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Undergraduate

Migrant Worker Serial Killer: Schizophrenia's Effects on Violence

Megan Frank

Abstract

Migrant workers are susceptible to violence because they are viewed as easier targets due to their lack of assets within their new land. Between February 1, 1971 and May 19, 1971 in Sutter County, California 25 migrant workers were murdered by a man with schizophrenia named Juan Vallejo Corona. Schizophrenia is a mental illness that is often explained by reduced emotional responses and lack of rationale within decision-making. Schizophrenia is prevalent within populations of individuals who have committed violent offenses. However, the reason the term "schizophrenia" has a concrete definition today is because of the efforts historical psychologists such as Eugen Bleuler put in to determining it. "Schizophrenia" as a term has developed over time and its true meaning today can be understood through observing the different brain systems connected with the illness. Conversely, many years ago the term was solely understood by the Greek roots Schiz meaning to split and phrene meaning mind. Neuropsychological disturbances in this disorder can be attributed to abnormalities in the fronto- limbic system, the brain region most responsible for negative emotional reaction to external stimuli. Schizophrenia has been known to cause violent tendencies in people who are not normally violent. Juan Corona murdered his victims with a machete and felt no remorse over his actions. Like most serial killers he targeted a group of individuals who he believed to be

vulnerable. These immigrants he murdered had limited resources in America, such as social connections and revenue. Since Corona was a labor contractor and the immigrants worked for him he had a sense of power over them, which added to their vulnerability. This literature review focuses on examining immigrant vulnerability and how Corona's violent actions were products of his schizophrenic illness.

Key Terms:

Schizophrenia, Neuropsychological Disturbances, Migrants, violent Offenses, Machete, Yuba

Background

Juan Corona was born in Autlán, Jalisco state, Mexico in 1934 (Kidder, 1974). At age 16 he came into California illegally; he had to do farm work in the Imperial Valley for three months before he was able to move to Sacramento Valley (Kidder, 1974). Corona's half brother Natividad had immigrated to California six years before him. Natividad settled near Yuba City in a place called Marysville (Kidder, 1974). When Corona immigrated his brother suggested he move near him. Corona quickly settled into his life in California where he found work on a local ranch in Yuba and married a woman named Gabriella Hermosillo in 1953 (Kidder, 1974). In 1955 there was a drastic flood on the Yuba River, it was said to have been the most destructive and horrific flood of any recorded history of Northern California. A total of thirty-eight people died in the flood (Kidder, 1974). The natural disaster affected Corona to where he had a mental breakdown; he believed everyone had died in the flood and he was living with ghosts. Natividad had him committed to DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, while there he was diagnosed with schizophrenic reaction, paranoid type. This form of schizophrenia deals with delusions and irrational beliefs that may lead to violent reactions out of panic (Thacore and Shukla, 1976). They gave him 23 shock therapy treatments and then deemed him recovered; he was released three months later. Corona was immediately deported to Mexico, but soon returned with a green card. Corona was still described as having schizophrenic episodes and a violent temper (Kidder, 1974). In 1959 he married Gloria Moreno and together the couple had four daughters. Corona went on to become a licensed labor contractor who was in charge of hiring workers, meaning he had a sense of power over them.

Corona's first attack occurred in 1970 when a man named Jose Romero Raya was attacked with a machete in the restroom of a café (Newton, 2006). Following this incident, 25 migrant workers went missing between February 1, 1971 and May 19, 1971. It was suspected

that Corona had something to do with it since he had been distributing workers to the ranches where the victims had been found. He housed many men that worked for him in a bunkhouse on the Sullivan Ranch; around this ranch most of the victim's bodies were discovered. Police found two meat receipts with Corona's signature in one of the graves, showing evidence that Corona was at the scene of the crime. Also, some of the victims were last seen before their death riding in Corona's pickup truck (Newton, 2006). After police searched Corona's home they found two bloodstained knives, a machete, a pistol, and bloody clothing. Authorities also found a notebook of Corona's containing 34 names and dates. The 7 identified victims were all listed within the book, but there were an additional 18 unidentifiable victims who were found. It was alleged that the dates indicated the days they were killed (Cartel, 1985). Although, Juan Corona's schizophrenia caused him to become violent, it is plausible to assume that it was his choice to murder immigrants because he viewed them as vulnerable by having a lack of resources.

Review of Literature

Immigration Research by Infante, Idrovo, Sanchez-Dominguez, Vinhas, and Gonzalez-Vazquez (2011), spoke of a mixed method study that was conducted in Baja California, where 1,512 immigrants participated. The study was broken down into a survey and an interview and the two stages of the study were explored quantitatively. In the study, information was collected from a 99-question questionnaire, and interviews were given to 11 Mexican emigrants and 11 Central American emigrants. The results indicated that one fifth of the immigrants reported having suffered some type of violence in Mexico or the US. However, being a immigrant was not the reason why they experienced violence against them. There were two reasons as to why they experienced violence: the first was that immigrants were marginalized and excluded from being equals in society so it was easier for them to be viewed by corporate America as less

important or valuable. The second reason as to why they experienced violence was because they were more vulnerable than others.

Vulnerable Outsiders. The reasons why immigrants are vulnerable is because they often have a shortage of capital, working hard for minimal pay and no benefits. They are also less likely to be familiar with the laws within their new land, which are likely to differ from their native home (Maldonado, 2006). This mixed with authoritative America's view of them as inferior makes them seem of little value to Corporate America. Due to this, minorities are forced to take jobs for survival that result in hard labor for little pay and no benefits; which include jobs like farm work and working in a nail salons (Maldonado, 2006). Due to their vulnerability and outsider stereotypical label there are high quantities of violence committed against immigrants. All immigrants are vulnerable, but those who are undocumented are the utmost due to their lack of access to necessary protective procedures like legal assistance. Juan Corona was he himself a emigrant, not leaving Mexico until he was in his twenties, which means he related to his victims. He had to deal with the same hardships and vulnerable stereotype that came with being labeled as an immigrant, and understood how they felt. Many serial killers choose those they view as easy targets to be their victims. A serial killer named Albert Fish murdered and ate children. He could easily overpower them and manipulate them into listening to him. He lured one of his victims on the guise that he was going to take her to a birthday party and she believed him and went without hesitation (Miller, 2014). Like Albert, it is assumed Juan Corona acquired his victims by choosing those who he had power over and could easily manipulate.

However, all of his 25 victims who he killed were farm workers who had migrated to America trying to make better lives for themselves. Of the immigrants he killed, 22 had emigrated from England, and the other three were identified as Native American and Black emigrating from other areas of the world (Cray, 1973). Serial killers often target people they

believe aren't important and won't be missed. Corona knew of immigrant's vulnerability very well because he had witnessed it from first hand experience. Infante et al. (2011) conveys why immigrants must endure so much violence, this is related to an article written by Eronen, Tiihonen, and Hakola (1996), which indicates how many people who commit criminal violent offenses have schizophrenia. These two articles indicate the most prevalent audiences for both of those positions. Infante et al. (2011) explains how those who are the most defenseless and susceptible to violence committed against them are immigrants, while Eronen et al. (1996) indicates that those who are seen the most often committing the violent criminal offenses have schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia has been seen prevalently within those who have committed criminal offenses. Eronen et al. (1996) discusses a 12-year longitudinal study where the mental examinations of 3, 292 homicide offenders were observed. Within the study it was discovered that 86 men and 7 women out of the offenders had schizophrenia. This study indicated that the illness Schizophrenia increases the odds ratio of an individual committing homicides. Previously it was believed that major mental disorders did not expose subjects to violent behavior, however many studies have been done that imply differing results. Studies concocted indicate that those with a mental disorder or handicap are at a greater risk of committing a criminal offense. This article shows how schizophrenia is linked to an increased likelihood for the individuals who have it to partake in violent behavior. This relates to the serial killer Juan Corona who after facing a traumatic experience was diagnosed with schizophrenia. It was only after having his diagnosis that his violent tendencies began to show, which later lead to his harming those who trusted him. The article shows how the form of behavior Corona portrays was one to be expected after his

diagnosis. Schizophrenia itself increased the odds of someone committing a homicide by about ten times. This article relates to an article by Yang, Raine, Han, Schug, Toga, and Narr (2010) that explains why those with schizophrenia are seen so often committing violent acts. Both articles explain how those who are schizophrenic are open to becoming increasingly violent than those without the illness. Within this article it was stated that those who have a mental illness are predisposed to violent behavioral acts. The study within this article indicated that there were quite a large number of homicide offenders who are schizophrenic. The article of Yang et al. shows proof that the gray matter volume of schizophrenia patients was reduced in the hippocampus and the parahippocampus only for those who have both schizophrenia and violent tendencies. Both articles indicate that not all individuals with schizophrenia are violent, and not all people who are violent have schizophrenia. However, Yang et al, explains that those with schizophrenia have a higher chance than those without it to committing violent acts because many have reduced hippocampal and parahippocampal volumes.

Yang et al. (2010) indicates that those with schizophrenia have higher odds of committing violent offenses, such as battery or murder. Out of all homicide offenders the ratio of those with schizophrenia was greater than the ratio of schizophrenia patients to the general population. There are many different brain systems connected with schizophrenia. Neuropsychological disturbances in the disorder can be attributed to abnormalities in the fronto- limbic system, which includes the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and the parahippocampal gyrus. This brain region is responsible for negative emotional reactions to external stimuli. A study was conducted where the structural magnetic resonance images of 22 murderers with schizophrenia, 18 murderers without schizophrenia, 19 non-violent patients with schizophrenia, and 33 controls lacking of schizophrenia and murderous tendencies was observed. The results brought to light that all non-violent patients with schizophrenia were on antipsychotic medication

at the time of the testing; only 3 out of the 22 murderers with schizophrenia were on the medication. The results indicated that murderers with schizophrenia, murderers, and non-violent patients with schizophrenia had similar lower Full Scale IQ than the control. They also indicated that murderers with schizophrenia showed reduced gray matter volume in the hippocampus and parahippocampal. There was reduced gray matter in the parahippocampal for murderers without schizophrenia and reduced gray matter in the prefrontal cortex in those who are non-violent but have schizophrenia. This article explains cross-cultural generalizability of prior fronto-limbic findings on those who are violent and have schizophrenia. Since schizophrenia patients already have reduced volume within their parahippocampal gyrus, which is the region that surrounds the hippocampus. It was plausible for them to receive reduced volume in their hippocampus when the matter around the hippocampus has already been reduced due to their illness.

Juan Corona was diagnosed with schizophrenia, and had to endure shock treatments (Kidder, 1974). After the treatments he was said to have recovered. However, this study shows that one cannot be cured of schizophrenia by shock therapy. Corona became increasingly violent after his release from the mental hospital, which led to his murderous rampage. Due to the fact that he was a violent schizophrenic this article indicates that he would have most likely had significant volume reduction within his hippocampus and parahippocampus (Yang et al. 2010). The volume reduction within his brain could not have been fixed by shock therapy; his illness and violent behaviors are already grounded within his brain and characteristics. If Corona would have had adequate therapy he may have been able to learn how to better deal with his illness and desires to harm, although he could not be cured. An article written by McNally (2011) explains how today's understanding of the term schizophrenia has evolved through time. Yang et al. (2010) expresses what schizophrenia does, and indicates the final product of what was expressed in McNally (2011), which are the many definitions of schizophrenia that great thinkers

from history contemplated on. McNally (2011) indicates what happened in the past, as the truth about what schizophrenia entailed was being uncovered. Both articles speak about the classification of schizophrenia and how and why it is the way it is.

The term schizophrenia has been debated for many years. McNally, K. (2011) inspects the conceptual validity of schizophrenia through a historical analysis of definitions of the illness. Swiss psychologists Eugen Bleuler initiated the term schizophrenia. Bleuler explains the definition in a literal sense; Schiz means to split and phrene means mind. Bleuler's assistant A.A. Brill introduced the term in the *American Journal of Insanity* as a symptom to the dementia praecox. This article goes on to express the historical conceptual instability over one term, and how through differing views the term created a number of definitions throughout time. The definitions of schizophrenia changed as the public attempted to make the term increasingly specific, because for a long period of time there was a lack of clarity over the concept of schizophrenia. The timeline in which the term evolved was long, indicating that the term took a long time to identify and understand. The article shows how schizophrenia has developed into what it is today, and who helped aid in its development. Those who are deemed schizophrenic have acquired certain symptoms in order to be deemed with this illness. Juan Corona has schizophrenia and this article shows that the symptoms he has that deem him with the illness have been changed over time and altered. The article indicates that if certain people did not add specific concepts to the term he may not have ever been labeled with the term. He may have been identified as just another serial killer without schizophrenia, if the definition had not evolved into what it entails today. Many years ago when the term schizophrenia was not clear Corona may not have been said to have the illness. The term schizophrenia has only evolved into what it is because of the perseverance of historical minds that attributed to the development of the word.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of Juan Corona, researchers can come to understand that there is a strong correlation between schizophrenia and violent behaviors. Although not all individuals with schizophrenia are to become violent, there is a stronger likelihood that someone with it would express violent behaviors than someone without it. Juan Corona himself did not develop his violent tendencies until after the flood triggered his schizophrenic outburst. Once his schizophrenia came to the surface he began to murder innocent immigrant workers. Articles within this review have proven that there is a stronger likelihood for individuals with schizophrenia to develop violent behaviors than those without it. That is why populations of violent individuals have schizophrenia as well. Abnormalities and damages within the fronto-limbic system are the cause for both schizophrenia and violent tendencies. Over time the term schizophrenia and meaning of it changed drastically, without the finding linking damage in the prefrontal cortex to schizophrenia, the mental connection between it and violent tendencies would not be discovered.

It is assumed Juan Corona murdered those who he viewed as vulnerable, which were the immigrants who were unaware and not accustomed to the ways of their new land. Many serial killers feel justified in killing those who they see as invaluable, those who they believe won't be missed. Corona not only executed immigrants based on their limited knowledge of the land but also because they had limited social capital within America. Those who have this disorder often have altered rationality, and are led to believe illogical things are sensible. With more research, it will be further evident that schizophrenia is the backdrop for Juan Corona's violent behaviors.

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Megan B. Frank majors in psychology and minors in public health at the University of California Merced. Megan is the social events chair of PsiChi, an international honor society in psychology. She has worked on many research projects including a study-testing resiliency on individuals before and after a manipulation. A current research project Megan is working on is a study testing if altruism in individuals lasts after committing a good deed. She is interested in neuropsychology, specifically how illnesses affect parts of the brain. After graduation, Megan plans to receive her Ph.D. in Neuropsychology. Megan was interested in publishing because she wanted others to see and understand a passion of hers. She has been interested in how the brain works since she was ten years old, and her interest in the subject has only intensified over the years.