

Techniques of Neutralization: A Case Study on the 'Project: High Council'

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Abstract

The Project: High Council is a 10-episode series that was aired on Astro from January to March 2023. This series revolves around an elite boys' boarding school named Kolej Ungku Deramat (KUDRAT) in the year 2007. However, this institute had a 'dark side' where the students were regulated by a student organization named 'high council'. As such, this drama showcases the unpleasant atmosphere due to the organization that acts as a social control. Fights between the Form Four and Form Five batch, bullying, breaking the school rules, violence that lead to injuries and near fatal experiences are some of the highlights. These deviant activities flourished over the years without any students reporting the incidents to the school management. The question here is why are students not willing to bring this matter to the teachers' attention? Are they supporting these deviant actions? Hence, the researchers analyzed this issue by adopting the five techniques of neutralization. Moreover, the textual analysis methodology was utilized to examine the 10 episodes of the drama. On that account, the findings enlightened the audience in understanding how this vicious cycle that is camouflaged in the name of high council tradition survived: First, denial of responsibility where students refused to be held responsible for any untoward incidents that occurred due to their 'established' tradition. Second, denial of injury where students escaped by proclaiming their fights as a part of their tradition. Third, denial of a victim where the students were willing to victimize other students to become the next leader in their high council. Fourth, condemnation of the condemners where students criticized the significant others to conform to their brutal tradition. Fifth, appeal to higher loyalties that caused the students not to oppose their high council's policies. In conclusion, the Project: High Council was a revelation of how educational management and leadership failed to recognize and acknowledge the deviant activities despite being a crème de la crème academy.

Keywords: High council; Techniques of neutralization; Elite boarding school

1. Introduction

All-Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator, also known as ASTRO had put forth a mind-blowing drama series; *Project: High Council* (Asraf and Zakaria, 2023). It consisted of 10 episodes that were screened on Malaysian television from January to March 2023. The drama captured the viewers' hearts as it brought back the memories of school days. As such, this series catapulted and received rave reviews from the media. The director Anwari Ashraf and Zulaikha Zakaria had casted multi-ethnic actors and featured several languages in this production that reflects our pluralistic society. Moreover, the screenplay was inspired by the incidents that occurred in some schools in our nation.

The narration of this praiseworthy storyline portrays two siblings; Nor Naim and Nor Fakhri who came from a broken family. They met each other coincidentally in *Kolej Ungku Deramat (KUDRAT)*, a prestigious secondary boarding school. This is where the action begins! Because it is an all-boys' school, numerous violent and aggressive acts transpired. To regulate such behaviour a secret organization called 'High Council' was established in the

year 1968. It was to enable the students to release their fury in a *come il faut* manner. By doing so, it would prevent the insane rage that may cause death. In addition to becoming a *Kapla* (head of High Council organization), a student needs to go through a stringent process to reach that position. The *Election* process begins with the selection of four candidates from four dormitories of the Form Four batch. It is a yearly ritual. Next, *Manifesto* or fights between them would be held to determine the winner to become the future *Kapla*. This post is extremely powerful because the school would be under his clutches!

In addition, the High Council can issue a licence if students were to pay for it. The licence is merely a ticket to approve their delinquent behaviour. It consists of not tucking in the school shirt, cutting queue in the canteen, possessing mobile phones, smoking cigarettes, sneaking out of school, bullying juniors, etcetera. In other words, it is a 'passport' for the students to misbehave with other students and not comply with the school rules and regulations. However, the best part is these matters are never known by the schoolteachers.

Statement of the Problem

The authors will explore the neutralization techniques (Henslin, 2005) that were adopted by the students to defend their deviant activities that took place in *Kolej Ungku Deramat (KUDRAT)*. Moreover, the five major components that branched out from this theory will be the core of this research. Besides that, the deviance vantage point will not only feature the students, parents and teachers but the fragile education institute that failed to inculcate the basic human nature. Therefore, this research will scrutinize the following: 1) why do students deny their wrongdoing? and 2) how did the High Council tradition manage to survive all these years without the teachers' intervention?

2. Review of Literature

The technique of neutralization sanctions an individual's wrongdoings. As such this 'privilege' permits one to commit mischiefs by giving various excuses for their actions. In other words, their behaviour is deemed correct but according to the society's norms, it is unacceptable. It is not to exaggerate but this theory apparently generates leeway for the deviant demeanour.

Sykes and Matza (1957) coined the term neutralization. They were examining the juvenile delinquency and unearthed an intriguing paradigm of the offenders. Thus, there are five elements that constitutes the neutralization techniques. First, the denial of responsibility: defend their delinquent behaviour as an accident and do not take any blame for it. Second, the denial of injury: resist from being blamed as no one was suffering from their act. Third, the denial of the victim: acknowledge their deviant attitude caused harm to others but they were entitled to causing it. Fourth, the condemnation of the condemners: oppose others' criticizing their actions as they are equal or worse than them. Fifth, the appeal to higher loyalties: backing their cliques despite it being against the societal norm. On that account, various literatures adopted this theory in their research and illustrated the significance via their findings. Moreover, the neutralization perspective has become a subcultural component in delinquency issues.

Therefore, Minor (1981) had conducted an empirical study on the reformulation of

neutralization scope. Based on his views, this technique is relevant to conformist youth, cases that are looming and minor wrong doings. A survey method was conducted on less than 500 undergraduate students based on purposive sampling procedure. The questionnaires were conducted in two parts: at the beginning and at the end of the semester. Findings indicated most of their outcome is agreeable to the neutralization point of view.

Besides that, Costello (2000) applies the social control concept on the neutralization theory. It also reflects the youth self-esteem in this process. The data consists of more than 4 000 respondents that were extracted from the Richmond Youth Survey. These stratified samples were race and gender-based representation. The results demonstrated those who were attached to the significant others are likely to be disadvantaged by having lower self-esteem and vice-versa. In other words, the neutralization will be obvious for those who are less restrained by the significant others.

Next, Ayars (2005) discussed the application of neutralization theory among the adolescents in Bahrain. The convenient sampling of nearly 250 participants were collected from the middle school students. They were subjected to focus group discussion. In addition, a survey was also conducted to obtain essential information for this research. The results of the deviant activities were influenced by the religious elements in the Middle Eastern country. It showed that the neutralization techniques differed from the Western point of view due to the geographical climate and the cultural perspective.

Apart from that, Monaghan (2022) explored violence among school students. The neutralization paradigm was modified to understand the reasons for not reporting aggressive behaviour to the respective authorities, despite knowing such actions to be wrongful. The respondents for this research were individuals who had attended high school and were between 18 and 24 years old. Surveys were distributed online. The findings revealed that participants aligned with the neutralization points in their attitudes toward reporting crimes.

Moreover, De Bock and Van Kenhove (2011) argued the double standard practice in the corporate world due to the neutralization context. The participants include nearly 300 university students as the samples for this research. Self-administered questionnaires were circulated via online to gather the required data. The outcome unveiled the unethical behaviour was less tolerated by the corporate bodies compared to the consumers. Conversely, the consumers were biased and adopted the double standard. They neutralized their unethical actions by condemning the corporate bodies who provided their (consumers) needs.

In addition, Vasque (2017) analyzed the patterns of gender in crime dramas. Neutralization elements were employed in this fictional male and female characters that validate their deviant actions. Four crime fictional dramas that were aired on the television for the past seven years were examined. The findings discovered that the portrayal of male characters had more screen time and they were able to justify their offences more explicitly compared to the female offenders.

3. Methodology

Qualitative (Creswell, 2007) approach was deemed appropriate for this study. As such, textual analysis was competent in analysing the text or data that represents the intrinsic

meanings and messages (Smith, 2017) that exist in this format or medium. It enabled the researchers to explore the applicability of the neutralization framework in the screen. Thus, the 10-series were examined. Each episode was of less than an hour's screening. It was aired on ASTRO for the first quarter of the year 2023. Every week one episode was screened and it continued up to 10 weeks.

Besides that, Bahasa Malaysia was the primary language in this show and it was the language conversed in by almost all the characters - from students, teachers and parents. However, English language was also communicated but it was between the English and Science teachers. Meanwhile, there was also a scene of an Indian student with his family that was shot in the Tamil language. Moreover, he was the sole Indian character in this series and was shown speaking in his mother tongue with his family members. However, subtitles were provided in Malay and English for the viewers to understand the foreign lingo. The script was written with the setting of the year 2007 in a prestigious male secondary boarding school. As such, it was played by multi-ethnic actors and actresses from the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities. In addition, the directors made a point to represent the characters from Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. Students who enrolled in *Kolej Ungku Deramat (KUDRAT)* institute were highbrow students who came from various family environments and socio-economic strata.

4. Results

This paper will discuss the five techniques of neutralization that was manipulated by the students to deny their deviant atrocities.

4.1 Denial of Responsibility

Nor Fakhri was a newbie in Form Four and was not fully aware of the 'High Council's' tradition despite being briefed by his fellow roommate, Azam also known as 'Ayam'. He was keeping a mobile phone that was gifted by his father. Unfortunately, Kahar the 'High Council's' *Kapla* (leader) confiscated Nor Fakhri's handphone. If Fakhri wanted his phone to be returned then he needed to 'settle' or fight with Kahar. Due to Fakhri's refusal it caused problem to his roommates Ayam and Ikhsan. School certificates were torn, spectacles were broken and their room was in a wreck. In other words, they were victimized due to Fakhri. Kahar and his friends of course made excuses of not taking any responsibility of their acts of vandalism. Fakhri desists to settle the dispute in the 'High Council' manner as he was previously embroiled in a scuffle at his former school that caused his father to apply for a transfer. He promised his father not to get into any feud and would call him daily.

Along with that, Honeymoon Camp (*Kem Bulan Madu*) is another example of denying one's responsibility. This camp was held yearly for the Form Four students. The activity in reality is just to frighten the students and make them respect their Form Five seniors. However, things got out of hand when Kahar's friend accidentally poured too much of 'honey' into the drink. The 'honey' in reality contained drugs! Hence, the next day the whole Form Four batch fell sick and the students were sent to hospital. Blood tests traced drugs in their system. The school management had to investigate all the students who attended the

camp as it involved drugs. None of the students revealed the truth regarding their activities. However, Kahar finally got caught as he was carrying the 'honey' in his school bag that got glazed to his exercise book. He submitted the book to his English teacher, Pn. Faniza. Mr. Sin the science teacher who was assigned to interrogate this matter was explaining the drug's origin to fellow colleague Pn. Faniza. That immediately reminded her of Kahar's book and she gave it to Mr. Sin for inspection. Kahar was found guilty and was suspended from school. But to him, his action was right as he was following the 'High Council's' tradition by spiking 'honey' (drugs) during the camp despite accidentally overdosing the students.

The scenes above exhibited the denial of responsibility played by the character Kahar. He displayed his delinquent attitude as a mishap and refused to admit his guilt despite his action no longer tolerated.

4.2 Denial of Injury

Mia the school canteen operator's daughter works in *Kolej Ungku Deramat (KUDRAT)* for her father. She cooks, cleans and serves the meals for the students. Besides that, she also supplies and sells cigarettes to the students who are studying there. Even though Mia's action violates the school's disciplinary rules she did not cause any injuries or death to these boys. Besides, they were smoking secretly behind their teachers' backs!

Further, Prakash received *restu* or blessings from the 'High Council' to move to the next level in competing for the prized position of *Kapla*. He was scheduled to meet against Zahrin. Zahrin recognizes Prakash's fighting skills that are superb and realizes it was going to be a tough challenge for him to win. As such, he insulted Prakash in the school canteen during recess time by throwing a piece of raw meat on his plate and told him to eat more protein before the match. Zahrin's gesture may not have harmed Prakash but it managed to irritate him just prior to the illegal fighting tournament.

Meanwhile, Kahar (Form Five) who disliked Nor Fakhri (Form Four) was trying to find cunning ways of beating him in the upcoming match. As Zahrin lost his match with Prakash, this automatically gave rise to Prakash to clash with Fakhri. Kahar master minded in damaging Prakash's personal belongings. He blamed Fakhri as being responsible for the situation in the hope to obtain support. By causing such provocation, Prakash and Fakhri would never reconcile. This was the plan that Kahar hatched! His mischief of ripping up a photo of Prakash and his late brother, did not hurt physically anyone but a matter of seeking revenge against Fakhri.

The three names in reference Mia, Zahrin and Kahar can easily be passed off as a villainous' characters. However, even though they were mischievous but they did not inflict any impairment that is drawn to the context of denial of injury.

4.3 Denial of Victim

Ikhsan (Form Four student) had to endure the Form Five seniors' harassment. They would come into his room and mess up his and his roommates' beds, tables and cupboards. Finally, Ikhsan could no longer take it anymore as they damaged his belongings. He went to the school principal's office and *jibam* or reported against his seniors especially Kahar. Tuan

Yusof, the principal conducted the investigation and found none of the students including Ikhsan's roommates; Nor Fakhri and Ayam testified against the seniors. In turn, no one backed Ikhsan's statement or report and the case was dismissed. This is because no students were permitted to *jibam* without the 'High Council's approval. Doing so, would lead the student into a distressing situation. As we are aware, Kahar is the *Kapla* and his word is the final say or the judgement. A memo was circulated to all students to boycott Ikhsan. No one spoke to him, sat with him or ate with him. In other words, he was ostracized by the *Kolej Ungku Deramat's (KUDRAT)* students. This punishment befitted Ikhsan as he deserved it for 'victimizing' the *Kapla* by reporting against him. The students' behaviour manifested here did not come from the school management board but from an unofficial underground organization namely 'High Council'.

Moreover, the situation became worse as the seniors barged into the room in the middle of the night and tortured everyone who shared Ikhsan's room. They would ask his roommates to do physical workout by excluding Ikhsan. In this way Ikhsan would become a target among his roommates instead of being sympathized with for his situation. When he was accepted into *KUDRAT*, his father purchased a multifocal spectacle for him that cost a fortune. The spectacle was broken by the seniors. As such, Ikhsan decided to leave the school as he did not want his roommates to be further abused by the seniors. Finally, Kahar and his friends accomplished their vengeance by 'throwing' Ikhsan out of the school as he deserved it for complaining to the principal.

In addition, Nor Fakhri (who is living with his father) got his revenge against his brother Nor Naim (who is living with his mother and stepfather). Naim showed a video clip of Fakhri's brawl in his previous school to their mother. The mother confronted their father and contested for custody over Fakhri. This situation made his father distraught and decided to flee with Fakhri. He was worried about losing his son to his ex-wife. Fakhri avenged Naim by getting hold of their childhood video tapes. Those tapes showed Naim behaving in a feminine manner. Fakhri played those videos during the outdoor movie screening in his school. Therefore, he embarrassed Naim as he deserved it for the 'damage' that caused him.

Hence, two different personalities were presented here. First, Ikhsan who is weak, powerless and insecure who was tormented by his seniors because he reported against them. The other, Fakhri disgraced his brother to get his vengeance. Both the scenarios represented the denial of victim.

4.4 Condemnation of Condemners

The condemners here will be discussed based on their significant others such as the educators, friends and family who condemn the deviant behaviours of these students. First, the schoolteacher. Mr. Sin smokes the pipe in the staff room. By right, school staff and students are not allowed to smoke within the premises. The students are aware of Mr. Sin's 'pastime'. They also smoke without the management's knowledge by attaining the cigarettes illegally. Their boldness is due to the teacher's actions. As such, they feel Mr. Sin has no right to judge them as he too smokes. Even if they were to get caught he could not condemn them as he is as guilty as they are. Mr. Sin only found out the students' smoking habits when he was conducting spot checks in the dormitories due to the Honeymoon Camp incident. He took the cigarette packet from the drawer and kept it in his pocket and realized

he could not question the students as he was also deeply involved! Unfortunately, as a warden he failed to detect the deviant activities that were taking place when he was assigned to be on duty. These students were slick in hiding their 'night activities' from the school management. They had an organized system to alarm the 'High Council' members when the wardens come on their rounds.

Next, Mia who became a friend to Nor Naim. She wanted to meet Naim but he did not turn up and she decided to go to his dormitory. There is where she discovered the students were fighting with each other. Naim pulled her out from the fracas and told her to leave immediately. As she was running away from the commotion, she was almost knocked down by Mr. Sin's car; Pn. Faniza was with Mr. Sin and Mia told them about the episode. They immediately went to the students' residence and was shocked to see Ayam unconsciously lying bleeding on the floor. The case became serious as Ayam was in a critical health condition. Naim was suspected by the 'High Council' to have *jibam* or reported this matter to the teachers. As such, he was shunned by all the students. Mia went to meet Naim the next day and questioned him of his injuries, bruises and fights. It made him furious and he condemned her for criticizing him. Naim felt Mia had no authority to question him as she had to take a good look at herself first. Mia received a scholarship for her further studies and repaired her late mother's car. Then why was she not leaving her father? Was it because she is afraid to take her own responsibility? In addition, Kahar who is the *Kapla* failed to adhere to the 'High Council's' tradition. The *manifesto* or fight that was held between Kahar and Nor Fakhri was inconsistent with the rules. Opponents need to comply with several aspects such as not to kick on the face or any sensitive and visible body parts. However, Kahar overruled it when he kicked Fakhri's face and instantly changed the rites. Hence, Nor Naim burnt the 'honey' (drugs) that was given by Kahar to safeguard it and to use it for the next year juniors in the Honeymoon Camp despite all the chaos. Naim was infuriated with Kahar's action in the fight and felt he has no right to instruct him. As the *Kapla* he himself broke the 'High Council's' tradition.

Besides that, fights got serious and a couple of students were admitted into the hospital. Hence, the school took a stern action in probing these untoward incidents. Kahar's father who was a former student in *Kolej Ungku Deramat (KUDRAT)* expressed disappointment at Kahar handling the situation. During his father and brother's era the school had no issues and the *Kapla* were commendable in managing the students. Kahar on the other hand condemned his father and said he should have exposed the 'High Council' and should have put a stop to his behaviour but for the past five years his father was not even concerned about him. Furthermore, Nor Naim and Nor Fakhri came from a broken home. Both the brothers condemned their father and mother for getting them into 'controversies'. The fights that they faced were to defend and to please them. Fakhri always ended up having physical arguments due to his father. His schoolmates condemned his father for being 'soft' or feminine. Meanwhile, Naim wanted to be a real man because his mother left his father of not being a man to take care of the family. As such, Naim needed to prove that he was capable to take care of his mother. Thus, he wanted to be a part of the 'High Council'.

The integrity of a teacher was in question due to the smoking habits that is prohibited in the school premises. As such, this automatically strips a teacher from condemning the student's discipline. As for Mia who is Naim's friend, she could not cross-examine him as Naim condemned her being insecure. Meanwhile, the parents were condemned by their own children as they were blamed for all the guilt charges thrown against them. Thus, the

condemnation of condemners is both guilty as charged!

4.5 Appeal to Higher Loyalties

Kahar is very hostile towards Nor Fakhri because he is rebellious and refuses to observe the 'High Council's' tradition that has been practiced for nearly 40 years. As such, he challenged Fakhri for a match with Prakash. If he lost he would step down as the *Kapla* and if Fakhri was defeated he would leave the school. This rivalry was not just between the two individuals but it eventually involved all the Form Four and Form Five students. Their knock-down-drag-out competition was brutal. Prakash lost the battle to Fakhri and Kahar refused to declare the win. Hence, the junior and senior batch clashed as if it was the 'Battle of the Titans'. Students were all over the school premise bashing each other up in a deranged manner. Ayam came looking for Fakhri and the environment was chaotic. Unfortunately, at that moment Kahar kicked Fakhri but Ayam pushed Fakhri away and took the boot. Ayam fell off from the building and was unconscious. He was bleeding profusely and was brought to the hospital by the schoolteachers. Surprisingly, the Form Four and Form Five students never *jibam* or reported who was behind this calamitous incident despite their fellow schoolmate being on the brink of death. These students pledged loyalty to the 'High Council' by sealing their lips!

Moreover, the finale match to become the next *Kapla* was between the brothers; Nor Naim and Nor Fakhri. Prakash advised Fakhri not to participate against his brother after what happened to Ayam. But Naim refused to back out and challenged Fakhri to compete. It was a complete catastrophe. Naim got under Fakhri's skin to the extent he lost his temper and continuously punched him until he became unconscious. Mr. Sin was on duty on that day and was doing his rounds. He noticed there were no Form Four students in their rooms except for Prakash. He was questioned by Mr. Sin of their whereabouts and he told him the location of the match. Naim was in a critical state in the hospital. After two serious incidents that plagued the school, finally the school carried out a thorough inquiry. It reared its ugly head as students started to cooperate in this investigation. The principal and schoolteachers were shaken up when students started to spill the beans. They were startled with the discovery of 'High Council' fraternity and the tyrant *Kapla*. What surprised them was none of the teachers were aware of the secret organization that was in existence since the year 1968. The case was brought to the *Kolej Ungku Deramat's (KUDRAT)* alumni. The principal and teachers were amazed that the alumni were aware of the 'High Council' tradition. The alumni supported this deviating tradition as it brought excellence to the school and not the formal curriculum in the classroom. Thus, the alumni decided the school needs to be loyal to them and the *KUDRAT's* reputation must never be tarnished. Besides, replacing the principal and staff was not an issue for them.

The appeal to higher loyalties was a barricade in prevailing the truth. It compelled the students to not disclose the unfortunate incidents. Apart from that, it is not merely the students who had to be loyal but also the teachers too from unmasking the bitter truth.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The lengthy discussion of the five techniques of neutralization is based on the theoretical framework. It gives carte blanche to the students to indulge themselves in deviant activities. As such, students will always find 'creative' excuses to escape their wrongdoings. Bullies, harassments, ragging are some of the words with which we could label the delinquent acts that take place in a school atmosphere. Only if students were courageous enough to report these unfortunate incidents, these could be put to a stop. However, due to peer pressure, students will only jump on the bandwagon. They will take unconventional methods by not jeopardizing their academic future in an elite school where at the same time they had to maintain a good relationship with other students for survival. Food for thought: will this dreadful tradition ever have an end and will our education system be able to protect these students from such insidious acts?

The limitation in this study could possibly be the authors have utilized all the five theories to study these 10 episodes. Therefore, the discussion may be general as each theory had to be highlighted. Due to these circumstances the depth and details of specific scenes or characters depicted in the drama may not be comprehensive.

In future, the researchers may want to examine more than one drama or series or films based on the neutralization perspective. The findings will be extensive so as to understand the delinquent scenario that exists in Malaysia.

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