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Research and Evaluation on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Research to Support Exit USA

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Project purpose

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 (Blee, 2002; Simi and Futrell, 2015), developed policies, and prosecuted violent extremists, there is little research studying the trajectories of former members of extremist organizations. The current project begins to address the gaps in knowledge about radicalization and exit by gathering firsthand accounts from former members of white supremacist organizations in the U.S.

The goal of this project 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 the disengagement and deradicalization process. This project was designed to provide a necessary and foundational assessment of the processes involved with becoming a former extremist. 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.

The project pulls from leading theories of social behavior (i.e., identity theory) and crime (e.g., desistance theory) to provide an explanatory lens to analyze the vast amount of qualitative data. Disengagement and deradicalization are the processes involved in ending violent extremist behaviors, and the cognitive work to dismantle their racist identities and no longer support violent movements. Some individuals may distance themselves from the extremist group and the related violence but retain lingering extremist views (Bjoro and Horgan, 2009). Identity theories are used to frame the life histories to describe how people become a racial extremist and how they exit these groups – i.e., charting the extremist career. The interviewees revealed detailed stories about how they

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saw membership to gain a future improved self and, later, they came to view exit as providing a better future self because the perceived gains of membership faded.

The project design is a qualitative study using a life-history approach to collect a nuanced understanding of the lifecourse trajectory of becoming a former extremist. The recruitment procedures were used to identify hard to reach individuals to participate in the study. 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. These childhood backgrounds fostered vulnerable individuals looking for belonging (i.e., improved self), but after various periods of extremist involvement (min = 2 years, max = 28 years; $\bar{x}$ = 8 years), support for an extremist identity waned.

Project design and methods

The data for this project come from in-depth life history interviews with former members of domestic white supremacist organizations. The interviews required overcoming several challenges related to locating and building trust among research participants that are hard to locate. Former white supremacist group members are often hesitant to be identified as such. They fear that information about their prior affiliations or activities will expose them to violence by current extremists, to legal prosecution, or to stigma. Because there is no way to compile a 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 groups (Wright, Decker, Redfern, and Smith, 1992). We developed initial contacts for the snowball chains through our research team's extensive prior research with white supremacists, identification through public presence (e.g., media, book authors, lecture series), and referrals from our project partners.[1]

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[1] We are grateful to the Anti-Defamation League, Simon Wiesenthal Center, Southern Poverty Law Center, and Life After Hate all provided initial assistance building the framework for this project.

The sampling method produced in-depth life history interviews with 47 former members of U.S. white supremacist groups. Participants were interviewed in the places they now live, located in 24 states across all regions of the United States and two in Canada. At the time of the interviews, the individuals in this sample were no longer affiliated with organized extremist groups. All the individuals saw themselves as former members (e.g., "I'm not involved anymore," "I moved on").

Interview Procedures

The interviews were conducted by the authors either individually or with two interviewers. 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 held regular phone calls and exchanged numerous emails to discuss the interviews, review any unusual details (e.g., the sheriff knocking on the door to serve an eviction notice), challenges (e.g., eliciting sensitive information from interviewees), and to review the interview protocol (e.g., minor adjustments). These conversations allowed the interviewers to work through issues to keep the interview process similar across interviewers and allowed us to share data prior to transcription as we talked over the life histories. The interviews lasted between six and eight hours.

We established rapport and vetted individuals prior to agreeing to conduct an interview. Members of the team had contact with participants via telephone and e-mail to inform the individuals about the nature and scope of the interview, verify that the person met the inclusion criteria (e.g., prior group affiliation, not an active member), and agreed to meeting logistics. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol in private settings such as hotel rooms and residential homes, and at times included continuing the interviews in restaurants and coffee shops. Most of the interviews were spent eliciting an in-depth life history to produce narratives that reflect the complexities and intersection of identity, ideology, and life experiences (McAdams 1997).

Data Analysis

We use a grounded theoretic approach to develop a conceptual explanation that closely fits the data and not necessarily to provide generalizations. Instead, the interviewing procedures were selected because they fit our purposes to understand an assortment of social and psychological processes involved in entry, involvement, and exit from violent extremism. The findings provide a detailed understanding of micro level processes involved in domestic extremism. We view the elicited narratives as instructive in terms of assessing how individuals make sense of their lives.

Each interview concluded with structured questions to provide comparable information across interviewees in terms of risk factors (e.g., history of child abuse, mental health problems), demographic information, and criminal history. 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 opening-up more and revealing more personal information (e.g., drug use, victimization).

Project findings

Table 1 presents information about class status and current family situation factors. Over two-thirds (71.7%) of the sample consider themselves either working or middle class. Over half of the participants reported an individual (not household) annual income between $25,000 and $74,999 (54.3%) and few participants reported individual incomes above $75,000 (n = 5, 10.8%).

Table 1: Class Status and Current Family Characteristics

	N	%
Class status		
Childhood working/middle class	33	71.7
$25,000-$74,999	25	54.3
Less than high school	5	10.9
Chronically unemployed	17	37.0
Current family		
Married/Cohabitate	27	58.8
Children	34	73.9
Involved in rearing children	28	60.9

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Table 2 reports a series of background characteristics describing childhood abuse, adolescent maladjustment, and instability factors. Two-thirds of the formers did not report family involvement in extremism; but, two-third reported being childhood socialization with movement ideas. Slightly less than one-fifth received coaching to perform violence (i.e., encouraged by a family member to engage in violence), and 28% grew up with a father that had been incarcerated.

Table 2: Family Background, Childhood Mistreatment, Adolescent Adjustment, and Instability Characteristics

	N	%
Family background		
No family involvement	31	67.4
Family socialization	31	68.9
Father ever incarcerated	13	28.3
Family coaching for acts of violence	8	18.2
Childhood mistreatment		
Physical abuse	26	56.5
Witness to violence	27	58.7
Sexual abuse	15	32.6
Neglect	21	45.7
Abandoned by mother and/or father	20	44.4
Adolescent adjustment		
Delinquent peer group	35	76.1
Problems with authority	32	69.6
Truancy	30	65.2
Property offenses	27	58.7
Runaway	21	45.7
Firestarter	5	11.1
Academic failure	38	71.7
Gang affiliation	15	32.6
Instability		
History of mental illness	25	54.3
Suicidal ideation (ever in lifetime)	26	56.5
Family history of mental illness	18	39.1
Ever incarcerated	26	65.0

Note: $N = 46$ for abuse, witness to violence, neglect, sexual abuse, and parents' marriage, $N = 45$ for type of violence witnessed, abandonment, $N = 44$.

Most formers experienced physical abuse during childhood (n = 26, 56.5%) and were witnesses to neighborhood and/or domestic violence (n = 27, 58.7%). About one-third experienced sexual abuse during childhood (n = 15, 32.6%). Almost half of the formers were neglected by their primary caregiver (n = 21, 45.7%) or abandoned by a parent (n = 20, 44.4%).

More than half of participants had a history of mental illness (n = 25, 54.3%) and suicidal ideation (n = 26, 56.5%). Over a third reported a family history of mental illness (n = 18, 39.1%). Most participants committed a combination of violent, property, and other offenses (n = 27, 60.0%) and had been incarcerated at some point in their lives (n = 26, 65.0%). Most formers reported some type of childhood and adolescent maladjustment issues.

Becoming a Former White Supremacist: A Series of Identity Transformations

Identity formation is at the center of our explanation of membership into and exit out of extremism. Identities connect people to their social positions and statuses. Identity is a psychological mechanism connecting individuals to the world they inhabit (i.e., social structures). Before describing key features of the identity transformations involved with becoming a former, we highlight three findings that fit with prior research:

1. *Hate as 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 (Blee, 2002).
2. *Vulnerabilities as Precondition*: Individual vulnerabilities make one want a new possible self (Markus and Nurius, 1986). High levels of negative life experiences – maladjustment, abuse, and instability – foster a desire for a new, different, and more fulfilled self. White supremacy was perceived to provide an empowered self with friends, purpose, and belonging.
3. *Temporary*: Group membership is often temporary, but not always short lived. Most extremists in the U.S. do not remain members for life (Simi and Futrell, 2015).

Extremist Identity Construction

Becoming a white supremacist requires an initial identity transformation. The formers shared recruitment[2] tactics that focused on grooming vulnerable individuals (e.g., youths that don't fit in, loners) 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

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[2] Although all members are expected to engage in some level of recruitment on an informal basis, many of these organizations have individuals in charge of active recruitment. This is a similar process used by more traditional organizations in which employees are encouraged (even incentivized) to identify potential "talent."

language (e.g., symbols, gestures, salutes), values (e.g., ensuring white supremacy), and attitudes (e.g., reconstructive history, white genocide). As recruits come to define themselves as a racial extremist, they insulate themselves with other extremists and narrow their interactions and opportunities for non-extremist influences.

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 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 (if only relatively intuitively) 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 theories have demonstrated that individuals move away from crime to avoid a feared future self (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009).

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/deradicalization processes. We highlight five key features involved with disengagement and deradicalization processes:

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

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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 (Simi, Blee, DeMichele, and Windisch, 2017). 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 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 (Latif, Blee, DeMichele et al., 2019). Formers were disillusioned with the organization due to negative group dynamics (e.g., infighting) and with the ideology as they came to see inaccuracies with the ideology (e.g., having positive encounters with people of color). We uncovered a series of asymmetrical gender dynamics due to the male dominated nature of white supremacy.

Being a former is emotionally draining. A recurring theme among formers was the 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 (Latif, Blee, DeMichele, and Simi, 2018).

The project traces the radicalization and exit processes involved with former white supremacists active in the U.S. These processes are characterized as lengthy, non-linear, and emotional in which vulnerable individuals (e.g., childhood mistreatment, maladjustment) are recruited into extremist organizations. The formers detailed a lifecourse not only characterized by abuse, neglect, and loneliness, but also active participation in reprehensible violent acts against

people of color, homosexuals, and Jewish individuals. Besides the specific violent acts, the formers described lives focused on a disruptive political agenda that included supporting a Racial Holy War.[3] White supremacist organizations provide members with the emotional and cognitive tools to overcome any potential moral objections to engaging in violence (Windisch, Simi, Blee, and DeMichele, 2018) and to conduct a series of activities to support the broader white supremacist agenda of securing a future racial hegemony.[4] 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.

Implications for Criminal Justice Policy and Practice in the United States

The lack of firsthand accounts of the exit process from extremism has created a blind spot in practical solutions and policy development. We identify four 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

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 recommendations. Understanding the cognitive motivations for joining and leaving extremism, is crucial for policy and practice. White

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3 Ben Klassen, a former Florida state legislator and leader of the white supremacist organization, Church of the Creator, is believed to have coined the phrase the "race and holy war," which often appears in abbreviated tattoos as RaHoWa. The intention is that white supremacists believe that a war between races is needed to cleanse the U.S. of nonwhites, homosexuals, Jews, and others.

4 This purpose is solidified in what is known as the 14 words: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children" espoused by David Lane. These words provide an overarching message signaling what members are to identify as their mission to cleanse the world of non-whites and to elevate whites as the global leader.

supremacy involves a series of overlapping organizations that have a detailed language (e.g., RaHoWa), use of symbols (e.g., 88, 14), 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.

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 are at along their extremist career (e.g., are they questioning their beliefs). Increasing knowledge among criminal justice practitioners has the potential to make routine interactions with extremists more effective.

Third, many community corrections agencies have adopted a risk, needs, and responsivity model, and officers should determine whether individuals are affiliated with extremist groups. Extremist members are highly involved with the criminal justice system, and supervision conditions should be responsive to whether an individual is involved with extremism.

Fourth, criminal justice systems cannot respond to radicalization alone. Instead, law enforcement, courts, and corrections need to develop connections with local resources. Countering violent extremism (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.

Publications Related to Project

1. Windisch, S., Simi, P., Blee, K. and DeMichele, M. Measuring the Extent and Nature of Adverse Childhood Experiences among Former White Supremacists. Under Review at *Terrorism and Political Violence.*

2. Latif, M., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., and Simi, P. (Forthcoming). Do White Supremacist Women Adopt Movement Archetypes of Mother, Whore, and Fighter? *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism.*

3. Latif, M., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., Simi, P., Alexander, S. (2019). Why White Supremacist Women Become Disillusioned, and Why They Leave. *Sociological Quarterly* (online first).

4. Windisch, S. (2019). *From Swaddling to Swastikas: A Life-course Investigation of White Supremacist Extremism* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest (#13881780)

5. Latif, M., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., and Simi, P. (2018). How Emotional Dynamics Maintain and Destroy White Supremacist Groups. *Humanities & Society, 42*(4): 480–501.

6. Windisch, S., Simi, P., Blee, K., and DeMichele, M. (2018). Understanding the Micro-Situational Dynamics of White Supremacist Violence in the United States. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12(6), 23-37.

7. Blee, K., DeMichele, M., Simi, P., and Latif, M. (2017). How Racial Violence is Provoked and Channeled. *Socio. 7*: 257-276.

8. Simi, P., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., and Windisch, S. (2017). Addicted to Hate: Identity Residual among Former White Supremacists. *American Sociological Review*, 82(6), 1167-1187.

Presentations Related to Project

1. Windisch, S., Simi, P., Blee, K., and DeMichele, M. (2019). More than Walking Away: Unraveling Disengagement, Desistance, and Deradicalization among Former U.S. White Supremacists. Presented at the American Society of Criminology conference. San Francisco, CA.

2. Latif, M., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., and Simi, P. (2019). How Emotional Dynamics Maintain and Destroy White Supremacist Groups. Panel on he The Emotional Dynamics of Backlash Politics beyond Anger, Hate, Fear, Pride, and Loss. Annual Meeting of the International Society of Political Sociology. August.

3. Latif, M., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., and Simi, P. (2019). Do White Supremacist Women Adopt Movement Archetypes of Mother, Whore, and Fighter? Panel on Culture, Gender and Identity, at the Confluence of the 'Extreme' and the 'Mainstream.'

4. Latif, M., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., and Simi, P. (2019). Panel on The Mobilization of Gender issues by Radical Right and Far Right Populist Organizations. Association Française de Science Politique. July.

5. Latif, M., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., and Simi, P. (2019). Do White Supremacist Women Adopt Movement Archetypes of Mother, Whore, and Fighter? Panel on Culture, Gender and Identity, at the Confluence of the 'Extreme' and the 'Mainstream.' Council of European Studies. June.

6. Windisch, S., Simi, P., Blee, K., and DeMichele, M. (2018). From Swaddling to Swastikas: A Life-Course Investigation of White Supremacist Extremism. Presented at the American Society of Criminology conference. Atlanta, GA.

7. Windisch, S., Simi, P., Blee, K. and DeMichele, M. (2018). Understanding White Supremacist Violence in the United States. Presented at the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) Workshop. University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway.

8. Latif, M., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., and Simi, P. (2018). The Embodiment of Violence and Sex in White Supremacy. Social Movement Session of the International Sociological Association. July.

9. Latif, M., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., and Simi, P. (2018). The Embodiment of Violence and Sex in White Supremacy. International Network for Hate Studies, May.

10. Latif, M., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., and Simi, P. (2017). Political Disillusionment & Exit: A Study of Female Former White Supremacists. Social Movement Session of the American Sociological Association. August.

11. Simi, P., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., and Windisch, S. (2017). White Supremacy Can Be Addictive and Leaving It Behind Can Be Like Kicking a Drug Habit. *London School of Economics United States Politics and Policy Blog* (USAPP).

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13. DeMichele, M., Simi, P., Blee, K., and Windisch, S. (2016). Addiction to Hate: Role Residual among Former White Supremacists. Presented at the American Sociological Association conference. Seattle, WA.

14. DeMichele, M., Simi, P., Blee, K., and Windisch, S. (2016). How Violent Right-Wing Extremists Leave Racist Groups in the U.S. Presented at the International Sociological Association conference. Vienna, Austria.

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