

Schizophrenia and Jehovah's Witnesses

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between Jehovah's Witnesses and schizophrenia using several different studies, reviews, and articles that have been conducted over the years. Some of the major findings on these previous, various works were that there is a strong, positive correlation between the Jehovah's Witnesses and schizophrenia. The theoretical foundation of this paper is based on the research done on the psychology of immigrants by Drs. Selten, Cantor-Graae, and Kahn (Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn, 2007), Dr. Ainsdale (Ainsdale, 2011), and Drs. Lee and Hernandez (Lee & Hernandez, 2009). The following research questions are asked in this paper: Is there an association between Jehovah's Witnesses and schizophrenia? If a positive association exists, is it caused by environmental factors, specifically as described by the Schizophrenic Migration model (Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn, 2007)? The Schizophrenic Migration model (Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn, 2007) posits that some elements that immigrants possess can cause schizophrenia and these elements are social isolation, social discrimination / adversity, and poor housing / living conditions. The conclusions suggest that there is not an association between Jehovah's Witnesses and schizophrenia in itself. Instead, there is an association between the elements of social isolation, social discrimination / adversity, and poor housing / living conditions and schizophrenia. The conclusion suggests that any group with these specific social elements, whether they are immigrants or Jehovah's Witnesses, would be at a higher risk of schizophrenia. Additional studies in these area would definitely be advised to validate this hypothesis.

Keywords: Jehovah's Witness, Schizophrenia, Mental Disorder, Religion

Introduction

The Jehovah's Witnesses are a Christian denomination with beliefs that are unique from mainstream Christianity. The Jehovah's Witnesses emerged as one of the more successful eschatology-based religions from the 1800's in the United States. Other religions from this same era would be the Church of Latter-Day Saints, Seventh-Day Adventists, and the Missouri Synod. This has been seen as perhaps an American reformation of Christianity similar to the Protestant reformation from Catholicism that occurred in Europe centuries earlier. All of these respective religions consider themselves distinct, however, and share very little outside of this. The Jehovah's Witnesses have approximately 7.5 million members and they are directed by the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses which establishes and controls all doctrine for the religion. Jehovah's Witnesses are perhaps best known for their door-to-door field ministry.

The religion has many controversial practices, such as not accepting blood transfusions, the shunning or “disfellowshipping” of members who do not conform, and their non-association with anyone not in their religion. The Jehovah's Witnesses are also known for their piety and restraint which are reflected in their conservative Christian values. Modesty in dress and grooming is required, the family structure is patriarchal, and the use of tobacco, illegal drugs, gambling, or excessive alcohol is forbidden. Homosexuality, sexual relations outside of marriage, and abortion are all grounds for expulsion from the religion unless the individual is seen as repentant. The Jehovah's Witnesses are also well noted for their interest in eschatology,

with a well-defined eschatological structure of how Armageddon will occur and what will happen afterwards.

Several studies over the years have been published which link the religion of the Jehovah's Witnesses with mental illness, most predominately schizophrenia. The majority of these studies were conducted on Jehovah's Witnesses who were prisoners due to their refusal to perform military service. Two of the other works were done by a former Jehovah's Witness, Dr. Jerry Bergman. An interesting model from 2007 by Drs. Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn (Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn, 2007) link the environmental and social elements of immigrants to schizophrenia. This model is hereafter referred to as the Schizophrenic Migratory model. The purpose of this paper is to define the relationship between schizophrenia and the Jehovah's Witness faith more clearly. The hypothesis is that the practices and beliefs expressed by the Jehovah's Witnesses can be associated with the Schizophrenic Migration model by Drs. Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn (Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn, 2007) which could result in a higher risk of schizophrenia.

Problem Statement

There have been many efforts to analyze observed occurrence of schizophrenia and mental illness of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Studies have been done for the last half century or so on the seeming phenomena of a higher rate of mental illness of the Jehovah's Witnesses

compared to the rest of the population. The focus of this project will be in describing and analyzing this issue in more detail and providing a viable solution for the problem.

The critical considerations are relevant in addressing this problem. Ethical factors relate to whether the information we have on the Jehovah's Witnesses is accurate and if they are being singled out for religious rather than scientific reasons. Religious freedom and the ability to live your life the way you wish are important values in our society. Diversity factors will focus on the fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses make a very small percentage of the population and come from a broad range of nations and cultures. There are only 7.5 million Jehovah's Witnesses in the entire world and yet they exist as a minority in almost all nations. Globalism factors include how world religions and governments interact with the Jehovah Witness religion. Jehovah's Witnesses exist in practically every nation that hasn't banned them. However, the Jehovah's Witnesses have been persecuted in many nations, including the United States where they were subject to mob violence and imprisonment. The differences in their beliefs and how some of their practices make them stand out have made them targets for religious discrimination. Social change factors include how to better understand the data so that it is unbiased and so that social change is used for a positive effects rather than negative effects. Social change does not necessarily mean changing the Jehovah's Witness religion itself. Instead, social change could mean changing the outside world's perception of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Integrated Literature Review

Most of these studies appear to be either out-dated or written by someone who is a former Jehovah's Witness. W and a Jehovah's Witness. Dr. Bergman did some research under the name of Havor Montague while he was still a Jehovah's Witness in order to avoid facing religious disciplinary action. Eventually Dr. Bergman formally disassociated himself from the Jehovah's Witnesses. The initial perception would indicate that there is a cause and effect relationship between the Jehovah's Witnesses and schizophrenia.

The Rylander Study

In 1946, Gosta Rylander investigated a sample of conscientious objectors imprisoned in Sweden. Of the 135 randomly selected cases, fully 126 were Jehovah's Witnesses. About four percent of the eligible Swedish population was judged psychologically "unfit" for military service, and the corresponding figure for Witnesses was 21 percent, or five times greater (Rylander, 1946). Of these 126, Rylander diagnosed 51 as neurotic, 42 psychotic, 32 as mentally retarded, and 5 as brain-damaged (some overlap exists because some cases were in two or more categories) (Rylander, 1946). Diagnosis was made solely on the basis of behavior that was clearly pathological, such as irrational paranoia or severe long term depression, and not behavior that resulted from following Watchtower doctrine, such as non-social involvement with the non-Witnesses (Rylander, 1946). The Rylander study “concluded from the subjects' medical records and his interviews that their pathological state was not uncommonly evident before conversion, but that the Watchtower's' influence was often detrimental to mental health, sometimes severely so” (Rylander, 1946).

The Pescor Study, the First American Jehovah's Witness Study

In 1949, in the first study on American Jehovah's Witness mental health, M. J. Pescor diagnosed as psychotic over 7 percent of his total sample of 177 young males imprisoned due to obeying the Watchtower's prohibition against complying with military regulations (Pescor, 1949). The sample was obtained by interviewing all selective service violators admitted to the federal prison medical center during the study (Pescor, 1949). Seven percent were diagnosed psychotic, four percent had other mental abnormalities, and 25 percent were rated socially maladjusted. 16 percent of Pescor's sample were on hospital status and 44 percent of these were diagnosed psychotic (Pescor, 1949). “The level of Witness psychosis in his sample was about seventeen times higher than that for the population as a whole” (Pescor, 1949).

The Janner Study

Swiss psychiatrist J. Janner examined a random sample of 100 Swiss citizens who were imprisoned because of objection to military service, about 85 percent of whom were Jehovah's Witnesses (Janner, 1963). The study found a significant number of Jehovah's Witnesses showed one or more of the following symptoms: high level of fear anxiety, severe neuroticism, introversion and/or social isolation tendencies (Janner, 1963). Janner “concluded that the Witnesses were generally somewhat removed from reality, although some demonstrated intense religious feeling” (Janner, 1963) and this study determined that “10.4 percent of the Witnesses had previous criminal convictions, about half of which were for sexual offenses, mostly

pedophilia and exhibitionism. The rest of the criminal connections were for minor property or person offenses” (Janner, 1963).

The Spencer Study

John Spencer, an Australian psychiatrist, examined the records of all admissions to Western Australia's psychiatric hospitals from January, 1971 to December, 1973 (Spencer, 1975). He located fifty cases that, according to the patients' own admission, were active Jehovah's Witnesses (Spencer, 1975). Spencer concluded that the rate of serious mental illness among this group was three times higher than that of non-Jehovah's Witnesses, and the diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia was fully four times higher (Spencer, 1975). A reason that Spencer's statistics are probably low is that Jehovah's Witnesses are prone to avoid psychiatric treatment (Spencer, 1975). Per Spencer, “the incidence of schizophrenia amongst them is about three times as high as for the rest of the general population, while the figure for paranoid schizophrenia is nearly four times that of the general population” (Spencer, 1975).

Havor Montague (Jerry Bergman) and Ohio Research

Jerry Bergman, otherwise known as Havor Montague, is an American psychologist. Dr. Bergman was raised and spent many of his adult years as a Jehovah's Witness. He monitored the admissions to state and private mental hospitals and local mental health clinics in Ohio from 1972 to 1976. From this study 102 cases were found to be Jehovah's Witnesses. Per Montague “The mental disorder rate of JW's is approximately 10 to 16 times higher than the rate for the

general, non Witness population [and that]...about 10% of the publishers (full members) in the average congregation are in serious need of professional help...[although they are often] able to hide this fact quite well, especially from outsiders” (Montague, 1977).

The Potter Study / Thesis Paper

In England, Robert Potter, as part of his Ph.D. thesis on religion and mental health conducted a study of the Jehovah's Witnesses and found “a strong positive correlation between Jehovah's Witness membership and clinical schizophrenia” (Potter, 1985).

The Bergman Review & Autobiography

In 1996, Dr. Bergman wrote a literature review and opinion piece regarding Jehovah's Witnesses and their mental health (Bergman, 1996). Additionally, he wrote his autobiography which detailed his life among the Jehovah's Witnesses (Bergman, 1996). While not published academically and not peer-reviewed, this work did pose many interesting questions regarding this topic and detailed many of the causes that Dr. Bergman felt were behind the mental disorders experienced by Jehovah's Witnesses (Bergman, 1996). Dr. Bergman also did additional research using the Oakland county (Michigan) court records from 1965 to 1973 to conclude that suicide and crime rates among Jehovah's Witnesses are also high, especially aggressive crimes against persons (Bergman, 1996).

The Stedman Article

John Stedman, an English Psychiatrist, who provided counseling to many ex-Jehovah's Witnesses wrote an article where he concluded “a significant number showed a high level of fear anxiety, were severely introverted, and were loners or severely neurotic” (Stedman, n.d.).

Critical Analysis

Many of the previous studies and articles discussed above are clearly dated. Further, many of the diagnoses cannot be given the full weight of a diagnosis today as the DSM's have changed over the years and further, different countries have different standards for diagnosing mental illness. Additionally, the first few were studies done on those refusing to be conscripted to serve in the military, thus the samples themselves may be flawed. Furthermore, military research on enlisted soldiers is suspect as it likely excludes mentally ill individuals deemed unfit for duty. If these cases were included, the rate would actually be significantly higher than what Pescor, Rylander, and Janner found. Two additional pieces of research by Dr. Jerry Bergman, (aka Havor Montague), provide invaluable insights that can only be gleaned from a Jehovah's Witness who is also a psychologist. On that same note, this also needs to be looked at under the critical lens of knowing that this person is a former Jehovah's Witness and may not be entirely unbiased in his observations, analysis, and opinions.

Some of the conclusions reached were that causes of the link between the Jehovah's Witnesses and schizophrenia and / or other mental disease were specific to the religion. Issues

such as changes in doctrine, prophecy failure, and the high number of prohibitions in the Jehovah's Witness religion (Bergman, 1996) are listed. However, these reasons as the causes have not been tested in a scientific setting and appear to be as much suggestion as theory. Further these do not appear to be causes of schizophrenia in any other environment and cannot be corroborated fully in this sense.

Problem Resolution

Schizophrenia is thought to have neurological and / or environmental causes, but the causes are not currently known. However, it has been displayed that immigrants have a higher risk level for schizophrenia than the rest of the population (Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn, 2007). This appears to be very similar to the risks observed by the previous studies and the Jehovah's Witnesses. There are some common social elements between both the Jehovah's Witnesses and immigrants that need to be explored. These environmental causes are “social isolation and immigration related to social adversity, racial discrimination, family dysfunction, unemployment, and poor housing conditions” (Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn, 2007). Further, this theoretical model is corroborated by additional papers by Dr. Ainsdale (Ainsdale, 2011) and Drs. Lee and Hernandez (Lee & Hernandez, 2009). While it could be argued that most American Jehovah's Witnesses choose this lifestyle and it is self-imposed, it does not change the fact that they still experience these conditions. Further, there are strong social pressures keeping them in the religion as they typically have no social network outside of their friends and family who normally

are also in the Jehovah's Witnesses religion. Thus they have every reason to continue to experience these social elements.

Social Isolation

The Jehovah's Witnesses experience social isolation as part of their religion “Remember, you are to have no association with non-Jehovah's Witness friends or relatives. If they are honest and moral, that still does not make any difference” (Watchtower, 1960). Jehovah's Witnesses believe that people of other faiths can influence them adversely. They believe there is a danger of being spiritually damaged by associations with non-Jehovah's Witnesses (Watchtower, 1994). They believe that associations with others should be limited and they should only interact socially with other Jehovah's Witnesses (Revelation – Its Grand Climax is at Hand, 2006). Further, Jehovah's Witnesses spend a lot of their free time performing field ministry and thus may feel guilty about spending time socially with non-Jehovah's Witnesses instead of attempting to convert them “Don't associate with outsiders (non-Jehovah's Witnesses). You are too busy for that!” (Watchtower, 1974). A study by Drs. Momtaz, Hamid, Ibrahim, Yahaya, & Chai (Momtaz, Hamid, Ibrahim, Yahaya, & Chai, 2011) shows the powerful and profound effect of religiosity and social isolation can have on the psychologies of individuals.

Social Adversity / Discrimination

Social adversity / discrimination are also part of being a Jehovah's Witness. Jehovah's Witnesses have a strong desire to remain politically neutral. They do not run for political office

and they do not vote (Watchtower, 1999). Politicians see no reason to attempt to attract Jehovah's Witness voters and therefore their interests are not represented politically. This is based upon the belief held by Jehovah's Witnesses that the entire world and all of its governments are under the influence and control of Satan as of 1914 A.D (Who Really Rules the World?, 1992). Jehovah's Witnesses hold that being involved in the government will make them worldly and satanic. However, Jehovah's Witnesses do follow all laws as long as they do not conflict with their religion and Jehovah's Witnesses do not have any issue using the judicial system when they feel they are the victims of injustice. In many countries, however, the Jehovah's Witnesses are persecuted. Other religions, including other Christian religions, often view the Jehovah's Witnesses as heretical or believe the whole organization is a cult. Mob action and violence against Jehovah's Witnesses has occurred no less than 335 times in the United States (Peters, 2000) and the number of times religious violence has occurred against individual Jehovah's Witnesses is unknown (Peters, 2000). In many nations that were the formerly part of the Soviet Union, many Islamic countries, and some other nations the Jehovah's Witnesses are banned. Per Jubber, "Viewed globally, this persecution has been so persistent and of such an intensity that it would not be inaccurate to regard Jehovah's witnesses as the most persecuted religion of the twentieth century" (Jubber, 1977). Thus the Jehovah's Witnesses experience social discrimination and adversity that is at least on par with immigrants and in some cases even greater levels of these social elements.

Unemployment / Poor Housing Conditions

Unemployment and poor housing conditions are something that some Jehovah's Witnesses experience. Jehovah's Witnesses are discouraged from seeking college educations “No Jehovah's Witness should want to go to college. Rather, work in the Watchtower Organization!” (Watchtower, 1975), higher level jobs “Professional people, doctors and lawyers are often inconsiderate of others due to their undesirable higher education” (Awake!, 1968) and “What about professional careers? The position has not changed. If you are a young person thinking about a career-forget it. The end will be in a few years” (Awake!, 1969), and other earthly goals. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Armageddon is about to happen, they will not finish school, will not fulfill a career, will not grow old, and will never die (Watchtower 1983). These lifestyle decisions along with the cultural values of discouraging higher educations and higher-level careers this results in a greater chance of being unemployed and subsequently living in poor housing conditions. Regardless of religion, those without college degrees and an ambition for a career simply will not have the same material resources as those who do. While done for very different reasons, this puts the Jehovah's Witnesses on the same level as immigrants who also lack college educations and subsequently do not pursue better jobs.

Jehovah's Witness / Mental Health Relationship

The nature of religion in society is very complex. The role of religion in psychological disorders is even more complicated. However, there appear to be two main schools of thought when it comes to religion and psychology. The first is that intense or high control religions will have a symptom-complex indicative of a disorder (Diener, Tay, Myers, 2011). The opposing

view is that religion may act as a defense or coping mechanism assisting a person in dealing with stressors and protecting their psyche (Warnock, 2009). However, these views are not necessarily mutually exclusive and thus both may prove correct. Many social scientists have turned their attention to the phenomena associated with religion and religious factors, but there have been remarkably few studies correlating religion with mental disorders. One major contributing factors with the problem would be the lack of studies conducted on the topic of the association between mental disorders and religion. Additional studies on mental disorders and religion would add significantly to the body of knowledge on this topic.

Part of the problem is that there has been a history of animosity between science and religion. Many famous social scientists reject religion, including Sigmund Freud, who viewed religion as an illusion or a sign of psychological neurosis (Reber, 2006) and Eric Fromm's humanistic psychology in which hierarchical or high-control religions are rejected (Fromm, 1950). However, virtually no social scientist rejects the impact that religion has on society in general or on the psychology of specific individuals (Reber, 2006).

The solution to the issue would be additional studies conducted to determine if there is indeed a correlation between the social elements of social isolation, social adversity, and poor living conditions and schizophrenia. Since the studies regarding immigrants by Drs. Selten, Cantor-Graae, and Kahn (Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn, 2007), Dr. Ainsdale (Ainsdale, 2011), and Drs. Lee and Hernandez (Lee & Hernandez, 2009) have strongly suggested that these social

elements are environmental causes of schizophrenia, determining if there is also a correlation between other groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and these causes would be necessary. This information is absolutely needed in order to help determine some of the environmental causes behind schizophrenia.

Some of the challenges and barriers to this issue is that the Jehovah's Witnesses may not trust the mental health profession based upon previous studies conducted and the various criticisms toward their religion that they face. A Jehovah's Witness test group may be defensive or may have anxiety towards being in a study group. In fact, studying any group that emphasizes social isolation can create unique challenges as the people in the group may be unwilling to participate at all. Thus it is difficult to have the level of trust necessary to facilitate such studies. The Jehovah's Witnesses magazine *Awake!* states: "...the Christian Witnesses of Jehovah are the best oriented, happiest, and most content group of people on the face of the earth. They get along better with each other than do people of any other religion, tribe or social group. They have the least need for psychiatrists" (*Awake!*, 1960). This is compounded by the fact that Jehovah's Witnesses do not care for their own mental health often because they feel that Armageddon is just around the corner and as such it won't matter.

The solution to this issue is the same as it would be with any group of people: simply attempt to foster trust and understanding in order to achieve common ground. In the study by Drs. Selten, Cantor-Graae, and Kahn (Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn, 2007), various methods

were used in order to gain the trust of immigrants and similar methods can be used on the Jehovah's Witnesses. The most common metaphor for the study of religion is that of conversation. The scholar learns from the believer. Conversation does not mean interrogation. Conversation means clarification. The scholar can ask questions of any kind. Underlying the metaphor of diagnosis is the conviction that the aim of religious studies is to explain religion. The two aims are not at odds. Explanation requires description. Description provides the subject matter. Explanation accounts for that subject matter.

Conclusion

In summary the research shows an alternate theory for Jehovah's Witnesses and schizophrenia. Rather than the religion itself being the cause of the higher risk of schizophrenia, it could be caused by the social elements of isolation, adversity / discrimination, and poor housing / living conditions (Selten, Cantor-Graae, & Kahn, 2007). These social elements should be explored further as the causes of schizophrenia. It is far more likely that these social elements are the reasons for contributing to a higher risk of schizophrenia than it somehow being a function of the Jehovah's Witness religion itself. Doctrinal issues or eschatological failures have never been shown to be a risk factors for schizophrenia previously. While there certainly is a link between religious delusions and schizophrenia (Mohr & Huguelet, 2004), the religion of the Jehovah's Witnesses is hardly the exclusive reason and there is no reason to believe they should be singled out.

It is not the role of psychology to stand as a moral judge over any culture or subculture (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008) including the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Jehovah's Witness religion is a lifestyle decision and should be respected as such. The religion may promote values such as social isolation, social adversity, and poor living conditions and these values may even be at odds with mainstream society, but these are personal decisions. Even if these factors do increase the risk of schizophrenia, this is simply part of their culture. Instead the role of mental healthcare should be to offer help to anyone, including Jehovah's Witnesses, to deal with any issues they feel they are facing. The goal is not to judge their religious decisions, but instead to examine the causes and to come up with solutions. These solutions should include a respect for the religion and its holistic properties (Edwards, 2008).

Since the emergence of the social sciences in the last century and a half, it has become clear that people know only a fraction of what is going on in their lives. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, economists, and political scientists are trained to identify and to explain aspects of life that people never recognize and could never explain. The time for religious studies to follow the lead of the social sciences is long overdue. Simply put, it is time for religious studies to cease approaching religion from the standpoint of the humanities and to start approaching it from the standpoint of the social sciences.

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