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## On the Permissibility of Homicidal Violence: Perspectives from Former U.S. White Supremacists

### Comments

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# On the Permissibility of Homicidal Violence: Perspectives from Former U.S. White Supremacists

by Steven Windisch, Pete Simi, Kathleen M. Blee, and Matthew DeMichele

## Abstract

*Drawing upon in-depth life-history interviews with 91 North American-based former white supremacists, we examine how participants perceive homicidal violence as either an appropriate or inappropriate political strategy. Based on the current findings, participants considered homicidal violence as largely inappropriate due to moral concerns and its politically ineffective nature but also discussed how homicidal violence could be an appropriate defensive measure in RAHOWA (Racial Holy War) or through divine mandate. Capturing how white supremacists frame the permissibility of homicidal violence is a step toward better understanding the “upper limit” or thresholds for violence among members who are trying to construct and negotiate a collective identity that involves violent and aggressive worldviews.*

**Keywords:** Violence, white supremacy, life-history interviews, restraint, modus operandi

## Introduction

On June 17, 2015, Dylan Roof walked into the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and killed nine African Americans in an attempt to ignite a race war. Two years later, a “Unite the Right” rally was held in Charlottesville, Virginia, amidst the backdrop of the controversy generated by the removal of Confederate monuments throughout the United States. At the rally, self-identified white supremacist James Alex Fields Jr. drove his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing Heather Heyer and injuring nearly 40 other people. One year later, on October 27, 2018, Robert Bowers entered the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and killed eleven worshipers. Each of these attacks represents white supremacists’ efforts to catalyze social change based on their extremist and racist ideology.[1]

Despite the deadly and tragic nature of these violent attacks, there is broad recognition among academics that homicidal violence among extremists is both rare and difficult to commit.[2] For purposes of the current study, homicidal violence refers to ideologically motivated violence that is intended to be lethal. This may involve homicidal acts that are group-based and are the direct function of extremist activities (e.g., territoriality, retaliation) as well as homicidal violence that is the result of an individual member’s actions.[3] In recent years, terrorism scholars have identified “barriers” or “breaks” that help constrain extremists from committing a higher number of violent incidents, such as personal obligations and organizational factors.[4] Yet, crucial questions remain about white supremacists’ perceptions of homicidal violence, and the struggle they encounter trying to construct and negotiate a collective identity that involves violent and aggressive worldviews. The prospect of committing violence presents natural challenges among adherents of radical ideologies because a potential point of conflict becomes knowing what types of action are permissible.

To build on this line of research, we rely on in-depth life-history interviews with 91 North American-based former white supremacist extremists (WSE), who unite around genocidal fantasies against racial, religious, and sexual minorities, and have extensive histories of involvement in violent activism, to examine factors that may influence their perceptions of when homicidal violence is either an appropriate or inappropriate political strategy.[5] This article is part of a larger study focused on the life course experiences among a sample of former white supremacists.[6] Capturing how WSE frame the permissibility of homicidal violence is a step toward better understanding the “upper limit” or threshold for violence among members who are trying to construct and negotiate a collective identity that involves violent and aggressive worldviews.

### ***“Barriers” and “Breaks” to Extremist Violence***

Although white supremacist culture is not exclusively violent, much of their world is focused on the promotion of violence. Being a member of a white supremacist group is intrinsically linked to doing violence in the name of the group and unconditionally supporting other extremist members. Yet, the type of violence promoted varies across the white supremacist movement. For extremists tied to vigilantism, “splinter cells” and “lone wolves,” their violence often involves more carefully planned types of violence such as bombings and mass-shootings that are set in motion prior to the immediate encounter.[7] These individuals believe they are more effective working alone rather than within the framework of a group because they can be more mobile and work under the cloak of anonymity without infiltration from law enforcement. In addition to white supremacists who stockpile high-powered weapons and participate in terror plots, white supremacists are also closely tied to street violence, which resembles conventional gang conflicts including less sophisticated weaponry,[8] such as generic physical assaults, drug feuds, and hate crimes.[9]

Regardless of the type of violence, individuals entering extremism do not begin this process as a blank slate but rather become extremists with existing histories of violent victimization and individual dispositions.[10] Prior research highlights individual preferences surrounding the use of interpersonal violence. Members describe it as a masculine endeavor and a mechanism for achieving personal pleasure and to dramatically represent oneself.[11] Individual preferences, however, are only part of the story. Extremists are also embedded within social networks distinguished by specific ideological and subcultural values, norms, and practices. Subcultural norms are an important source of influence supporting the use of violence to resolve conflict.[12] For instance, white supremacists believe they are fierce warriors fighting to save the white race from genocide, and, if need be, martyrs who are feared and hated by their opponents.[13] This mentality celebrates going to battle and inflicting bodily harm, which underscores the importance of white supremacist ideology in producing and sustaining violence.[14] The combination of individual preferences and subcultural norms has contributed to widespread extremist violence, including cross-burnings, lynchings, vandalism, church arsons, identity theft, murder, armored car robberies, physical assaults, home invasions, and other acts of terrorism.[15]

While white supremacists unite around a variety of violent criminal activities, it appears that there is an “upper limit” or threshold among some members on committing homicidal violence.[16] Even though no single factor can completely prevent terrorism, prior research has identified an array of constraints contributing to the low base rate of homicidal violence. For instance, individual commitments to family and work have been found to alter a person’s routine activities and constrain unstructured socialization time, which reduces the potential for homicidal violence. At the same time, the extremist must consider the costs of committing an act of terrorism (e.g., incarceration) and the risk associated with losing their investments in conventional behavior.[17] Moreover, moral, emotional, and cognitive concerns (e.g., fear, anxiety) have been found to reduce the likelihood of homicidal violence.[18] Contrary to the common perception that extremists are “crazy” individuals determined to kill as many people as possible, terrorism scholars have found that extremists often struggle to justify the use of violence against innocent bystanders.[19]

Organizational factors, such as leadership and organizational developments, have also been found to reduce the likelihood of homicidal violence.[20] For instance, leaders in certain organizations establish parameters that prohibit extremist violence because they view it as counterproductive and fear the negative publicity will undermine public support.[21] Instead, these organizations encourage individuals to concentrate their energy toward lower-level street violence or non-violent political strategies such as marches and recruiting.[22] Reductions in homicidal violence have also been found when extremist organizations allocate resources (e.g., time, money, personnel) toward targeting movement rivals and resolving internal conflict.[23]

Finally, factors external to extremist individuals and groups operate as constraints to homicidal violence. For instance, prior research has proposed that enacting “target hardening” strategies such as stationing armed guards or installing security cameras can decrease the target’s degree of exposure and expected loss, both of which are associated with the potential for an attack by violent extremist groups.[24] In conjunction with these external constraints, law enforcement officials have taken steps at the local, state, and federal levels to surveil

and infiltrate extremist organizations as a strategy to disrupt planning and minimize opportunities for violent action.[25] To build on these lines of research, we examine our participants' life-history narratives to better understand their perceptions related to when homicidal violence is considered "appropriate" and "inappropriate."

### **Methodology**

The current sample consists of 91 former members of US white supremacist groups. Participants were interviewed in the places they now live, with 87 located in 24 states across all regions of the country and 4 in Canada. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 61 years ( $M = 41.5$ ;  $SD = 8.6$ ) and included 70 men and 21 women. Thirteen participants described their current socioeconomic status as lower class, 42 as working class, 31 as middle class, and 5 as upper class. In terms of involvement, participation in white supremacy ranged from three to twenty-one years ( $M = 9.9$ ;  $SD = 6.8$ ). A large portion of participants had extensive histories of criminal conduct, including property offenses (e.g., shoplifting) and a variety of violent offenses such as murder, attempted murder, street fights, violent initiation rituals, and bomb-making. Of the 91 participants, 63 reported a history of extremist violence, and 48 had spent time in prison.

As there is no way to compile an exhaustive list of former members to serve as a sampling frame, we identified interviewees by snowball sampling from multiple starts to ensure variety in the location and type of extremist group.[26] We developed initial contacts for the snowball chains through a variety of means, including our research team's prior research with active and inactive white supremacists, by identifying former extremists with a public presence (e.g., media, books), and by using referrals by our project partners.[27] As multiple individuals were used to generate unique snowballs, only a small segment of the participants were acquainted with each other.

Interviews were conducted in private settings (e.g., private residences) and public settings (e.g., restaurants). Most of the interview was spent eliciting an in-depth life-history to produce narratives that reflect the intersectionality of identity, ideology, and life experiences.[28] The interviews included structured questions about the subject's family background, involvement, and disengagement, with probes to encourage subjects to elaborate on aspects of their life histories. These insights would not have been available through secondary sources and movement propaganda.[29] The interviews lasted between four and more than eight hours and generated 10,882 pages of transcripts, which indicate the level of detail generated through the life histories. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with minor edits. Finally, all names of research participants used here are pseudonyms.

We analyzed the life-history interview data using a modified grounded theory approach,[30] which allows researchers to combine a more open-ended, inductive approach while also relying on existing literatures and frameworks to guide the research. The initial data coding began by reading entire interview transcripts line-by-line to determine differences and similarities within and across the sample. Inductive codes emerged from the initial phase of line-by-line analysis.[31] Deductive codes were extracted from scholarly literature on restraint, violence, and related topics. After the initial codes were developed, we compared and contrasted themes, noting relations between first-level data and more general categories.[32]

Several limitations of this study are important to mention. First, the retrospective nature of life-history interviews raises questions about validity and reliability due to memory erosion, distortion, and selective recall.[33] The practice of remembering is a reconstructive process where memories of events are typically reinterpreted during each recall.[34] As such, it is possible that our participants' current understanding and recall of their former perspective about violence might include more condemnation or dismissal of their willingness to commit violence and perhaps less careful engagement with or recall of their violent activism as a white supremacist member. In addition to memory erosion, participants may feel ashamed, stigmatized, and guilty about their past violent performances, and therefore, unwilling to directly and accurately engage with this topic. Although the retrospective nature of life-history interviews introduces potential bias, all memories are subject to manipulation.[35] Therefore, this limitation characterizes any study that involves memory processing. Furthermore,

the data analysis in this study is focused less on determining specific facts and more about emphasizing the perceptions of when homicidal violence is either an appropriate or inappropriate political strategy. To minimize this limitation, interviewers frequently probed participants for more information using various types of memory anchors (e.g., birthdays, specific school years, etc.), conducted follow-up interviews when possible, and triangulated responses between the life-history interviews and our semi-structured interview questionnaire.

Second, individuals in the current study no longer identify as “White power” and are no longer affiliated with organized hate groups. The participants see themselves as “formers” or something equivalent to a former (“I’m not involved anymore”; “I moved on”). In some cases, individuals have been disengaged for more than a decade and have experienced substantial changes in their social and cognitive orientations (e.g., interracial marriage; conversion to Buddhism). Since the current study relies on former white supremacists, it is possible that their current relationship with their “former” extremist identity may affect how they think and talk about past violence. For instance, it is possible that participants minimized the extent to which they or their group participated in extremist violence. Despite this limitation, the use of former extremists to understand the complex processes associated with extremism has provided valuable insight that would not have been available through secondary sources and movement propaganda. Doing so provides researchers with a unique insider’s perspective into an array of pressing issues that may not be addressed without the insights of former extremists. [36] Finally, due to the relatively hidden nature of this population, the sample was derived through snowball techniques and, as a result, is not representative, which prevents generalizing from these findings. The goal of a grounded theory approach, however, is to develop a conceptual explanation that closely fits the data (or incidents), which the concepts are intended to represent. Although grounded theory is not intended to provide generalizations, the hypotheses developed can be tested at a later point.

## Results

For this study, we are interested in our participants’ perception of homicidal violence as an appropriate and inappropriate political strategy. We define “appropriate” behavior as actions that, given certain conditions, align with individual and organizational norms and codes of conduct; whereas “inappropriate” behavior refers to actions that violate individual and organizational norms and codes of conduct. In the following sections, we examine the emergent criteria by which our participants evaluated the permissibility of homicidal violence.

### *Homicidal Violence as Appropriate*

Across the sample, participants perceived homicidal violence as an appropriate political strategy when used as a measure of self-defense. A willingness to frame violence as a defensive measure is consistent with WSE’s belief in a racial holy war (referred to as “RAWOHA”).[37] According to RAHOWA, Whites have been threatened for centuries by “race-mixing,” political liberalization, and religious tolerance. Over time, the accumulation of these threats will lead to a war between Whites and all other races.[38] Only when non-Whites and other “sub-humans” are segregated, or at least subordinated to White authority, will RAHOWA end.[39] In line with RAHOWA, participants reported defensive preparations such as stockpiling weapons and food as well as receiving specialized survival and weapons training. With that said, some participants were unwilling to initiate RAHOWA and discussed how the use of homicidal violence would only be appropriate if someone else took aggressive action first. For example,

*Again, it’s like if we had to defend ourselves that is one thing, but no one wants to start a war... You are waiting for somebody else to throw the first punch and then it’s safe to go jump in... There’s a certain part of the mind that just needs evidence... anytime you heard of a Rodney King or something that was brewing racial tensions like you just hoped that would be the spark. In our minds, it was like if this sparks enough now we can get involved and we can change things. (Joel, Interview 65, 10/5/2015)*

Joel's account underscores a central theme of our participants' narratives in which homicidal violence was considered an appropriate measure of self-defense or means of retaliation. This view has a long history in traditional just war theory, which holds that, while it is wrong to intentionally assault the innocent, those who are not considered innocent forfeit their immunity from attack.[40] By framing homicidal violence as a defensive measure, it is easier for Joel to suppress moral concerns and cognitive controls (e.g., fear, hesitation) and view his targets as willful participants who have committed a transgression. In doing so, homicidal violence becomes acceptable and even obligatory. Similar to Joel, other participants suggested homicidal violence would be an appropriate strategy during RAHOWA. For instance,

*There was no war going on, you know, we were not in a battlefield conflict. If we were in a full-on race war, yeah, it's time to go fight but we're not in a war, so to go bomb a synagogue, there was really no reason for it... We're in a velvet revolution, which is a war of words and small action. I am not sure what the catalyst to a large-scale revolution would be or will be as far as RAHOWA goes, that can be anything. But it was not the time we were in. (Alton, Interview 66, 10/23/2015)*

Similar to Joel, Alton suggests that homicidal violence is appropriate for RAHOWA. However, since Alton believes the United States is currently engulfed in a "velvet revolution," local actions (i.e., interpersonal violence against minorities, "gay bashing") are more beneficial forms of activism. This finding is in line with Busher and colleagues' who found that extremist organizations often pursue more intermediate objectives while deprioritizing revolutionary goals.[41] Moreover, while Alton and Joel suggest that homicidal violence is appropriate as a defensive measure in times of "battlefield conflict," this only occurs insofar as a group accepts that RAHOWA has begun. Both participants' accounts underscore the subjective nature of what classifies as a "catalyst" or "spark." For instance, indicators that RAHOWA has begun are open to interpretation and may range from an intrusion of outgroup members into the extremist's workplace, neighborhood, or community to national flash-points such as the Los Angeles riots or the passage of laws that regulate Second Amendment rights.[42] The key takeaway from these findings is that the target's provocation helps provide a mutual focus among attackers, which suppresses moral, cognitive, and emotional controls (e.g., personal responsibility, guilt, hesitation) and helps justify the use of homicidal violence.[43]

In addition to self-defense, participants discussed how homicidal violence could be appropriate if it is required by divine mandate. It is important to note that WSE do not only see their racial supremacy in ordinary human terms but consider their perceived superiority as a reflection of the cosmic fight between good and evil. For instance, Christian Identity believers define "non-Whites" as evil incarnate and promote racial violence as acts ordained by God. They see Blacks, Latinos, and Asians, and other non-Whites as lower-order subspecies of "pre-Adamic mudpeople" and, therefore, not fully human. Christian Identity adds to this interpretation the notion that Jews were descended from Satan and resulted from Eve's copulation with the serpent. Identity believers imagine they are warriors in a righteous battle against the Jewish conspiracy to eradicate the White race.[44] At the core of this belief system is the conviction that non-Whites have fundamentally corrupted the world, and that Whites have a moral obligation to participate in its cleansing destruction.[45] While some pragmatically and rhetorically condemned violence, these individuals appeal to a higher authority because they invariably see the outcome of violent activism in positive terms, as beneficial for both themselves, their society, and the cosmos. For example, Keith discusses reconciling the "purpose of God" against his own preference for non-confrontation and ultimately concluding that such action is necessary for the return of Jesus.

*The only way I could justify it was in my theology. We believed that God was instrumental in everything. Everything was a sign from God. We prayed, "God, if this is what you want us to do, tell us. If it is not what you want us to do, cause something to happen." ... The conflict for me was trying to reconcile the purpose of God versus my own basic nature of wanting peace more than war... I resisted it absolutely, but God wants us to do it, so I have to cross that hurdle of not being afraid. You got to go through this before Jesus comes back and sets up the kingdom. (Keith, Interview 2, 5/4/2013)*

Clearly, Keith struggles with committing homicidal violence, and while he does not reject the moral standards that govern human life, his divine loyalty takes precedence. In doing so, Keith rationalizes that his actions are

for the greater good and must be carried out before Jesus can return and start a new kingdom. While it is true that apocalyptic signs can lead to violence, this only occurs insofar as a group accepts that event as a “sign.” Based on Keith’s narrative, signs from the divine can function as both accelerators and barriers to homicidal violence. In addition to strict scriptural doctrine, participants adhered to more general mandates to defend the White race. Much of this discussion involved the well-known white supremacist slogan referred to as the 14 words: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children”.[46] The 14 words has become a movement doctrine that legitimizes preemptive self-defense and has evolved into a doctrine supporting the use of violence in the name of racial preservation. For example,

*For the people that advocated violence, they see it as self-defense like, “Our race is dying and we need to do something to stand up for our people.” There was definitely a lot of talk about race war and the whole 14 words thing... very thankful it never came to that. I had a wife and a kid. I wanted to protect them. The [LA] riots had just happened. I knew the race war could kick off any minute... Honestly, murder was not my thing, but I was prepared for trying to save the future for White children. (Chase, Interview 14, 11/1/2013)*

While opposed to committing murder, Chase appeals to higher loyalties and accepts the appropriateness of such action as a means of securing a future for White children. The meaning of the 14 words doctrine is far from clear, and white supremacists have historically offered a body of interpretations on the subject. For some, the 14 words doctrine represents a mandate to raise future generations of White children in accordance with white supremacist values. Such efforts involve socializing children through boundary maintenance efforts by filtering peer and media influences and working to control friendship selection and media messages their children receive.[47] For others, the 14 words doctrine represents a moral duty to secure their children’s future through the use of violence. As such, similar to their views of the Oklahoma City bombing (when 198 people were killed, among them many children, and more than 680 injured in 1995 by Timothy McVeigh), the diverse interpretations of the 14 words doctrine underscore its indeterminate nature for constraining or accelerating homicidal violence among extremists. The key takeaway from these findings is the importance of participating in a group that encourages more lethal forms of violence.

#### *Homicidal Violence as Inappropriate*

Next, we turn to investigate the conditions in which homicidal violence was considered inappropriate. Across the sample, participants discussed moral concerns as a reason for viewing homicidal violence as inappropriate. Although participants described committing a wide range of violent performances, including acts motivated by ideology (e.g., “gay-bashings,” “bum-rolling”) as well as more generic violence (e.g., neighborhood violence, school fights), a portion of the sample did not support “extreme” violence such as murders and bombings.[48] Based on the data, a portion of participants (N = 63; 69.2%) in our sample suggest an apparent capacity to harm other people, yet this aptitude did not necessarily translate into a willingness or ability to kill their enemies. For instance, the following participant discusses avoiding more severe forms of violence because he was unable to suppress and overcome specific moral considerations related to murder.

*I don’t want to kill. I don’t mind getting in a fist-a-cuff with somebody but blowing shit up, no... Now I mean, I knew that the government had done some pretty shitty things, you know. At that time, they had Ruby Ridge, I mean, same with Waco. That was just fucked up, no matter how you looked at it, on both sides, but no, as far as me, I didn’t get into the extreme radical thought of kill everybody. (Sonny, Interview 53, 9/5/15)*

It is important to note that the condemnation of homicidal violence does not represent an unwillingness to commit violence, but rather represents an interpretive code where certain types of violence are permissible, and others are prohibited. In fact, some white supremacists adhered to a version of the street culture that glorified fist fighting over other types of violence.[49] For these participants, interpersonal violence was more sensual and intimate, which provided them a sense of personalization they could not attain with other types of violence (e.g., shootings, bombings).[50] Similar to other participants, Sonny’s progression toward homicidal violence did not extend past considerations or radical talk as he struggled with the absolute and destructive na-



ture of such action. Sonny explains that he was willing to physically assault someone but would not have been able to execute bombings or other acts of lethal violence. From this perspective, more severe forms of violence such as murder (e.g. lynchings) or mass-casualty violence may require a higher degree of radicalization than street-level and interpersonal violence.[51] For other participants, observing the deadly aftermath of actual attacks such as the Oklahoma City bombing generated similar moral objections. For instance,

*The Order, I looked up to those guys... That is what we wanted and talked about doing, but when we saw all the children, the reality of all that shit sunk in... sure, we could justify killing a secretary by saying, "anybody who greases the gears of tyranny is not innocent." But try and explain to me how those kids are not innocent. Even the most devout Nazi brain couldn't justify it. (Karl, Interview 76, 1/9/2016)*

Karl's account represents an element of the street culture in which violence against "innocent bystanders" or "civilians" (e.g., women, children, elderly) is considered inappropriate.[52] Although Karl brainstormed ideas for overthrowing the government, a moral breach occurred when he learned that children were killed in the Oklahoma City bombing. From this perspective, killing children represents an "upper limit" or threshold of violence that Karl was not willing to cross because of their innocence and inability to defend themselves.[53] At this point in the process, when participants are unable to justify the use of violence, a recalculation occurs that limits the acceptability of homicidal violence.

In addition to moral considerations, participants discussed how pragmatic concerns reduced the permissibility of homicidal violence. While many participants ideologically believed that violent force would eventually be required to establish a White homeland, they pragmatically and rhetorically condemned violence because they saw it as self-defeating. For these individuals, mainstreaming the white supremacist movement and gaining social and political power (rather than physical power) is the most efficient way of generating long-term change. For example,

*I think the FBI was overbearing. I look at the government like a monster, like Frankenstein. The more you intimidate the monster, the more he is going to knock you out of the way... you can't fucking touch them blow to blow in any way, shape, or form. I mean one man taking down a federal building isn't going to stop anything... We should be recruiting people of standing. We need to get people working the infrastructure of the country in our groups like the judges and cops. (Damon, Interview 72, 11/22/2015)*

For Damon, homicidal violence is inappropriate because such actions are perilous against the vast resources and power of the federal government. Similar to other participants, Damon prides himself on being smart and cautious, running a legitimate business, and having a strategy for claiming victory in a future race war.[54] Rather than going "blow to blow" against the federal government, Damon suggests white supremacists must strategically defeat their enemies by projecting a positive public image that will help mainstream the white supremacist movement and attract high-quality members such as judges and law enforcement officers. Like other participants, Damon described the Oklahoma City bombing as "counterproductive," "pointless," and "idiotic" despite the fact that Timothy McVeigh is simultaneously described by white supremacists as a "martyr" for the cause. The diverse opinions of the Oklahoma City bombing underscore the indeterminate nature of the factors that constrain homicidal violence among extremists. Along the same lines, participants considered homicidal violence as inappropriate because it could damage the movement's public image, and therefore, hinder recruitment efforts.[55] For example,

*More people are going to respect what you're saying if you do it in a smart, respectful manner. They're not going to listen to you if you blow up buildings full of innocent people. You're making yourself look like an idiot, and you're making the message look like an idiot... plus I never wanted to go to jail, you know, what good are you sitting in prison? Say like something did happen, then you'd be sitting in some cell and wouldn't be out there to fight. For what? For dumb shit. (Melissa, Interview 47, 7/21/2015)*

Similar to Damon, Melissa suggests the white supremacist movement must pragmatically generate long-term social and political change by utilizing non-violent strategies such as political marches and recruitment. Such actions will allow the white supremacist movement to appeal to an increasing number of conservative mid-

dle-class Whites. In addition to explaining how homicidal violence could jeopardize the group's public image and recruitment efforts, Melissa pragmatically weighs the costs of committing homicidal violence against the risk of potential incarceration.[56] For some participants, fear of incarceration constrained their radicalization toward homicidal violence since they had "something to lose" should they violate the law and become formally sanctioned.[57] Other participants expressed concerns that acting violent may create a model or script that their children would mimic. These and other reasons illustrate how fear is a general factor with multiple manifestations that has the potential to reduce the permissibility of homicidal violence.

## **Conclusion**

Despite wide recognition among academics that homicidal violence is rare, few studies offer explanations of the factors that constrain extremists from committing a higher number of violent incidents.[58] To address this issue, we examined how participants perceive homicidal violence as an appropriate or inappropriate political strategy. Based on our findings, participants discussed how homicidal violence could be an appropriate defensive measure in RAHOWA or through divine mandate but also considered homicidal violence as largely inappropriate due to moral concerns and its politically ineffective nature. It is important to note that the condemnation of homicidal violence does not represent an unwillingness to commit violence, but rather represents an interpretive code where certain types of violence are permissible, and others are prohibited. Despite nonparticipation in homicidal violence, most of the individuals in our sample (N = 63; 69%) were involved in other types of violence such as ideologically-motivated attacks, interpersonal disputes, and violence related to economic incentives. Considering this, we caution against any conclusions that our participants' absence of homicidal violence translates into a lack of violent potential.

The distinction between when homicidal violence is appropriate and inappropriate has important theoretical implications. In particular, the current study highlights the indeterminate nature of factors that, for some encourage violence and others, constrain violence. It is difficult to determine the exact factors that mitigate against involvement in violence as some of our participants rhetorically condemned homicidal violence but proposed conditions in which they would consider such actions appropriate. For instance, a portion of the sample pragmatically condemned homicidal violence because they felt long-term change would be achieved through social and political power rather than physical power, while at the same time suggesting homicidal violence as a form of self-defense is sensible. Participants also expressed conflicting moral standards by indicating that homicidal violence is inappropriate as it can result in the death of innocent women, children, and the elderly, while simultaneously suggesting that such actions are appropriate if they represent fulfilling moral obligations to future generations of the White race. As future research examines the factors that constrain extremist violence, efforts should be made to weigh the relative prevalence of these constraining barriers. In doing so, researchers can take additional steps toward understanding which factor or factors represent the "upper limit" or threshold for homicidal violence.

Finally, capturing how white supremacists frame the permissibility of homicidal violence reveals important markers useful for policy. In particular, the current study highlights inconsistencies between what people say and do. For members of extremist groups, talk is one of the most concrete manifestations of how adherents construct and negotiate a collective identity that involves violent and aggressive worldviews. While a majority of the sample reported participating in "violent talk" in which members expressed White power ideology by invoking the use of violence as well as discussing hypothetical homicidal attacks, only a small minority moved beyond brainstorming to practical proposals of assassinations, bombings and/or shooting sprees that involve detailed coordination.[59] While such interactions provided members with a sense of doing, these discussions did not necessarily involve a direct correspondence between a person's words and future behavior. In these situations, talk may become the action as actors exchange these extreme statements with an understanding that the words are not meant as literal expressions of future behavior.

Such a finding should give those who assume consistency between words and action pause. While dehumanizing language is essential to the escalation process toward violence because it removes moral constraints that prevent humans from harming each other, the relationship between words and violence is complicated by potential discrepancies between words expressed during “radical talk” and a person’s underlying perceptions or attitudes that may constrain violent behavior. For example, a person whose general attitude may include the idea that homicidal violence is counterproductive may also engage in radical talk that glorifies homicidal violence and includes expressing ideas related to committing homicidal violence. All of this points to the need for additional empirical and theoretical investigation of the complex dynamics and conditions that may promote and/or simultaneously constrain homicidal violence.

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### **Notes**

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