An old_timer...got me started....He saw dogfighting was important to me, and brought me into this insider circle. I would not have made it without him.

An old_timer is one who is highly respected in the game, for both his bloodline and always bringing good dogs to the pit.

Dogmen do not like strangers. They think newcomers are undercover cops. But, if one of the old_timers brings someone to a fight, it is okay.

The prefight gathering is just as important as the match. This is where you learn the history of the bloodlines, and methods of breeding and conditioning. The old_timers talk....Newcomers...listen....One day I'll be an old_timer....They will say...I was a great dogman and produced a great bloodline....That kind of respect and loyalty to the sport and fellow dogmen is what this is all about.

The dogmen are also likely to mention a number of influential and respected people who are involved in the sport. The kings and queens of Europe and some American presidents watched dogfights. The mayor of...is a dogman and the sheriff of...has fought dogs for twenty years. One of the [National Football League team] is a dogman.

We Are Good People

Opponents argue that dogmen are cruel criminals; dogmen contend they are good people.

We have to be careful these days with the Humane Society breathing down our necks and pressuring the cops to bust up dogfighting. I don't know why those damned people don't just mind their own business. They act like we're hard core criminals or something.

Dogfighters are not cruel people.

Other dogmen were more specific in their articulation of this technique.

We are respectable people who pay taxes and salute the flag. We work at honest jobs. If we are bending their rules a little, then that's okay if that's the way they want it. But 99% of our lives consists of following the rules and being good people. You don't penalize good respectable people for jay walking.

Dogfighting is a part of this culture. You don't change culture. It dies but it does not change. Dogfighting, cockfighting, fishing, hunting are all parts of our heritage. We have seen many intruders try to change us, it's always outsiders...but we are just ordinary folk who are different in some ways.

Opponents of Dogfighting

While dogmen have attempted to neutralize their activity, animal protectionists have expressed a different opinion. The following are their accounts of the dogfighting world.

His face is a mass of deep cuts, as are his shoulders and neck. Both of his front legs have been broken, but Billy Bear isn't ready to quit. At the referee's signal, his master releases him, and unable to support himself on his front legs, he slides on his chest across the blood and urine stained carpet, propelled by his good hind legs, toward the opponent who rushes to meet him. Driven by instinct, intensive training and love for the owner who has brought him to this moment, Billy Bear drives himself painfully into the other dog's charge...Less than 20 minutes later, rendered useless by the other dog, Billy Bear lies spent beside his master, his stomach constricted with pain. He turns his head back toward the ring, his eyes glazed (sic) searching for a last look at the other dog as (sic) receives a bullet in his brain (Brown, 1982, p. 66).

Dogfighting is a sick and spreading fad...a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals investigator says...(Davis, 1984, p. 14).

In an interview, an animal protectionist said, "These dogfighters...claim all this tradition and camaraderie...but these guys can be pretty evil...."

Pit bull terriers have extremely powerful jaws. They hold with their front teeth and chew with the rear. As the dogs rip and tear at each other, blood, urine and saliva splatter the sides of the pit and clothes of the handlers....Frequently the only sounds are those of crunching bones and cartilage (Kent, 1982a, p. 12).

"Rarely does a dog die in the pit," says a dogfighting investigator for the Humane Society....Often, however, a dog dies afterward from his battle wounds....There are those who are willing to pick the dog up and throw in the towel thereby losing the fight....But that's very few. ("Dogfighting: Supporters," 1982, p. C8).

Legislators from urban areas of Louisiana make annual appeals to stop dogfighting. But each year the outcomes are always in favor of the sport. The sport of dogfighting with pit bull terriers is uncivilized and inhumane. It should be outlawed...dogfighting has gotten to be almost as promiscuous and uncivilized as cockfighting, except that the dog is a better friend to man than the chicken...pit bull terriers are bred for...fighting...to the bitter end. It's a massacre. The least we can do is to stop...dogfighting ("Dogfighting Uncivilized," 1982, p. S22).

Typical Scenarios

A typical scenario was the fate of a 1988 bill in the Louisiana legislature. The senate passed 36_0 a bill prohibiting organized dogfight but only after taking most of the bite out of it. The bill was designed to discourage the fighting of pit bull dogs and betting on the outcome of the fight. The measure changed the law (at that point) only by increasing from \$250 to \$1,000 the fine for those who are convicted of putting on such spectacles. The penalties for those who buy tickets to attend dogfights were removed, and an effort to reinstate the penalties was turned back by a 21_15 vote (Wardlaw, 1988).

Taking an animal that has no freewill, taking it and training it simply for the purpose of fighting...I think it is cruel treatment...the bills raise a basic philosophical issue of whether you are for allowing dogfighting or against it....These fights are very cruel affairs....The object is for one animal to put the other out of combat. They fight in a pit. There is a lot of maiming, often dogs die as a result of their injuries (Wardlaw, 1988, p. 9).

Two SPCA officials commented on the idea that the dogs like fighting.

Most of the dogs I have seen looked like they did not enjoy the fight.

Many dogs are killed by their owners either because they are injured or because they are not winners. Those guys literally have no use for losers.

The following is a newspaper account of a dogfight in Tennessee.

Sheriff's deputies arrested more than 90 people including one carrying \$100,000 in cash related to the dogfight. The inside of the building was equipped with a public address system, food, and a liquor bar...near the building was a school bus converted into a camper that served as a hospital for the fighting dogs. The barn, disguised as a revival house, hid a carpeted 16x16 foot ring where the dogs fought. The floor and sides of the pit were smeared with fresh blood and saliva. The plywood sides were stained a dark gray by what spectators said was blood from past fights. Several dog skeletons were found in the wooded area near the old wooden building ("90 Arrested," 1983, p. S4).

The Humane Society has also accused dogfighters of being cruel to other animals. The dogfighters have been accused of throwing kittens to pit bulls so the fighting dog can get a taste of blood (Ballard, 1982). Dogfighters say such statements are not true. One dogman, in an interview discussion, offered a concise, albeit deluded, comment: "I don't like to see any animal suffer."

Discussion

Using neutralization theories, the authors were able to frame the responses of dogmen. Apparently alienated from a world that rejects dogfighting, dogmen attempt to account for their conduct by considering their criminality and exemplary behavior on the same balance sheet; evil fades because it is outweighed by good. Although most literature consistently refers to these mechanisms as techniques of neutralization, there has been a great deal of debate over the contribution of neutralization to deviance. Whether these techniques allow individuals to commit the acts, occur after the fact, or are an important difference between deviants and nondeviants are some of the considerations that fuel this debate. Techniques of neutralization are seen as being unnecessary for those who are committed to deviance but necessary for offenders who have a strong bond to the conventional moral order (Minor, 1981). Dogmen are committed to the unconventional values associated with dogfighting, but their lives appear to be otherwise conventional.

Like members of other deviant occupations, dogfighters have developed their own ideologies to deal with the stigma of legal harassment and public condemnation. These ideologies are used as mechanisms for maintaining the status of those who are members of the occupation and to counter the attacks of outsiders (Forsyth, 1987, 1996a; Forsyth & Gramling, 1986; Hawley, 1993; McCaghy & Neal, 1974; Ritzer & Walczak, 1986).

Dogfighting like poaching involves animals who are seen by many as being part of the environment. Dogs, however, are seen as companions rather than as a source of food; hence, they are closer to man than to links in the food chain. The altering of this environment can bring on a negative reaction (Palmer & Forsyth, 1992). Research has shown reaction to poaching to have been severe if the poacher's motives were money and less severe if the poaching were seen as a cultural conduit (Forsyth, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Forsyth & Marckese, 1993a, 1993b).

Cockfighting is legal in Louisiana because the cock is not considered an animal (Forsyth, 1996a). Cockfighting is seen as having a cultural connection (Hawley, 1993). Indeed, cockfighting in Louisiana has been called "a gentleman's sport" (Beacham, 1996, p. A13).

Dogfighting has incurred deviant labels because it is seen as a misuse of the environment for sport; critics see no cultural connection. Animals have arisen as a highly visible and logical subset of the new environmental awareness, and greater respect is accorded them as a somewhat incidental beneficiary in this cultural wave of animal rights (Palmer & Forsyth, 1992).

Further Research

Although social science has a long tradition of investigating the consequences of rapid social change, little of that research has been directed at an understanding of the micro processes involved in these changes. There has been recent academic curiosity about the repercussions of swift economic rise, particularly energy boomtowns (Freudenburg & Gramling, 1992). Commensurate with this development is culture conflict.

Culture and Law

This culture conflict is symbolized by using law to change people's relationship to the environment. Poachers and shrimpers provide two examples. Some poachers may not be the criminals they are portrayed but members of a cultural group conforming to norms which have been displaced by the urban search for weekend recreation (Forsyth, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Forsyth & Marckese, 1993a, 1993b). In 1989, shrimpers rebelled against the use of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs), and staged the country's largest marine blockade in protest. The TEDs seemed straightforward enough. Endangered turtles get caught in the shrimpers nets and drown, so the TEDs were designed to protect the turtles. Shrimpers, however, are not individuals who have total disregard for an endangered species, but persons who belong to families and communities and who perceive they are being trampled on by outsiders (Margavio & Forsyth, 1996; Margavio, Laska, Mason, & Forsyth, 1993).

Culture and Conflict

Cultural conflict occurred in these two cases as, starting in the 1920s (Gramling, Forsyth, & Mooney, 1987; Smith & Parenton, 1938), the drilling for oil off the Louisiana coast brought outsiders into French Louisiana and as, following World War II, hunters and fisheries became subject to game laws. As populations become increasingly urban and contact with rural areas decline, even more cultural intrusions of once inaccessible areas will occur. The protection of species is an urban idea, having taken little input from rural areas, which may have economies tied to these species (Palmer & Forsyth, 1992).

Anti_Social Backlash

Many deviants endeavor to rationalize their behavior as reasonable, if not conventional. We are beginning, however, to see the emergence of a vigorous anti_social backlash in rural America. Some people are beginning to sense that they are being condemned for simply pursuing traditional forms of behavior such as trapping; hunting; digging for Indian relics; owning and using firearms; cockfighting; killing predators (often listed as endangered) who pose a danger to livestock; filling in wetlands (which they view as unusable), and marshes. These individuals see an oppressive government that acts on liberal agendas. In some instances these antagonistic concerns have erupted into events such as Waco, Ruby Ridge, and the Freemen standoff.

Complexity and Perceptions

Social scientists need to understand the complexity of industrial society, a complexity which provokes broadly contrasting views of what makes up a high quality environment. Environments may be embellished or debased, depending upon the type of environment required for preferred ways of living. From the perspective of the fly fisherman, the canoeist degrades a trout stream's environment. The sound of a snow mobile is noise pollution to a skier (Fauance, 1981). The sight and smell of shrimp boats or the mere sight of offshore oil rigs may be unacceptable to the owner of a beach condo (Forsyth, 1996b).

As social scientists study the problems caused by the constant interaction of our selves with our environments, they must recognize that structural and cultural differentiation and the rapid rate of social change, which are characteristic of the American way of life, frustrate the resolution of these problems. Only by understanding and negotiating this complexity can they successfully understand environmental deviance. Social scientists need to understand the intricate controversies surrounding the social friction of progress versus tradition. Most importantly, we need to grasp the dynamics of the social construction of reality engaged in by those with opposing views.

One of the goals of this research was to portray and interpret the world of the dogfighter through the use of techniques of neutralization. There is other knowledge with which to ground this data. Auspiciously, this research has established the foundation for other inquiries into this deviant phenomenon.

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Notes

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Although these techniques are presented as being theoretically exclusive, data does not always lend itself to the sole support of one technique. Data is presented here under the technique it best fits, realizing that aspects of other techniques may be present.

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