Concerned citizen or vigilante? Applying revised techniques of neutralization and identity frameworks to better understand nativist groups on the U.S.-Mexico border

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ABSTRACT

The U.S.-Mexico border region has been a place of contention for decades. Groups of concerned citizens have congregated near its borders to help ebb the flow of migrants crossing the southern border. The purpose of this paper is to understand one group of these concerned citizens through a lens of identity and revised techniques of neutralization. The research is conducted after the larger Minutemen organizations have dissolved and created smaller fractured groups who take on the role of patrolling the Sonoran desert in Arizona. In addition to the fieldwork, current journalistic accounts aid in the analysis of current groups on the southwest border region. Using in-depth interviews and participant observation experiences, I apply Kaptein and van Helvoort's revised techniques of neutralization to understand the actions and rationalizations of this civilian group's reason for patrolling the southern border. Four distinct techniques are applied to the findings: the reduction of labels, the reduction in the immorality of accusers, the appeal to higher goals, and the appeal to rights.

Introduction

The U.S.-Mexico border region has been the site of decade's long struggles to fortify the southern border. Along the border are groups of concerned citizens seeking to help secure the nation from incoming migrants. The focus of this paper is on how non-state actors repurpose security tactics to shape their identity regarding immigration and border security while using techniques to justify these actions as not vigilante. Civilian involvement in traditional policing activities has taken the form of neighborhood watch programs. When applied to the study of anti-immigrant groups surveilling the southern U.S. border regions, one can see many of the same techniques used in a rural, desert setting. When civilian involvement is not sanctioned by a law enforcement body, the label vigilante is used to do what anti-immigrant groups view as doing a job the government will not do. Vigilantes may not accept the label placed on them from outsiders who do not fully understand their motivations. By further investigating the motives, actions, and ideas of anti-immigrant group members can aid in building an understanding for why these groups feel the need to patrol the U.S.-Mexico border region.

I focus on one group in southern Arizona to analyze how they use techniques to neutralize their identities between vigilante and concerned citizen. I use in-depth interviews and participant observation to analyze members' thoughts, experiences, and ideologies as they pertain to securing the border. In addition, I add more current journalistic accounts of groups patrolling the same region to provide more recent activity from similar minded

groups. The findings are analyzed using four techniques of neutralization revised by Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019). The four techniques used include the reduction of labels, the reduction in the immorality of accusers, the appeal to higher goals, and the appeal to rights. In addition to techniques of neutralization, the current research focuses on how many of the participants who were active in the national movement had to reshape their identity when the smaller movements became one of the few ways to continue their activity on the border. The following paper focuses on the key question of my research: how do civilian border group members' rationalizations shape and/or affect their group identities? I find that analyzing their actions, rationalizations, and ideas, the distinction becomes blurred and the role civilian groups' play becomes more complex than a simple label of vigilante can encompass. Thus, the paper contributes to the current literature by further understanding how the division within larger anti-immigrant groups affect their identities and how members rationalize their actions to steer away from a vigilante label.

Theoretical Framework

To mitigate one's potential deviant identity, techniques of neutralization may be applied. Members must justify or rationalize their involvement and actions in the group beyond their group identity. Sykes and Matza (1957), influenced by Sutherland and Cressey, were among the first to develop and study neutralizations. Neutralization theory seeks to nullify the guilt of norm violation often protecting their own self-esteem so to convince themselves of their behavior traditionally considered immoral (Kaptein and van Helvoort, 2019). One main challenge to the theory has been in the difference between neutralizations, rationalizations, and justifications (Maruna and Copes 2005; Scott and Lyman 1968). Neutralizations and rationalizations are not distinguished in Kaptein and van Helvoort's work, whereas the use of justifications asserts a positive value where one may not exist (Scott and Lyman 1968). Scott and Lyman focus on the various neutralizations to explain their justifications. Previous research on the Westboro Baptist Church focus on how the group accepts their deviancy and are not trying to neutralize their behavior, instead justifying their behavior for ideological reasons (Powell-Williams and Powell-Williams 2017). The overlap between neutralizations, rationalizations, and justifications illustrates the complexity of assuaging guilt using various techniques.

Using the previous research on neutralizations and rationalizations, Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019) created a model to expand the potential field of techniques of neutralization from five to 12 categories with 60 sub-techniques. Their model starts with two main categories: denying deviant behavior and denying responsibility. Each of these

categories has two divisions grouped in six neutralization techniques, three for each division, with five sub-techniques in each neutralization. The focus of this paper is on techniques four (reducing norms to facts) and five (appealing to another norm) that explain how subjects deny deviant behavior, and therefore are more useful for my purpose of analyzing the behavior of an anti-immigrant group. Within these two main techniques, there are five sub techniques with two from each technique being applied to the current research. These include: the reduction to labels, the reduction in the immorality of accusers, the appeal to higher goals, and the appeal to rights (Kaptein and van Helvoort 2019). With more available options, the neutralization technique can be applied more specifically to a given behavior.

Collective identity is at the core of understanding how and why members attach to a particular group. Collective identity is defined as “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (Poletta and Jasper 2001: 285). A primary goal for movements is to change their identity, setting up who we are versus who they want us to be (Poletta and Jasper 2001) while creating a shared sense of ‘we-ness’ or collective agency being imposed by outsiders, ultimately creating an oppositional consciousness (Hunt and Benford 2004). Identity is fluid and relational. People may have multiple reasons why they join and identify with a specific movement by enhancing the narrative and demanding recognition for their new identity. One can see that “activists construct, deconstruct, celebrate, and enact collective identities as strategies of protest” (Poletta and Jasper 2001: 294).

The main struggle with collective identity is boundary work. One must present an antagonistic relationship, us versus them, in-group and out-group dichotomy (Hunt and Bedford 2004). Once these boundaries are set, members “maintain and enforce those boundaries” (Hunt and Benford 2004: 443). There is no single identity, rather the fluidity of identity is constantly changing due to external pressures (Poletta and Jasper 2001; Hunt and Benford 2004; Shapira 2013). Collective identity is formed through interactions with allies, those opposed to the movement, bystanders, and audiences such as the media, or others who come into contact with movement members (Hunt and Benford 2004).

Using both techniques of neutralization and identity theory together can build on the understanding of how precarious one’s identity can be when tied to actions. The neutralizations aid in identity formation to nullify an undesirable aspect of the identity, in this case, vigilante. By rationalizing the involvement as not existing outside of the law may allow group members to justify their actions and ideology.

The Spectacle in the Desert

Civilian border groups are neither new nor extraordinary. Upon creation of the U.S.-Mexico border, local farmers and citizens banded together to protect their property. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that the call to the border expanded to include non-border resident citizens. These efforts helped to create a spectacle that would eventually cause others to take note and move their organization to protect the southern border (Doty, 2007). Many nativist groups portray Mexicans as “swarthy, impoverished hordes” trying to take over or invade the United States (Henderson, 2011). They characterize those who cross the southern border as Mexican or OTM—other than Mexican (Bonner, 2005) who should be feared for their potential dangerousness. Then-presidential candidate, Donald Trump, stated in his speech in 2015 “When Mexico sends its people, they’ re not sending their best...They’ re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’ re bringing those problems with us. They’ re bringing drugs. They’ re bringing crime. They’ re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Kopan, 2016), thus furthering stereotypes about Mexicans.

Two main groups emerged in 2005, the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps and the Minutemen Project, to produce what Leo Chavez calls “a spectacle in the desert” (2008). The spectacle is meant to draw the attention to the border and the issue of illegal immigration and migrant crossings. The spectacle in the desert was to draw attention to a lack in border security, reduce the number of apprehensions in the area they are monitoring, and influence the US Congress to act on immigration (Chavez 2008). Harel Shapira (2013) and Roxanne Doty (2007) both explore the spectacle produced by these groups in the Arizona desert. The disbanding of these groups due to a fracturing of ideologies made way for splinter groups to emerge from the previous groups’ membership. These groups developed an expanded definition and identity of their role in the southern border region. One of these fragmented groups is the focus of this paper.

Citizen involvement in policing activities in the U.S. dates back to the founding of the country. Citizens were deputized and used when the need arose. Many took part in slave patrols arising from the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. With the formalization of the Border Patrol in 1924, citizen involvement in border security ceased and became the responsibility of the federal government (Henderson 2011; Massey 2006). Other policing agencies have used neighborhood watch to include citizens in watchperson roles. Neighborhood watch emerged in 1972 “involv[ing] citizens coming together in relatively small groups to share information about local crime problems, exchange crime prevention tips, and make plans for engaging in surveillance of the neighborhood and

crime-reporting activities” (Rosenbaum, 1986: 104). The involvement is a cooperation between law enforcement officials and citizens to help problem solve issues related to crime prevention. In the borderlands, the passivity of watch led to the creation of citizen patrols looking for more aggressive approaches to surveillance. Prior to the development of formalized policing, patrols were seen as vigilantes, taking the law into their own hands to protect property or country (DuBow and Emmons, 1981; Rosenbaum, 1988). Ranchers along the border created a citizen patrol group called the American Border Patrol to help detect the presence of undocumented migrants crossing the border surreptitiously (Miller and Hess, 2007), whereas other groups are active along the U.S.-Mexico border and in many U.S. states through virtual surveillance practices (Campbell 2015; Doty 2007; Elcioglu 2015). The role of the citizen in policing as it applies to the border can be tenuous. The U.S.-Mexico border is 2,000 miles long and would be difficult to patrol primarily with government officers. I illustrate next how vigilantism is not ideologically distant from neighborhood watch activities, with some activities straddling the lawful-unlawful balance.

The concept of vigilantism has no one agreed upon definition. In its classic sense, vigilantism refers to “organized, extralegal movements which take the law in their own hands” (Kenney, 1987: 15). The vigilante is ever changing, matching what is being studied more than a common definition. Vigilante “occupies an awkward borderland between law and illegality, and the veil of secrecy that cloaks much vigilante activity also provides cover for deception, so that it is by no means always what it seems or claims to be” (Abrahams, 2008: 422). Abrahams describes vigilantism not as a thing unto itself, but rather something in relation to the phenomenon being used to label it. The need to apply the label of vigilante will be more powerful in relation to the act rather than a definition that is applied generically. There are actions that are completely legal yet are perceived to be illegal. Vigilantism cannot exist on its own, but rather it exists on the edges of state power and tends to be “more critical of the state’s actual performance than of the state itself” (Abrahams, 2008: 423). Throughout the many years since the civilian border groups’ creation, many people have participated in activities along the border. The current iteration of these groups are both constructive as well as destructive, adding to the discussion about border relations and issues with immigration reform while simultaneously rooting actions in racial animus and nationalistic fervor.

When does watching cross the line to vigilante? Both Shapira (2013) and Doty (2007, 2009) illustrate the complex and fluid nature of civilian border patrol member’s identities. Shapira (2013) illustrates the complexity of belonging and how more than one identity can emerge or exist depending on the situation. Doty includes popular sovereignty to focus

the conversation on the people and how vigilantes are standing up for what is right (2007). Elcioglu (2015) applies Doty's popular sovereignty to the recent incarnation of anti-immigrant groups and applies the motivations of the "soldiers" as an extension of the Border Patrol. Hence, bringing the complicated identities of patroller and protector together to create a grey area of watch and vigilante. The study detailed below seeks to determine how civilian border group members can rationalize or neutralize their actions and thoughts regarding their role in protecting the border. I present how members view, rationalize, and discuss their organization as a neighborhood watch and further justify their actions deemed by many outside their organization as vigilante in nature.

Method and Data

I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews and utilized participant observation with an Arizona-based civilian border group in spring and fall 2011, allowing me to talk to members and hear their stories to learn about their experiences and ideologies (Lofland et al., 2004). To locate and engage members, I used a snowball sample. This involved asking each respondent to recommend another member to interview. My first contact was with a co-founder of a national anti-immigrant group, Heidi. The group was a large organization of self-proclaimed "patriots" that patrol the southern border region to locate unauthorized migrant crossings with the intention of assisting in the deportation of these individuals out of the U.S. The emergence of this type of civilian border patrol group is linked to a "call to the border" in 2005 and is covered well by Doty (2009) and Shapira (2013). The original calls to the border elicited hundreds of 'patriotic' individuals who answered the call to protect the borders from immigrants seeking entry from Mexico and Central America. The original groups portrayed in Doty and Shapira's works were larger, and driven by the now defunct leadership of Chris Simcox. These groups were more visible and garnered more media attention than many of the current civilian border groups.

I yielded a sample of nine participants willing to participate in semi-structured in-depth interviews. My sample is limited because no new referrals to new interviewees were obtained after the interviews of the nine were complete. In addition to formal interviews, I had several informal conversations while on various "missions" with the group in the desert, providing contextual information for this project. I would meet at the ranch and drive to various locations and hike to the cameras with civilians involved in monitoring the border. Additionally, a longer walk, approximately three to four miles, conducted to track a 'known migrant route' allowed for discussion about immigration issues and group members' tracking skills and abilities. This allowed ample time for informal

conversations related to immigrants and their presence in the borderlands and provided context to the more formalized interviews. Members who participated only in the “missions” introduced themselves using their names and/or call signs; some only giving their call sign. A call sign is name given to someone to communicate without using real names, such as “Maverick” , “Ice” or “Goose” . Previous research has focused on and participated in “musters” (a gathering of the “troops”), camp life among participants, and other larger gatherings, such as political protests or counter protests to other immigration activists (Doty 2009; Shapira 2013). These rallies ceased with the dissolution of the Minutemen Civil Defense Corp in late 2010. The splintering of the larger national group resulted in a decline in memberships and camaraderie. The current civilian border patrol group focuses on different activities, such as placing cameras in the desert, conducting night watches, and general patrolling of the desert.

Each interview lasted an average of forty-five minutes and took place at a location convenient for the respondent; including restaurants, office meeting rooms, places of business, and a hotel lobby. Many of the group members I interviewed were skeptical and wary of outsiders joining their movement or even talking with them. Many members expressed fear that their actions or ideology was going to be distorted or their identity revealed. They expressed fear for their safety from drug cartels and others in the business of transporting migrants through the Sonoran desert, and thus many possible informants are not captured in this study. That said, two of the interviewees were founding members of national anti-immigrant organizations and identified themselves by name, but a pseudonym is used as with all other interviewees.

The characteristics of the respondents I interviewed were homogenous in terms of race/ethnicity, age, and gender as all appeared to be white, between forty to sixty years of age, and six were men and three were women. I did not inquire directly about these demographic characteristics, or others such as education and income, as these would likely be sensitive questions for these individuals already suspect of researchers. That said, additional information about the study participants emerged during the interviews through unprompted disclosures. Several members, approximately eleven of the nineteen, had previous military experience, from all branches of the armed forces. One member, Steve, a member who appeared to be in his early twenties, identified as having no previous military experience. It was also disclosed that all patrol group members lived in Tucson or Phoenix and had been residents ranging from several years to decades. In terms of organizational structure within these groups, the women I spoke with were in organizing positions; ‘Heidi’ serving as a co-founder of one of the national organizations and ‘Sally’ serving as an organizer for the local organization.

IRB for this study was granted by the author's institution. Each participant was told the purpose of the research was to better understand the Minutemen as a volunteer police organization and a social movement network. In addition, members were told the study intends to examine how the organization frames its role in society, including the presentation of a public image and the dissemination of ideological stances, particularly illegal migration. Participants wanted their organization to be understood on their terms and were eager to speak about how they are making the southern U.S. safer.

Coding the interviews and interactions began with an open coding session to explore the data. The next level coding included identifying patterns and emerging themes. All coding was conducted and entered by hand. Using the techniques of neutralization as a guide, four overall themes emerged during coding of data: appeal to rights, reduction of the norm to labels, immorality of the accusers, and appealing to higher goals. The following analysis illustrates how these themes are essential elements in the production of member's identities between vigilante and neighborhood watcher. This research investigates the application of neutralization techniques toward member's thoughts and actions toward immigrants to the U.S. primarily from Mexico. The following analysis focuses on the four techniques that best apply to civilian border groups using Kaptein and van Helvoort's (2019) revised model on neutralization techniques. The four techniques that will be applied to the research include: appeal to rights, reduction of the norm to labels, immorality of the accusers, and appealing to higher goals.

In addition to the collected data described above, I supplement the analysis with updated journalistic accounts of similar groups patrolling a similar area along the U.S.-Mexican border. To find these accounts, I used the search term "U.S.-Mexico Border Vigilantes" to locate articles that would fit the parameters of my research. I found four articles that focused on border vigilantes. The four articles came from reputable sources including: The Wall (from USA Today), The Guardian, The Intercept, and Brookings. I applied the same coding structure as with the previous data. Each article was able to contribute to at least one technique of neutralization.

Findings

The Appeal to Rights

The appeal to a right or laws, rules, agreements, and promises is a first neutralization to apply to the civilian border group (Kaptein and van Helvoort 2019:1270). Examples of such rationalizations include following the law, legal right to engage in the activity, and seeing it as their moral duty to protect, in this case protection of their country from

migrants crossing the border illegally. Civilian border groups were designed to be a civilian extension of Border Patrol. This sentiment is echoed several times with thoughts such as “We’ re just an extension of them [Border Patrol] as a volunteer group but we have a lot of respect for the Border Patrol” (Stan) or Sally saying:

we were trying to give them assistance, that is all we ever wanted to do, we don’ t make arrests, we don’ t stop people, we don’ t encounter them, we never want to put our people in, all this time and in the 10 years since the Minutemen started there has never been an incident, with any of our people getting injured.

Many members share Fred’ s sentiment: “most of the people I have met are very patriotic in a sense that they want law and order in the country.” He sees those who are actively working or gathering knowledge about the issue as patriots, who, if given the opportunity, would like to see laws enforced. Many members have strong ties to the area, either growing up or moving there before 2000 and establishing businesses and families. Their sense of neighborhood extends into the desert because they have a sense of belonging to Arizona and the United States. This expansion on the definition of neighborhood adds to the layers of their activities and perceived motives. Neighborhoods are thought of as urban spaces with close knit or potentially close knit communities (Sampson et. al 2002). Members see the importance of expanding their reach to better protect the greater community. “The border is no longer in the desert, it is all over America” (Grandin 2019:6) says a member of Kansas City’ s Heart of America Minuteman Civil Defense Corps chapter, alluding to how the problems associated with the border region are found in many areas of the United States.

One important facet of neighborhood watch is the partnership with law enforcement. In the case of these civilian groups, the law enforcement body is the Border Patrol. When the civilian group decides where they are going for their mission, the team leader calls Border Patrol to inform of their position in the desert. Stan says:

we tell the Border Patrol where we’ re goin’ . We don’ t go out there and then they get surprised that we’ re out there. We let ‘em know where we’ re goin’ and how long we’ re gonna be there and so it’ s they, we don’ t work independently of them. We’ re just an extension of theirs. A volunteer group extension.

The civilian border groups see themselves as an extension of the Border Patrol, a volunteer cadre. This perception runs counter to the official statement by Border Patrol. This partnership is largely one-sided as the official position of the Border Patrol is:

Customs and Border Protection (CBP), United States Border Patrol does not endorse or support any private group or organization from taking matters into their own hands as it could have disastrous personal and public safety consequences. The Border Patrol strongly encourages concerned citizens to call the U.S. Border Patrol and/or local law enforcement authorities if they witness or suspect illegal activity. Securing our nation's borders can be dangerous. Interdicting narcotics and deterring and apprehending individuals illegally entering the United States requires highly-trained, law enforcement personnel.

The group believes they are helping Border Patrol and are strict with their missions. They see what they are doing as “more or less a neighborhood watch, where you are observing and reporting” (Fred). The mission has expanded to include “training, instead of the old days where you sat in the car and just reported; now we can get out on foot and go to other areas.”

Fred continues explaining what their search and rescue group does:

Then during the day or night we can sit at strategic points and observe and if we see a group call them in to the Border Patrol. And a lot of times the groups will walk on, they will run, some of them are so tired or sick or thirsty or cold that they will stop and we will stay with them until the Border Patrol gets there.

Along with Fred, one of the more active members of the Search and Rescue Team—Steve—reiterates that “all we do is sit there, observe and report what we see kind of like a neighborhood watch org, they just report crime or whatever. You know that's pretty much what we do.” Steve also points out that “we will also help anyone who is in distress, is lost, been left behind, don't have any water or food and they are injured we help them.” Steve believes reporting to Border Patrol is important and their team “will stay with them [migrants] until Border Patrol arrives. They might get up and run because we cannot detain them, we might follow them that way we can continue to report their position to Border Patrol, but you know that is what we do.” Knowing the laws and maintaining a presence within the boundaries are important. Additionally, offering aid to a migrant in need lends credibility to their search and rescue operations. The credibility is shaken when help is only to aid in the apprehension of the migrant. The ACLU points out in the Intercept (Devereaux 2019:2) that “we cannot allow racist and armed vigilantes to kidnap and detain people seeking asylum.” Many groups are quick to assure rights groups they are observing and reporting, not detaining and injuring. The actions of one group can cause others to see these actions as possible in all groups (Felbab-Brown & Norio 2021:3).

These groups do not inform Border Patrol of the location of their cameras in the desert. They will hand over any video they capture of migrants or drug smugglers through the desert and a general location of the area, but not the exact coordinates. Fred discusses how they choose where to put the cameras to survey. He says:

there are some you know for the trails we put the cameras out and take them down. Other ones we go out and scout for trends of how they are travelling, what will happen is Border Patrol works areas for a month or two months, so it will divert the traffic and we will go out and look at where the traffic is going.

The teams are always scouting for new locations, especially when the cameras are not catching any movement. Sally touts the success of the cameras and the ability to keep their members safer by saying:

the cameras were doing phenomenal work where we didn' t actually have to have personnel out there and yet cause we knew there were people out there, they send them on a different trail because their intel they were starting to use all the things we were using, the GPS, they were using the cell phones, they were using all of the technology, the thermals that type of thing, they were using those things as well, they up to dated their people, we have to be smarter than them, we can' t just continue to be stagnant and continue to do the same old same old, that is when we split off from Minutemen Civil Defense Corps.

Members see what they are doing as helping Border Patrol detect migrant activity in places Border Patrol may not have the resources to watch. Sally informs us that Border Patrol stay on the main roads or well-traveled roads but “back on these little small trails, they can' t get up into those, they don' t have enough personnel to watch those little trails that are coming through it because they change periodically and then you can set Border Patrol there and they [migrants] would just move to another trail.” Detecting the movement of migrants in the desert is the purpose of both the civilian border group and Border Patrol. Sally describes how their missions come to be: “we' re finding out that we have people saying if you call us and let us know so we can set up cameras so we can set up cameras to find out where the activity is.”

The outlook of these members alludes to an identity of helping Border Patrol monitor the desert for migrant activity. Civilian members look to be a preventative force in the desert, hoping to deter migrants from crossing. Their objectives are to follow and maintain the law at all times, and to follow any directions provided from the Border Patrol. This is illustrated by their constant affirmation that what they are doing is legal and they are

only following the law. Their views as a neighborhood watch organization is not without criticism, and moving forward, the group will need to contend with the racist nature of their patrols by being present in the southern U.S. monitoring a border where people of color cross.

The Reduction to Labels

The second rationalization allows members to continue believing their actions are right, even if outsiders label them as deviant. To illustrate the rationalization of reduction of the norm to labels, one focuses on the language used. Civilian border group activity is interpreted by many as vigilante in nature. When confronted with the label of vigilante, Ben, founder of a national anti-immigrant organization, offers his take on the label and definition:

Well there are two definitions of vigilantes, if you go to Webster' s or Merriam Webster' s dictionary the first definition is I believe is an angelic one, a do-gooder, to me the vigilante who goes out and picks up all the trash from the curb because the city doesn' t sweep the streets, who randomly opens doors for people, carrying their groceries in both arms out of the store there is your angelic vigilante. Now that is the type of vigilantism the Minuteman Project is engaged in if you want to refer to us as vigilantes, thank you for the compliment. That being said, people who use an activist movement to veil sinister intentions or motives they make the second definition of vigilante. Sinister people from the dark side of the community.

Rejecting the label of vigilante seems to be the norm and preferred way of viewing their groups. Steve explains that “we just report what we see to law enforcement, if they do something about it great, if they don' t well they don' t.”

Heidi refers to “the president [George W. Bush] himself [telling] us to be vigilant and report any suspicious activity. You just leave the e or the a out of the vigilante and you have vigilant it is not a bad word.” Heidi sees their mission as noble and should be respected because they are bringing to light a wrong they feel needs righted. The labels others put on the group have consequences, not only in how they view their own group, but on how others view their group. Heidi is a business owner and she knows that she has:

lost a few customers, you know with Mexican heritage that simply thought we were vigilantes and Mexican haters and didn' t understand that I also gained a lot of people and then of course we had those people who would come up to Chris and I and would say to him, we support you but we cannot come up in the open we have to

do it silently and that to me is the greatest sorry, I mean if you believe in something stand up and let it be known, that is the way I was raised and that is what I expect of everyone else.

Sally approaches the label of vigilante differently. She says:

yeah we are vigil and that means we are constantly vigilant, we don't want to be you know passive, we don't want to sit back and say oh my oh my it's a terrible thing, we want to take the assertive action, it doesn't mean we confront these people cause we don't, we don't ever put any body in danger.

She sees what they are doing as positive, following the law and simply aiding Border Patrol in the apprehension of undocumented migrants or drug smugglers. She contends that “we are just ordinary citizens who have had enough. That is what we are and we just want to say if our government won't step up and do it then we are the people, we are the government, the people are the government,” and if that is viewed as vigilantism, then so be it.

The play with language is a common antic to help move away from the vigilante label.

When people call us vigilantes, well, take the word and break it in half...we've got a 'vigil' that we're doing here in the border. And then you have the 'ante' ...Ante it up, do your part. So we're doing our part of this vigil on the border (Carranza 2017).

The play on language helps with the image of holding migrants illegally or conducting operations that are not seen as legitimate. By being vigilant, these groups see their role as protector rather than criminal. The previous excerpts illustrate how members are likely to redefine or repurpose the vigilante label to justify how their actions and presence are different from mainstream vigilantes. Changing definitions or reading into various meaning of vigilante help to shape their identity and steer away from a vigilante identity toward a more palatable identity. This shift in the message of what the groups do while out on “patrol” stemmed from U.S. civil liberty groups “highlighting the unlawfulness of the vigilante groups actually detaining individuals”, many who may have been suspected of not having valid documents (Felbab-Brown & Norio 2021:3). The precarious line these groups have managed to walk between legitimacy and illegality waivers when these groups act in an intimidating nature by posting “themselves near polling stations in area of high percentage of people of color and videotape those going in to vote. Their claimed purpose was to deter the undocumented from voting, but, of course, such tactics

can also deter many legal citizens from voting, particularly marginalized minorities” (Felbab-Brown & Norio 2021:2).

The Reduction in the Immorality of Accusers

A third rationalization focuses on the immorality of those accusing them of being vigilantes. Society tends to view all nativist or anti-immigrant groups the same. There is diversity between the groups in terms of extremism; however, society views them all as vigilante and racist in nature due to their focus. When groups behave in a manner that is racist or violent, this action may create a false impression for others. Those fighting “the good fight” try to deter or distance themselves from these groups. As Ben says:

I got the Mountain Minutemen...taken off the border. That is the group that put out the video “How to Kill a Mexican” , showing someone it is a parody, but it looked real. He also claimed he was a trainer for people wanting to go to the border and do observation he said it was a training film, what you shot a Mexican immigrant coming across the border and bury his body in the desert and pile rocks on it.

The violent actions by one group leads to a label of vigilantism in the eyes of the general public. The public has made judgments on these groups based on many factors, one being the news stories generated by anti-immigrant groups. Their actions are the first to draw attention to the vigilante label. Their actions seem to be above the law because they are doing a job that has been tasked to a law enforcement body. Neighborhood watch was designed to help police prevent and deter crime from occurring and may not include actively seeking violators. Actively seeking migrants or drug smugglers, while dressed in pseudo-military clothing, being armed, and conducting missions in the desert is a main reason their actions are viewed as vigilante. Many believe these groups are fighting a just cause, and many more see their actions as racist and potentially violent. Members may see those who are labeling their group as vigilante as being hypocrites, biased, unfair, or malicious because of their lack of involvement and understanding of the migrant movement across the southern border. By re-routing the “blame” to a larger group, members’ are able to rationalize their involvement because of the lack of knowledge or fairness put forth by members of society, including the media.

These groups are not always welcomed even if there is wider support around the U.S. When one group was moving from one area of Arizona to another they faced:

“resistance from the local community. ‘There’ s a lot of harassment towards us, a lot of slander, a lot of defamation of character. They’ re putting out fliers and things

that have nothing to do with us, or if they do, they' ve turned everything around. They have all their facts messed up' ” (Carranza 2017:12).

By focusing on how they are treated by others helps deflect their own culpability and responsibility for the actions of their group and groups like them. Focusing on deterring drug smugglers and cartels is noble, but these issues were there long before these new border groups came to town.

Another common tactic used by these groups is to focus on potential motives of those who oppose what they do or are migrants themselves. The Reconquista movement is a familiar talking point within these groups. Essentially the story goes that Mexican migrants come to the U.S. to eventually take back what was theirs. If there are enough Mexicans in the U.S. the ease of a cultural takeover is inevitable. If these groups do not protect and defend the border area, these 'bad people' are going to take away my country. They vilify their opponents to make their position look just (Grandin 2019).

A historian told the Intercept:

Regardless of whether you' re a vigilante acting outside of the law, or you' re a state police officer or a local law enforcement officer practicing extralegal violence, people were not prosecuted. A culture of impunity allowed state police officers and local law enforcement in many instances to collaborate with vigilante, but they wouldn' t have called them vigilantes. They would have said they were pulling together a posse (Devereaux 2019: 6).

Portraying others as immoral or having immoral goals while their group tries to spin their activities as legitimate for national security and the prosperity of their nation is another way for anti-immigrant groups to walk the line of vigilante and concerned citizen.

The Appeal to Higher Goals

A final rationalization against a vigilante identity is appeal to higher goals. Here members see their efforts as doing the job the government will not or cannot do. Stan says he does not “go out looking for illegals coming north to give them food and water, I go out looking to stop them coming north, and if they' re thirsty and hungry I always carry extra water and extra food with me, I don' t deprive them of it, I will always take care of them.” Stan' s outlook and willingness to help has the appearance of altruism cloaked within vigilante activities.

Problems occur when members make statements like:

of course we haven' t killed any Mexicans yet, we haven' t killed any south Americans yet, we haven' t shot anybody yet we have not even pulled out guns yet against anybody because we have very very strict rules when people carry guns and most of the people have a CCW [concealed carry weapon] license and they have to go through a course so we are very very adamant about everything being followed by the law. (Heidi)

The use of the word 'yet' in this type of statement can move some to think, if given the opportunity, someone could be killed. The statement does not help the group' s image of not being vigilante. Knowing you have armed members in the desert with the express purpose of locating migrants to hand over to the Border Patrol leads to a situation that could turn violent under the right circumstances. Group members understand their involvement can be dangerous and work within the framework of the law to protect themselves first and others second.

The fact someone might be killed in the desert or while surveying a situation addresses the issue of armed patrols. Steve says "we will all be armed for our protection... now we carry rifle and body armor at times, we didn' t used to" but as the potential violence in the border region escalated, civilian group members feel safer if they are armed. Heidi clarifies "we were carrying weapons, Arizona is an open carry state, and we are also quite aware that this was not an undangerous commitment we were doing." She continues her justification by stating "they [Border Patrol] realized we were only spotting and reporting, that we were the eyes and the ears of the Border Patrol."

Much about the issue of vigilante action is the protection of society from those who have broken the law—in this case immigration law. Ben sums this up by stating:

If we are going to start pandering to those who have broken our laws and we are going to start selectively enforcing the laws well that means we all have carte blanche to apparently what laws we are going to respect and which laws we are going to disrespect and how dare you try and enforce the law against me, you are not enforcing the law against him or her, but you want to enforce another law against me.

Many members believe vigilantes would not need to exist if the government were doing their job. Steve says if "the government or whoever is supposed to do their job" were doing it, our group would not need to exist in the capacity of desert patrols. He continues by saying civilian groups do not "go that far at all. Nowhere near." He is referring to extralegal violence that is often associated with vigilante activity.

As one member said to The Wall (Carranza 2017:13)

I' m down here to defend my country from whoever is coming across that border...I can walk away and get a job tomorrow, but I' ll always be sitting there thinking, 'what' s going through (the border) today? What didn' t I stop, what didn' t I do?

Many members of these groups are veterans. They look to their past military involvement and ask "What did all these people die for in the second world war, Korea, and Vietnam? It wasn' t for open borders, to let in so many migrants that the U.S. would turn into a country of mayhem" (Grandin 2019:6). One motivation of group members crave "a sense of camaraderie combined with a grander purpose, the same feelings of belonging and self-worth they used to experience while servicing in the U.S. military in wars abroad" (Felbab-Brown & Norio 2021:6). Even those members without a military background share this sense of desire for a community where they feel their actions are making a difference. One member stated:

It' s a bunch of people that are willing to get off their couch, spend their money, get training, practice all the skills that we learn here, and basically it' s like a job. It' s a volunteer job. It' s not because they' re here for a paycheck, they' re here because they want to be here (Carranza 2017: 7).

In sum, vigilantes work outside the law, are not mainstream, and cause many to see them as unnecessary. Many of the group' s actions are vigilante in nature and have racist undertones. A greater awareness of their justifications aid in the construction of logical arguments to destroy or weaken the movement.

Discussion

My research question at the beginning of this paper was: how do civilian border group members' rationalizations shape and/or affect their group identities? Drawing on the works of Doty and Shapira, there is a need to see these groups as more than simply vigilante, but rather as complex individuals with varying identities depending on the role they perform. Adding another layer to analyze group members' identity formulation is the use of rationalizations to justify their actions, thus legitimizing their identities. Labeling these members as vigilantes is insufficient because their law and order focus includes safety for themselves, their families, and the country as a whole. The complex interchange of identities with the racial overtones of policing the southern border allows for a variety of perceptions to arise. Some scholars have been critical of the vigilante aspect of this identity (Chacon and Davis, 2006; Navarro, 2009), while others focus on the complexity of group members' identity (Doty, 2009; Shapira, 2013). Comparing the

current study with the work of Shapira and Doty notes the evolution of the movement. Shapira and Doty both were able to observe and participate at the height of these movements whereas the current study comes in after the dissolution and fragmentation of the larger movement. The frustration with a lack of enforcement of immigration laws is still present with less involvement and different techniques. The current iteration of the movement uses technology to track movement in the desert instead of people sitting and waiting to apprehend migrants crossing the desert.

The identity of the active members is varied with some being vigilant throughout the year even without a muster call and those who show up when a muster call is made. This change in movement structure has additionally changed those who are involved. Many of the members who were a part of the current study were self-described patriots, here to do the job the government was not doing. The members are a mix of young and old, dedicated and not ready to give up. Their growth is slow due to reduced excitement regarding immigration. The rise of social media and online participation has created a drop in participation in the desert.

The use of rationalizations to support their efforts in the desert help to legitimize the movement to outsiders. Using the four new sub-techniques of neutralization, as expanded by Kaptein and van Helvoort (2019), the reduction to labels, the reduction in the immorality of accusers, the appeal to higher goals, and the appeal to rights, one can see how group members are able to further neutralize their involvement and identities. Using language to shape their movement by claiming to be vigilant and upholding the law by conducting their activities is one way to neutralize a vigilante label. Appealing to the higher goal of doing the job the government is not doing focuses their work on the inaction of the respective government agencies. They do understand that the Border Patrol is not adequately staffed and they see the broader government as the reason for this lack of staffing. They rationalize their actions within legal frameworks and appeal to rights, the legality of upholding U.S. law as any citizen patriot would. Their final neutralization sub-technique is calling out the immorality of their accusers. By focusing the attention on the hypocrisy or bias of those labeling their actions as vigilante. Their focus on their patriotism as a superior action to those not acting to secure the borders is an example of this sub-technique.

My results further indicate the two perspectives, neighborhood watch and vigilantism, are not mutually exclusive, but rather speak to different actions and ideas. The data points to a hybrid (or fragmented) identity that uses vigilante action and ideas in concurrence with neighborhood watch tactics. At the root of the fragmented identity is

how government based police agencies, such as the U.S. Border Patrol, do not endorse civilian border patrols. Until a legitimized working partnership between immigration enforcement agencies and civilian border groups are created, members of the civilian organizations will stand at the edge of legality. While my findings are based on a small group in the SW region of the United States, I contend these members share both vigilante and neighborhood watch identities. This is substantiated by the current journalistic accounts of similar groups in the southwestern U.S. They are concerned citizens patrolling their border neighborhood (similar to urban neighborhood watch groups) while still adhering to classic vigilante ideas and actions. One could refer to these groups as crack fillers, seeping into areas they assess need support and pursuing their mission to secure the border. Members see their actions as just, considering they perceive the government is not performing the job they are tasked to perform on the southern border. This perception further refutes the negative identity, vigilante, because their perceived just actions follow the neighborhood watch system more than vigilante.

These groups will continue to exist in a state of unlawfulness as long as they work outside of existing legal structures outlined and executed by the Department of Homeland Security. The purpose of the research is to expose the many identities civilian border group members have regarding their role combatting illegal immigration. The fluid and dynamic nature of their identity speaks to a complexity within their ideological understanding of immigration within the American context. We need to speak of the multitude of differences between the members of civilian border groups instead of the overarching groups themselves. There are members who seem more compassionate while others appear militaristic and racist. The vast differences among the members becomes lost when we apply a singular label, essentially wiping away the individual identities found within these groups. The moderate voices in these groups may help to address overtly racist members from taking their group to the extreme.

The current research has a few limitations to consider. The first is the sample size. Working with anti-immigrant groups who actively patrol the borderlands is difficult especially with the dissolution of the larger national groups. The fragmentation made it more difficult to locate members willing to talk about their involvement. A second limitation is the time-frame of the research. Since these groups no longer conduct musters the way they did earlier in the movement, gaining access to the gatherings they had were few. And finally, the original fieldwork was conducted in 2011, but supplemented with current journalistic accounts aids in showing how little these groups have changed over time. The group I focused my research on is still active in the area and continually posts videos from their game cameras.

Implications

Understanding the rationalizations used by anti-immigrant groups who take on civilian roles in law enforcement activity is important to build policy to protect those who may come in contact with these group members. Migrants cross the southern border for many reasons, and immigration reform has been on the table for discussion for decades.

Criminalizing groups for helping migrants by placing water in the desert while standing by when other groups actively seek out migrants to turn them over to Border Patrol stands in contrast to freedom and liberty. To better understand these groups and their role in the southern borderlands, qualitative methods are best utilized to ascertain the nuances within many of the anti-immigrant civilian border patrol groups. Interviewing, participating, and observing their activities are critical to our overall understanding of why these groups have endured over the decades. There is a role for quantitative criminology to understand how many migrants cross in areas where anti-immigrant groups patrol and the number of migrant deaths can aid in the creation of policy to protect all life. Using surveys to more fully understand the breadth of the nativist ideology among these groups will foster clarity in how to craft a message for these groups to support reform of the immigration system and laws. Nativism runs deep in the United States and the current new nativism is simply focusing on a different group of immigrants.

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