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Research Notes

Findings and Implications from a Project on White Supremacist Entry and Exit Pathways

by Matthew DeMichele, Wesley S. McCann, Kathleen Blee and Peter Simi

Abstract

This Research Note provides an overview of the main findings from a project on white supremacist pathways - or why some individuals join and leave white supremacist groups - with a specific focus on elucidating common themes, theoretical applications, main takeaways, and providing recommendations for academics and policy-makers. One key lesson is that identity is central to entry and exit pathways.

Keywords: white supremacy, extremism, P/CVE, pathways

Introduction

The spread of, and involvement in, domestic extremist organizations are some of the most pressing issues facing the criminal justice field. Although researchers, policymakers and criminal justice practitioners have studied, developed policies, and prosecuted violent extremists, there is little research studying the trajectories of former members of extremist organizations. The current Research Note attempts to address the gaps in knowledge about white supremacist pathways by gathering firsthand accounts from former members of white supremacist organizations in the U.S. and presenting the findings from the extant literature. The literature on white supremacy is vast, but there have only been a few studies on entry to and exit from these groups and movements using in-depth qualitative field interviews.[1]

The goal of this note is to understand the pathways to disengagement and deradicalization among former white supremacists to provide justice and community organizations with useful information to support prevention and intervention strategies. There is a dearth of systematic information about the motivations, trajectories, and barriers involved with disengagement and deradicalization processes. In this Research Note we chart the social and psychological processes involved in exiting domestic extremist organizations by analyzing the detailed life history accounts of 47 former domestic extremists.

Disengagement and deradicalization are the processes involved in ending violent extremist behaviors and beliefs, and each require significant cognitive work to dismantle racist identities. For example, some individuals may distance themselves from the extremist group and the related violence but retain lingering extremist views.[2] The findings demonstrate that former white supremacists have childhoods that include neglect, violence, abuse, and family socialization supportive of racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic views, and these childhood backgrounds fostered vulnerable individuals looking for belonging (i.e., improved self), but after various periods of extremist involvement support for an extremist identity waned. Notions of intentional change coupled with identity transformation provide offramps for these disillusioned members.

Data Sources and Design

1. Sample

The data for this note come from in-depth life history interviews with former members of domestic white supremacist organizations. We identified interviewees by snowball sampling from multiple starts to ensure variety in the location and type of extremist groups.[3] We developed initial contacts for the snowball chains through our research team's extensive prior research with white supremacists, identifying them through public presence (e.g., media, book authors, lecture series), and referrals from our project partners.

The sampling method produced in-depth life history interviews with 47 former members of U.S. white su-

premacist groups. Participants were interviewed in 24 states across all regions of the United States and two provinces in Canada. At the time of the interviews, the individuals were no longer affiliated with organized extremist groups, and all the individuals saw themselves as “former” members. Interestingly, however, not all of the interviewees were deradicalized as some continued to hold onto their white supremacist beliefs.

2. Interview Procedures

The interviews were conducted by one or two of the authors at a time. The authors held regular phone calls and met in-person to cover the logistics, review the interview guide, and discuss general approaches to the interviews. The interview team also regularly discussed the interviews, challenges faced, and made minor adjustments to the interview protocol. This allowed the research team to maintain similar interview processes across its members while enabling discussion of data prior to transcription. The interviews usually lasted between six and eight hours.

We established rapport and vetted individuals prior to agreeing to conduct an interview. We contacted subjects via telephone or e-mail to inform them about the nature and scope of the interview, ensure they fulfilled our inclusion criteria (e.g., prior group affiliation, not an active member), and discuss interview logistics. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol and took place in private spaces (e.g., homes, hotel rooms) and public spaces (e.g., parks, restaurants). Interviews focused on obtaining in-depth life history information to extract narratives that capture the complexity and interconnectedness of identity, ideology, and experiences.[4]

3. Analytic Strategy

We use a grounded theoretic approach to craft a conceptual framework for examining the data. The interviewing procedures comport with our study foci to understand a variety of social and psychological processes associated with entry to, and exit from, extremist groups. The findings provide a nuanced mosaic of the micro-level processes inherent in extremist pathways. The narratives obtained from participants are illustrative of how individuals make sense of their lives.[5] Each interview ended with structured questions to ensure comparable information was obtained across subjects in terms of background data. The structured items were asked at the end of the interviews after we developed more trust and comfort with the interviewees, which, in some cases, may have contributed to them disclosing more valuable information.

Findings

1. Sample Characteristics

Across the sample, childhood maladjustment issues, prior involvement in crime and delinquent groups, and family background concerns were quite prominent. Over two-thirds (71.7%) of the sample considered themselves either working- or middle-class. More than half of the sample had an individual annual income between \$25,000 and \$74,999 (54.3%) and some reported individual incomes above \$75,000 (10.8%). Most had at least a high school education (89.1%), but close to 37% were chronically unemployed. In terms of family status, close to 59% were either married or cohabitating with a partner, 73.9% had children, and close to 61% were involved in the rearing of their children.

Two-thirds of the formers reported zero family involvement in extremism, but about the same number reported being socialized during childhood with movement ideas. About 18% of our sample reported being coached to perform violence (i.e., encouraged by a family member to engage in violence), and almost three out of ten grew up with a father that had been incarcerated.

Over half of our sample experienced physical abuse during adolescence (56.5%) and a comparable number witnessed neighborhood and/or domestic violence (58.7%) during childhood. About one-third experienced sexual abuse during childhood (32.6%), almost half were neglected by their primary caregiver (45.7%) or abandoned by a parent (44.4%).

Close to three-quarters (76.1%) were part of a delinquent peer group, almost 70% had self-reported problems with authority, 65% had engaged in truancy, 58.7% in property offenses, and 11.1% in starting fires. Almost half (45.7%) of the sample consisted of adolescent runaways, with almost one-third being affiliated with gangs, while 71.7% were academic failures. Over half had a history of mental illness (54.3%) and suicidal ideation (56.5%). Over a third reported a family history of mental illness (39.1%), and a majority of the sample committed some combination of violent, property, or other offenses (60.0%), with many having spent time incarcerated (65.0%). Overall, most formers reported some type of adolescent maladjustment issues and prior involvement in crime.

2. *The Role of Identity in Extremist Pathways*

Identity transformation is at the center of our exploration of white supremacist pathways, consistent with Paternoster and Bushway's identity theory of desistance.[6] Identity is a psychological mechanism connecting individuals to the world they inhabit (i.e., social structures), and identity transformation occurs during both entry and exit processes. Before describing key features of the identity transformations involved, we highlight three findings that fit with prior research:

1. *Hate as an outcome*: Most people did not join white supremacy because they are adherents to an ideology. Hate is a learned outcome of group membership. Individuals find meaning and purpose from the sense of empowerment gained from their new knowledge, awareness, or political awakening.[7]
2. *Vulnerabilities as a precondition*: Individual vulnerabilities make one want a new possible self.[8] Significant life experiences - including maladjustment, abuse, and instability - foster a longing for an improved and 'better' self. White supremacy was perceived to provide an empowered self with friends, purpose, and belonging. This comports with prior scholarship in that a sense of purpose predisposes people to adopt a collective identity during the transformation process.[9] Many extremists can be described as having experienced a loss of significance in their lives.[10]
3. *Temporary membership*: Group membership is often temporary, as most extremists do not remain members for life.[11] This is despite many facing significant challenges in leaving.[12]

2.1 *Identity Construction*

Becoming a white supremacist requires an initial identity transformation. The formers shared recruitment tactics that focused on grooming vulnerable individuals through a process of incremental exposure to build community and a sense of belonging. The grooming process provides recruits with potential benefits of membership, including friendships and a surrogate "family." The initial grooming processes include slowly learning the acceptable language, values, and attitudes. As recruits come to define themselves as racial extremists, they insulate themselves with other extremists and narrow their interactions and opportunities for non-extremist influences. This in turn produces a collective identity. Rituals and various experiences over time galvanize this collective identity.[13]

2.2 *Formers' Identity Transformation*

The second identity transformation is when extremists shift to become a former. The narratives reveal that individuals were motivated by both positive (i.e., becoming a better person) and negative future selves (i.e., avoiding becoming a worse person) as they disengaged and deradicalized. Creating a future possible self[14] is a matter of calculating how to be satisfied and pleased with one's life relative to their current self as a white supremacist. Formers were able to perceive that the white supremacy lifestyle was not going to provide long term benefits such that many developed a fear of what their future might hold if they maintain involvement with white supremacy. Desistance scholars have demonstrated that individuals move away from crime to avoid a feared future self.[15]

The exit process is gradual as formers reported slowly becoming dissatisfied with the ideology, tactics, or politics of a group. Formers described an identity that became filled with negative encounters with other

members; even breeding distrust among other members. White supremacy requires the development of a totalizing identity that results in the isolation of members from non-extremists. This marginalization fosters a sense of social stigma that makes white supremacy less attractive and further supports disengagement and deradicalization processes. We highlight five key features from our work on disengagement and deradicalization processes amongst white supremacists:

1. Exit processes are non-linear;
2. Disillusionment with the organization and ideology;
3. Negative group dynamics (e.g., betrayal, infighting);
4. Emotional fatigue (e.g., shame, remorse, exhaustion);
5. Asymmetrical gender dynamics.

Extremist pathways are characterized as lengthy, non-linear, and emotional in which vulnerable individuals (e.g., due to childhood mistreatment, maladjustment) are recruited into extremist organizations. The formers detailed a life-course not only characterized by abuse, neglect, and loneliness, but also by active participation in reprehensible violent acts against people of color, homosexuals, and Jewish persons. In addition to specific acts of violence, many formers described that their lives focused on a disruptive political agenda that included supporting a Racial Holy War.

A central feature of disengagement and deradicalization is that they are non-linear processes of cognitive transformation. The formers indicated struggling to let go of their commitment to hate, something they equated to an addiction.[16] The struggle to let go of their former identity (and hate) existed as members described employing exit tactics to reduce their frequency of involvement (e.g., attended fewer events), intensity of involvement (e.g., engaged in less violence), and level of commitment to the group.

Disillusionment is a leading reason cited for exiting white supremacy and it interacted with other motivations for exit. Disillusionment is complicated because it manifested both as prior to, and following, exit – meaning it was cause and consequence of exit, depending on the former.[17] Formers were disillusioned with the organization due to negative group dynamics (e.g., infighting) and with the ideology as they came to see inconsistencies with the ideology (e.g., having positive encounters with people of color).

Being a former is also emotionally draining. A recurring theme among formers was one of shame, regret, and exhaustion. Many formers were shameful about the violent acts they committed during their involvement with white supremacy, and they regretted spending so much of their life dedicated to hate. The formers expressed feeling anxious, fearful, and dissatisfied with their life as an extremist, which encouraged them to perceive the possibility of exiting the lifestyle as these emotions weakened their extremist identities and social ties.[18] This conforms to prior scholarly findings as well, as most extremists do not stay in forever,[19] and many become disillusioned and eventually burn out.[20]

We also uncovered a series of asymmetrical gender dynamics due to the male dominated nature of white supremacy.[21] Specifically, women tend to act within and against gender defined roles based on the opportunities available, given group structures and dynamics, as well as the role violence plays within group processes and tactics. Furthermore, the process of becoming disillusioned and eventually leaving is influenced by women's roles and relationships within the group.

White supremacist organizations provide members with the emotional and cognitive tools to overcome any potential moral objections to engaging in violence[22] and to conduct a series of activities to support the broader white supremacist agenda of securing future racial hegemony. The formers provided a nuanced understanding of the individual and social characteristics that support various pathways out of radicalization as they work to eschew these prior attitudes and behaviors. The findings demonstrate that disengagement and deradicalization are not single events, but rather complex processes of requiring commitment to change through cognitive transformation vis-à-vis a desire to avoid a negative future self.

Implications for Criminal Justice Policy and Practice

The lack of firsthand accounts of the exit process from extremism has created a blind spot in the search for practical solutions and policy development. We identify five areas that the findings can contribute to criminal justice policy and practice:

1. Knowledge and Awareness;
2. Missed Opportunities;
3. Community Supervision;
4. Community Partnerships;
5. Centering Identity.

First, there is a lack of knowledge about the radicalization and exit processes, especially related to white supremacy in the U.S. Increasing knowledge and awareness for criminal justice practitioners and relevant service providers is a foundation for our other recommendations. Understanding the cognitive motivations for joining and leaving extremism, is crucial for policy and practice. White supremacy involves a series of overlapping organizations that have a detailed language (e.g., RaHoWa), use of symbols (e.g., 88, 14 words), and literature (e.g., *Turner Diaries*). Criminal justice stakeholders need to know more about the nuances of white supremacy to develop effective policies and practices. This is especially true for those involved in P/CVE work. Although there is a dearth of P/CVE programming in general, very little tailored programming in the U.S. has been implemented and even less evaluated.[23] More work should center on evaluating the barriers to disengagement, with a specific focus on how white supremacists can discard their racist identities. In fact, many “formers” often fail to eradicate their racist ideology (e.g., de-radicalize) even after disengaging.[24]

Second, the lack of knowledge about the nuances of white supremacy can lead to missed opportunities to intervene with active extremists. Formers revealed that, despite wearing clothes and exposed tattoos that are associated with white supremacy, criminal justice stakeholders did not address their potential affiliation with extremist groups. These interactions are missed opportunities to understand where individuals stand in the course of their extremist career. Increasing knowledge among criminal justice practitioners has the potential to make routine interactions with extremists more effective, especially considering so many of them have significant prior involvement with the criminal justice system. Such interactions could provide viable referrals to exit programming or services that target the underlying causes of their membership in such groups. Practitioners should develop training protocols to enhance criminal justice stakeholders’ ability to identify, interact with, and respond to these types of actors during the course of their interactions.

Third, supervision plays an important role in combatting future offending patterns. Many community corrections agencies have adopted risk, needs, and responsivity tools for offender supervision. Community corrections officers (CCOs) should determine if supervision conditions are responsive to whether an individual is, or has been, involved with extremism. However, police need to be educated about the role of community supervision and the capabilities of CCOs, specifically, how intelligence can be used to better inform CCO decision-making and the reintegration process.[25] Of course, reintegration efforts must resist become intelligence gathering operations.[26] Some have identified that the risks and needs for extremists is largely the same as the general offender population, but that CCOs may need to probe not only the underlying reasons for offending and group membership, but also the ideological beliefs as well, which poses numerous challenges.[27] For example, the Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM) - which is an intervention tool targeting inmates with terrorism-related convictions and those at risk for radicalization - has shown promise in using risk needs assessments coupled with individually-tailored intervention plans in a correctional setting to get individuals to desist from extremism.[28] Another example is London Probation Trust’s (LPT) Central Extremism Unit (CEU), which provides community supervision to bolster reintegration efforts. Although this unit is specifically focused on Islamic extremists and conclusions about program efficacy are largely inconclusive, one study argued that for such an approach to be successful, supervision must be individualized to reduce re-offending, ensure reintegration, promote identity transformation, and create

new routes to express grievances.[29] Substantial progress has been made in the extremism risk assessment field, but more validation of such instruments is needed.[30] Research like this can be of significant utility in developing and validating instruments, as such instruments often serve as the foundation for many interventions. However, research using in-depth life-history interviews is still rare in this arena.

Fourth, criminal justice systems cannot respond to radicalization alone. Instead, law enforcement, courts, and corrections need to develop connections with local resources. Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) is predicated on a “whole of community” approach that leverages all community resources, including educators, social workers, mental health practitioners, and non-governmental organizations. There is some evidence that police-led multi-agency approaches to P/CVE are ineffective,[31] community-based public health models are not very promising to date,[32] and over-securitized prevention programming (ex: Prevent) can backfire. Yet community-based disengagement programming often leverages these types of resources and has found some success in the form of mentoring programs,[33] while general exit-programming in Norway and Sweden shows promise.[34] The key to success seems to hinge on community collaboration, however. A broad whole-of-community approach that centers on fostering strong partnerships in the community while encouraging transparency and dialogue with community members is one way to do this alongside the inclusion of law enforcement, when practical and necessary.[35] A robust cooperative relationship between public and civil actors as well as NGOs helps to solidify program legitimacy and proper reintegration.[36] However, more work needs to be done in these areas in terms of pilot studies that include formative, process, and outcome evaluations.

Fifth, our research and the work of others has concluded that identity transformation is central to understanding why people join and leave extremist groups. For example, aside from our work presented here, others have found that identity transformation is important to understanding white supremacist’s pathways into and out of these groups.[37] It has also been argued that extremists in general tend to submit to a group identity due to an underlying psychological or identity-based need.[38] Uncertainty about one’s own identity is remedied by joining a group and adopting its attitudes, norms, and behaviors, and - most importantly - identity.[39] This collective identity thereby provides the individual with a sense of purpose.[40] P/CVE programs need to focus on fostering healthy identity transformation and practitioners need to take into consideration the meaning group membership provides to one’s sense of self and belonging. For example, the Motivational and Engagement Intervention (MEI) and the Healthy Identity Intervention (HII) have shown significant promise in facilitating positive shifts in cognitive rigidity and fostering a healthier identity. However, such interventions may not be suitable for people whose behavior is *not* driven by engagement and identification with an extremist group or some ideology.[41] Methods to obtain disengagement and deradicalization need to be tailored to context, but identity must be considered. Programs that have a reflection- on identity component are an important part of successful desistance interventions, as not all extremists are driven by a strong ideological conviction.[42] Because the disengagement process can induce an identity crisis, some argue that individuals who participate more in pro-social activities during this process are better at reconstructing their identity.[43] Some even argue that adopting a new role and identity acts as a protective factor from re-engagement.[44] Nevertheless, more work needs to be done in this area.

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Kathleen Blee is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. She has written extensively about organized white supremacy, including *'Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement'* and *'Women in the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s'*, as well as published articles on methodological approaches and the politics and ethics of studying racist hate groups and strategies for combatting racial hate. She has also studied progressive social movements, including *'Democracy in the Making: How Activist Groups Form'*, and, with Dwight Billings, the origin of regional poverty in *'The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia'*.

Notes

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