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Leaving the World of Hate: Life-Course Transitions and Self-Change

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Abstract

The topic of hate group membership and radicalization toward extremist ideologies has received substantial attention in recent years; however, relatively less is known about the process of disengagement and deradicalization. This is troubling because the number of hate groups in the United States has increased and some are known to engage in a variety of violent and criminal behavior. This exploratory study relies on life history interviews with 34 former white supremacists, one of the oldest types of hate groups in the United States, to examine the process of exit from these groups. Findings suggest that exiting is a multifaceted process with a variety of factors that influence a person's decision to leave. The results also highlight a number of difficulties associated with exiting such as ongoing emotions of guilt, ideological relapse, and maintaining social ties with current members of the white supremacist movement.

Keywords

hate crimes, desistance, radicalization

Introduction

In the past decade, the issue of radicalization to violent extremism has received substantial attention (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2005, 2008; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011; Sageman, 2011; Sedgwick, 2010). Although there is little consensus regarding the appropriate definition of the term, radicalization can be defined as "the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs" (Borum, 2011, p. 9). The concept of

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radicalization raises important theoretical and practical questions regarding how and why individuals and groups transition from nonviolent to violent ideology. Some scholars describe how influences such as the Internet (Maher, 2007; Musawi, 2010; Silber & Bhatt, 2007), social networks and personal connections to existing extremists (Klausen, 2010; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011; Sageman, 2004), religious and political leaders (Moghaddam, 2005), and intergroup conflict (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008, 2011) serve as potential catalysts for radicalization. However, questions remain as to what causes radicalization and why some individuals radicalize, whereas most others who experience similar conditions do not (Borum, 2011). Furthermore, the concept of radicalization has been a source of confusion for scholars because radicalization alone does not necessarily imply action, just as those who act in an extreme manner may not necessarily be radicalized (Borum, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011). Answering these questions has substantial implications in terms of threat assessment, prevention, and suppression efforts.

Like the concept of radicalization, the term deradicalization is plagued with ambiguity, confusion, and similar difficulties of operationalization (Horgan, 2008; Sageman, 2011). Although the study of deradicalization is important, the process of how individuals and groups move away from violent extremism has received substantially less attention than studies that focus on radicalization. Although there is relatively less attention placed on the process of deradicalization, studies have recently begun addressing the underlying mechanisms that facilitate changes in cognition and group attachment. Deradicalization from violent extremism refers to a reduction in commitment to extremism and a change in beliefs that conforms to mainstream values (Bjoro, 1997; Bjoro & Horgan, 2009; Blazak, 2004; Cohen & Ballou, 2012; Gadd, 2006; Horgan, 2009; Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Kruglanski, Gelfand, & Gunaratna, 2010; Messner, 1997; Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek, 2010). Much of the focus on deradicalization has been on changing beliefs to reduce the likelihood of reengagement in violent behavior (Horgan & Braddock, 2010).

The process of deradicalization is especially relevant as governmental and nongovernmental efforts have emerged to promote the facilitation of deradicalization and disengagement (Cohen & Ballou, 2012; Horgan & Altier, 2012; Neumann, 2010). For example, in the summer of 2011, Google Ideas held a Summit Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) in Dublin, Ireland that discussed the role of the Internet and venues such as chat rooms and social networking sites and their potential impact on facilitating deradicalization from extremist groups (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011). Other programs and initiatives such as European EXIT programs have also been implemented in various countries and social settings that focus on both individual and collective forms of deradicalization and disengagement (Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Neumann, 2010). Deradicalization programs rely on education, vocational training, encouraging a transition toward different social networks, and the use of social workers and mentors who address personal and psychological needs (Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Neumann, 2010). Although the United States is not as advanced as various European countries in implementing deradicalization programs (Vidino, 2011), many strategies mirror much older American efforts at gang intervention that also relied on

the use of social workers to address the needs of disadvantaged youth (see Klein, 1971; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965).

In addition to gang intervention efforts, the process of deradicalization also shares much in common with the process of leaving new religious movements more commonly referred to as cults (Balch, 1986; Kanter, 1972; S. A. Wright, 1987). Members of cults must adhere to relatively strict rules of conduct that are intended to reinforce ideological commitment (Balch, 1986). For those who defect, the process begins with psychological changes that involve questioning and challenging fundamental beliefs of the movement (Balch, 1986). Doubts take the form of "cognitive restructuring" that involve viewing the movement and ideology differently and in a detached fashion (Balch, 1986, p. 31). Other changes such as "behavioral disengagement" are characterized by publicly discussing doubts, changing scripts or styles of speech, spending increased amounts of time with external influences, and physical withdrawal from movement activities (Balch, 1986). This process also leads to a weakened support system and a feeling of alienation from other members in the movement, which often results in exit from the group (Balch, 1986). Although much can be learned from the existing literature on exit from cults and a variety of other criminal and noncriminal groups, relatively few studies have focused specifically on the underlying characteristics and social processes that are associated with exit from U.S. hate groups. Part of this inattention stems from broader societal folklore that there is a high degree of consistency in individual behavior over time (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997). The belief and expectation that behavior traits are static leads to stereotypes, misunderstanding (Levy, Plaks, Hong, Chiu, & Dweck, 2001), and a lack of attention focused on changing behaviors.

In the sections that follow, we begin by providing an overview of hate groups in the United States and then clarify and define the concepts disengagement and defection, deradicalization, and desistance. Next, we discuss the existing literature on exit from hate groups and describe our methodology. Finally, we describe the results and conclude with a discussion about the theoretical and policy implications of our findings.

Hate Groups in the United States

The term hate group is frequently used but rarely defined. The term is complex and refers to "any organized group whose beliefs and actions are rooted in enmity towards an entire class of people based on ethnicity, perceived race, sexual orientation, religion, or other inherent characteristic" (Woolf & Hulsizer, 2004, p. 41). Since the election of our country's first African American president, the number of hate groups in the United States has increased (Potok, 2013). For example, between 2000 and 2012, the number of hate groups in the United States increased from approximately 600 to more than 1,000 (Potok, 2013). Hate groups use a variety of methods to recruit new members such as the distribution of flyers in high schools and night clubs (Blazak, 2001), performing music at live shows (Blazak, 2001; Futrell, Simi, & Gottschalk, 2006), targeting neighborhoods that suffer from economic deprivation (Blazak, 2001), and various types of social media (Adams & Roscigno, 2005; Duffy, 2003; Schafer, 2002;

Simi & Futrell, 2006). Previous studies found that individuals are attracted to hate groups for reasons such as sympathy for the group's ideology or political position, anger because of immigrants, leftist antiracists, or the authorities, protection against enemies or perceived threats, a search for excitement and thrill seeking, the violent and militant aspects of the group, the perception that it provides a substitute family, and the search for status and identity (Bjoro, 1997; Blee, 2002; Schafer, Mullins, & Box, 2014; Simi & Futrell, 2010).

For this exploratory study, we focus on one type of hate group, white supremacists, who although not exclusively are largely organized around the ideology of hate. Members of white supremacist groups are known to commit a variety of different types of crimes that include physical assaults, home invasions, theft, identity theft, counterfeiting, drug distribution, fraud, acts of terrorism, and various forms of hate crimes (Berlet & Lyons, 2000; Flynn & Gerhardt, 1995; Freilich & Chermack, 2009; Freilich, Chermack, & Caspi, 2009; Hamm, 2002; Hoffman, 2006; Simi, 2010; Simi & Futrell, 2010; Simi, Smith, & Reeser, 2008; Smith, 1994; S. A. Wright, 2007). In addition to the forms of illegal behavior described above, members of the white supremacist movement also engage in a variety of legal activities. For example, members form political parties, organize public marches and rallies, create and distribute extremist literature, and develop separatist communities (Simi, 2010). These activities are all part of white supremacists' efforts to catalyze social change based on their radical ideology.

The white supremacist movement's four main branches include the Ku Klux Klan, Christian Identity sects, neo-Nazi's, and racist skinheads (Burris, Smith, & Strahm, 2000; Futrell & Simi, 2004). Members of the white supremacist movement believe they must defend the white race from genocide and "the future world they envision is racially exclusive, where 'non-whites' are vanquished, segregated, or at least subordinated to white authority" (Simi, 2010, p. 253). Members are also strongly anti-Semitic professing that world affairs are dominated by a small Jewish conspiracy (Blee, 2002).

Despite the persistence and even growth of white supremacist groups, participation is highly fluid as individuals "come and go." The frequency of individuals leaving hate groups contrasts with the folklore that "once a _____ always a _____" or "blood in blood out," the idea that the only way to leave a hate group is by being killed (Fong, Vogel, & Buentello, 1995; Schneider, 1999). To be sure, certain individuals remain involved for decades or even entire lifetimes, but these cases are the exception rather than the rule. In the next section, we define various terms that are used to describe the process of exit from groups such as disengagement and defection, deradicalization, and desistance.

Conceptual Background

There has been a recent increase in the number of scholars studying the process of exit from groups as well as the process of leaving a criminal lifestyle. The increased interest is important because the social and psychological dynamics that underlie self-change is in need of further theoretical elaboration. Part of what hinders greater

theoretical development is the tendency to use terms such as "disengagement," "defection," "deradicalization," and "desistance" interchangeably, thus ignoring important differences in these concepts. This section briefly reviews and clarifies these concepts.

Disengagement and Defection

Disengagement can be defined as, "the process of withdrawing from the normative expectations associated with a role, the process whereby an individual no longer accepts as appropriate the socially defined rights and obligations that accompany a given role in society" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 3). For violent groups, individuals may have experienced a role change within the group that resulted in a reduction of violent behaviors (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). Role change and levels of disengagement for individuals within social movements may be the result of psychological factors such as burnout or disillusionment that stems from differences between expectations and reality (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). Disengagement may also be the result of physical factors such as the experience of imprisonment (Horgan, 2009) or a reduction of "biographical availability" that includes things such as marriage, children, and stable employment (Lofland, 1966; McAdam, 1988; Petrie, 2004; Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-Olson, 1980). Previous studies of criminal offenders find that diminished biographical availability corresponds with decreased criminal behavior (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Defection can be defined as "physically separating from the group and resolving not to go back," but does not necessarily mean that an individual has foregone group beliefs (Balch, 1986, p. 19). Compared with disengagement, which may be limited to shifting roles within the group, defection is defined as leaving the group entirely (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). Defection, however, may not be permanent and return to the group is possible. There are three primary means of defection: (a) expulsion, where individuals are forced to leave the group at the demand of other members or leaders; (b) extraction, where an outsider forces an individual to leave, sometimes through the use of kidnapping and deprogramming; and (c) voluntary exit, where individuals leave as a result of their own decision (Richardson, Van der Lans, & Derks, 1986). Although the application of this term has traditionally been used in a religious context, usage has been expanded to include exit from other groups such as political extremists (Aho, 1988; Bjoro, 1997).

Deradicalization

Deradicalization is distinct from disengagement because it suggests a change in an individual's values. Deradicalization may be defined as "the process of changing an individual's belief system, rejecting the extremist ideology, and embracing mainstream values" (Rabasa et al., 2010, p. xiii). Individuals that undergo deradicalization may experience a change in priorities and come to the realization that violence should not be used to affect social change (Horgan, 2008; Rabasa et al., 2010). Much like the reasons for disengagement, individuals that experience deradicalization may experience a

growing sense of disillusionment with the movement (Horgan, 2008; Horgan & Braddock, 2010). Individuals may also come to "a recognition that social, political, and economic transformation will only occur slowly and in a pluralistic environment" (Rabasa et al., 2010, p. 2). Deradicalization involves a change in cognitions, but does not necessarily involve a change in behavior. In fact, one question that has emerged is whether deradicalization requires a change in a person's mental model in addition to disaffiliation from other extremists or whether the latter is sufficient for deradicalization (Bjoro & Horgan, 2009). It has recently been argued that for deradicalization to be distinct from disengagement, the former must involve cognitive elements of change, whereas the latter refers to the behavioral aspects of change (Bjoro & Horgan, 2009). For example, it may be possible that an individual could forego the ideological orientations of their group yet continue to participate in negative and even violent behavior knowing that this behavior runs counter to their new belief system. Alternatively, an extremist could disengage (exit from the group) but retain his or her extremist beliefs.

Desistance

The term desistance is often applied to the study of changes in severity or frequency of criminal offending. Although conceptually the term seems relatively straightforward, there is substantial ambiguity regarding an appropriate operational definition (Brame, Bushway, & Paternoster, 2003; Laub & Sampson, 2001). Much of the ambiguity results from measuring the absence of a certain type of criminal event (Maruna, 2001). Some scholars acknowledge that desistance is likely characterized by temporary absences from criminal offending (Clarke & Cornish, 1985), whereas others are less optimistic and argue that an extended period of time free from offending (sometimes as long as 10 years) does not ensure that desistance has occurred (Farrington, 1998). In addition to the temporal component of desistance, the process is also affected by maturation (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Shover, 1996) and structural factors such as a stable job, strong marriage, and military involvement (Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Laub & Sampson, 2001, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Employment, marriage, and military service are considered "change events" and serve an independent role in the facilitation of life-course transitions away from criminal behavior (Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998, p. 225).

In contrast to structural theories of desistance, other explanations focus more on aspects of symbolic interactionism that place the individual "up front" in the change process (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Farrall, 2004; Massoglia & Uggen, 2010; Mead, 1934). For example, Maruna and Farrall (2004) coined the terms primary and secondary desistance, where the former is a temporary break in offending and the latter is a permanent state of nonoffending that requires a change in an individual's identity to that of nonoffender. This distinction helped define different stages of the desistance process among offenders in the midst of transition. Others argue that self-reflection and "cognitive shifts" help facilitate the desistance process through changes in identity and a change in the meaning and desirability of criminal behavior (Giordano et al., 2002). Similarly, changes in an individual's emotional self

and a reduction in anger also facilitate the desistance process (Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich, 2007). Although desistance from crime has been studied extensively in criminology, much less is known about how and why individuals leave criminal groups and even less is known about leaving groups that share an ideology of hatred.

Exit From Hate Groups

The limited number of studies that focus on leaving hate groups find several factors are related to this process. For example, some individuals leave for psychological reasons such as disillusionment with the initial fantasies or ideals of the movement and subsequent experiences (Kimmel, 2007). The disillusionment may be the result of dissatisfaction with the activities of the group, a lack of loyalty among members, and the way that younger members are manipulated by veterans (Bjoro, 1997, 2009). Specifically, some members of the movement may be upset that too much time is spent on activities that involve alcohol consumption instead of focusing on their political and ideological agendas (Bjoro, 1997). Additionally, Gadd's (2006) study of a British far-right extremist found that identification with different social groups led to a recognition of dissatisfaction with far-right extremism. Some of the dissatisfaction may result from a moral uneasiness with movement ideology and participation (Bjoro, 1997).

Furthermore, some activists may mature out of the movement and desire a lifestyle that is more conventional (Bjoro, 1997, 2009; Kimmel, 2007). In fact, some research finds that the role of significant others was an important factor in the change process (Aho, 1988; Blazak, 2004; Gadd, 2006). For example, new responsibilities related to children, marriage, or other relationships outside the movement were reported as a frequent reason for leaving (Bjoro, 1997). Significant others may also teach an individual that a hateful ideology is counterproductive (Blazak, 2004). Additionally, some individuals may begin to burn out because of the demanding lifestyle and guilt produced from engaging in violence (Aho, 1988; Bjoro, 1997; Kimmel, 2007). Indeed, evidence suggests the role of exhaustion as a consequence of engaging in violent behavior is an important facet of the exit process (Gallant, 2014). Some of these individuals may also realize that their activist involvement jeopardizes the ability to acquire or maintain certain types of jobs (Bjoro, 1997, 2009; Simi & Futrell, 2009).

Although the pathway toward exit is not uniform, one intervention program, Exit Sweden, describes the typical process that individuals encounter when trying to leave hate groups (Bjoro, Donselaar, & Grunenberg, 2009). This program outlines the process as five phases: (a) the phase of motivation, where an individual is still part of the movement, but is beginning to doubt involvement; (b) disengagement, where the person has made the decision to leave the movement; (c) the phase of establishment, where the individual has left the movement and has a place to live; (d) reflection, where individuals begin to realize the extent of their extremist ideology, violence, and criminal actions while involved in the movement; and (e) stabilization, where individuals have a normal life and perhaps a family. Although numerous individuals leave hate groups, those who do may continue to experience fear for their safety and maintain emotions of

guilt because of their previous lifestyle (Bjoro et al., 2009). Fear may be produced by threats from current extremists who consider those who leave "race traitors" (Aho, 1988; Blazak, 2004). Those who remain in the white supremacist movement may shun, intimidate, victimize, and sometimes even murder former members (Aho, 1988; Bjoro, 1997; Blazak, 2004). This type of intimidation may sometimes force former members to change their identities (Kimmel, 2007).

Method

This exploratory study utilizes a life history methodology with preliminary results from a sample of 34 individuals to examine desistance from the contemporary U.S. white supremacist movement. At this point, follow-up interviews have been conducted with 9 individuals to produce a total of 43 interview sessions. The interviews ranged from 2 hours to more than 15 hours with two interviews lasting more than 3 days. Participants lived in 11 different states across all regions of the country. The second author's long-term ethnographic fieldwork with far-right extremists provided the basis for initial contacts with former white supremacists. The study also relied on contacting former extremists who have a "public" presence and have either written books about their experiences, shared their stories on websites, or have spoken publicly about their extremist involvement. Each of the initial participants was asked to provide referrals to other former extremists who might also be willing to participate in an interview. This snowball sampling process produced contacts that otherwise would not be accessible using traditional means of contact such as the Internet or mailing lists (R. Wright, Decker, Redfern, & Smith, 1992). Multiple individuals were used to generate unique snowballs and thus participants often were not acquainted with each other. Roughly half of the former white supremacists included in this study have publicly discussed their previous involvement in a hate group, whereas the other half of the sample have not publicly discussed their past extremist involvement. Substantial rapport was established and maintained through regular contact with participants via telephone, e-mail, and Facebook.

Although the study focuses primarily on the reasons for deradicalization and disengagement from the white supremacist movement, life history narratives provide in-depth data related to an individual's life before, during, and after their extremist involvement. The telling of life histories produces a narrative that allows the researcher to better understand the complexities and intersectionality of ideology and life experiences (Blee, 1996). Members of our sample provided a rich and detailed history of their lives that involved themes such as family socialization, romantic relationships, job attainment and stability, reasons for joining and leaving the white supremacist movement, and involvement in criminal and violent behavior. Many members of our sample have a history of criminal conduct including property offenses such as shoplifting, vandalism, and other forms of property destruction. Individuals also engaged in a variety of violent offenses such as murder, attempted murder, street fights, violent initiation rituals, and bomb making. Respondents included 31 male and 3 female participants representing a wide variation in terms of age and socioeconomic status. For

example, 3 participants were between the ages of 19 and 25 years, 2 participants were between the ages of 26 and 35 years, 27 participants were between the ages of 36 and 45 years, and 2 participants were 46 years of age or older. With regard to current socioeconomic status, 3 individuals described themselves as lower class, 15 as working class, 12 middle class, and 4 described themselves as upper class. This article presents preliminary findings to generate an overall composite of former hate group members and the process of leaving. We do this by reporting specific characteristics of the participants' life circumstances and specific details regarding the process of leaving including several aspects previous studies have not explored.

Background Characteristics

Before discussing the exiting process, it is important to first discuss participants' background characteristics. Overall, the length of participation among our participants ranged from 3 years to 21 years. The level of group involvement for members of our sample included 8 individuals who founded a white supremacist group and 26 participants who were either core or peripheral members.

We also examined a series of risk factors that previous studies have identified as important influences related to the onset of delinquency and criminality (DeMatteo & Marczyk, 2005; Farrington, 1998; Farrington & Hawkins, 1991; Goldstein, Olubadewo, Redding, & Lexcen, 2005; Heilbrun, Lee, & Cottle, 2005; Loeber & Farrington, 1998). We collected a wide range of data related to various risk factors; however, in this article, we focus exclusively on risk factors related to mental health due to space limitations. First, 32% of our sample reported experiencing mental health problems either preceding or during hate group involvement. Although we relied on self-reports of mental health problems as part of the interview protocol, respondents were asked whether a medical practitioner had ever officially diagnosed the person with a mental disorder. Next, 44% of the sample reported suicidal ideation at some point during their lives. Finally, 58% of the participants reported problems with alcohol and/or substance abuse. Alcohol and substance abuse can also be viewed as a type of mental health problem and, in fact, is listed in the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth edition* (*DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These findings contrast with other studies that conclude extremists and terrorists are no more likely to suffer from mental health problems than members of the general population (Horgan, 2003; Sageman, 2004; Silke, 1998; Victoroff, 2005). Two possible explanations may account for this difference. First, members of U.S. hate groups may be prone to mental health problems. Movements based on antidemocratic principles and authoritarian impulses may attract individuals with certain predispositions such as mental instability. Of course, not all people who join white supremacist groups or other antidemocratic movements suffer from mental health problems, but rather there may be a certain "elective affinity" (Weber, 1905) that exists between unstable individuals and movements that valorize violence as a preferred mode of communication. The second possibility is that previous studies may underreport mental health problems due to methodological limitations. Conversely, it is possible that our participants overreported mental health

problems, although we think this is unlikely due to the generalized stigma associated with mental illness (Link & Phelan, 2001). Last, we should underscore that additional examination is necessary to determine the temporal sequencing of mental health issues in terms of whether participants experienced these problems preceding, during, or following (or some combination) extremist involvement.

The Process of Exit

The most important finding at this point is that no single reason for leaving cuts across the majority of the sample. Instead, motives for leaving vary a great deal (Horgan, 2009). Although disillusionment is common, we are still analyzing the different sources or experiences that lead to disillusionment. At this point, disillusionment appears to stem from a variety of different experiences. In the sections below, we discuss how the experience of incarceration may produce disillusionment and serve, in part, as a catalyst for exit. Next, we discuss how some individuals chose to exit as a group. Finally, we describe some of the difficulties associated with leaving.

Incarceration as Catalyst for Exit

Although none of the participants left involuntarily (Richardson et al., 1986), slightly more than one third of the exits were catalyzed, to some extent, by contact with law enforcement andincarceration. In these instances, the incarceration and contact with law enforcement served to separate individuals from the group and their previous lifestyles providing an opportunity for a degree of self-reflection about past choices and future possibilities. These results contrast with existing research on criminal desistance, which has found that the experience of incarceration does not facilitate desistance (Burnett & Maruna, 2004; Farrall & Calverley, 2006). Research in this area argues that self-reflection is difficult in prison because of noise and the constant threat of criminal activity (Farrall & Calverley, 2006). Although research on criminal desistance typically does not identify a link between incarceration and desistance from criminal behavior, there are additional social dimensions to consider when an individual becomes deradicalized or disengaged from a group. Specifically, it is known that hate groups have a substantial presence in correctional facilities across the country, but the links between prison and street-based hate groups are uneven (Simi et al., 2008). For members of hate groups who become incarcerated, jail or prison may provide an opportunity to "start over" without an affiliation to a hate group (Harman, Smith, & Egan, 2007). The separation from the group during periods of incarceration may also serve to weaken ties and isolate the person from their previous associates and social roles within the group (Lindquist, 2000).

Although previous studies found that incarceration reinforced continued involvement in criminal behavior (Burnett & Maruna, 2004; Farrall & Calverley, 2006), we found that incarceration along with various other factors provided several participants a source of motivation toward exit (Horgan, 2009). Much like former alcoholics who experienced "hitting rock bottom" (Greil & Rudy, 1983, p. 8; see also Young, 2011)

before deciding to take action toward change, some members of our sample came to see prison as a direct consequence of hate group involvement and solid evidence they had reached their lowest point. Incarceration and other contact with law enforcement may have provided a dramatic illustration that involvement is a "dead end" and thus may be especially powerful in terms of "crystallizing discontent" (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) and spurring disillusionment. As one participant explained,

> I left it behind because I called Hugh [white supremacist leader] and told him I been put in jail and said, "Can you help me out?" he says, "No I can't. You're politically dead to us." And that's what really started me questioning things. . . . And then once I heard that I said, "Okay, I'm trying to get done with it but I'm not really done with it." I was still hanging true to the race but you know what, after that it just showed me, I mean, people are not so true. That's not their true colors. I mean, are you kidding me? If you can't support me for going to jail. Once I heard that I was like that's it . . . (Participant #124, August 19, 2012)

When "Martin" entered prison, he expected white supremacist leaders would provide him with support and when his request was rejected he began experiencing disillusionment between the promise of loyalty and brotherhood and the reality of dishonesty and selfishness. Although contact with law enforcement and the experience of prison or jail may provide a catalyst toward change, incarceration is costly (Schmitt, Warner, & Gupta, 2010; Weissman, 2009) and there are certainly more humane ways of helping facilitate self-change than sending someone to prison (DiClemente, 1993; Saleebey, 1996).

Group Exit

Although most individuals left the white supremacist movement alone, 21% left the movement at the same time as other members. In these instances, a small segment of members decided to leave their group simultaneously and the circumstances typically involved disagreements following an unpopular decision by one or more group leaders. The ensuing tensions left a segment of the group feeling alienated and reinforced the decision to exit. Previous research on group exit found that when multiple individuals express doubts it sets a "trend" and may lead other people to challenge their own role commitments (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 192). Furthermore, mutually reinforcing doubts toward movement commitments is especially important when it happens to individuals who are friends or close acquaintances (Ebaugh, 1988).

Although friends and close acquaintances are important to the process of group exit, romantic partners have also shown to be particularly important to the exit process (Blazak, 2004). Similar to leaving as part of a group, 35% of the participants who were married at the time of their involvement left with their spouse who was also involved. Existing research finds that when individuals leave a group with others, it is easier for them to anticipate a future life outside of the movement than those who leave by themselves (Ebaugh, 1988). When multiple individuals express doubts together, they can

begin the "deliberative stage" of exit that involves discussing the advantages and disadvantages of remaining or leaving the group (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 193). When multiple individuals express a desire to leave they may also engage in "role rehearsing," which involves anticipating what it will be like once the change has been made (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 193). Finally, individuals who leave as a group may do so strategically because they are aware of the stigma and harassment that often awaits former members (Aho, 1988; Blazak, 2004; Kimmel, 2007). Specifically, research has shown that less stigma is associated with leaving movements as part of a group compared with leaving alone (Ebaugh, 1988).

Difficulties With Exit

Research in criminology has increasingly acknowledged the importance of emotions as they relate to criminal desistance (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Giordano et al., 2007) and exit from extremist movements (Aho, 1988; Bjoro, 1997). Much like previous research on leaving hate groups, slightly more than half (54.5%) of the participants reported experiencing guilt related to their hate group involvement. Many of those who reported guilt related this feeling to the violence committed during their involvement in the white supremacist movement. Participants also experienced guilt regarding the beliefs they once held such as hating "non-whites" and other "racial enemies" and perpetuating these beliefs by distributing propaganda and other information that served to entice sympathizers and members of the general public to join the movement.

> . . . if you believe in God then you believe what you did was the worst thing you could have possibly did. Anybody that believes in God does not glorify what they did. I don't . . . I'm ashamed of what I used to be . . . Yeah because like I said there were a lot of people that got hurt and a lot of people that are no longer here and should be. A lot of people that got bad shit that happened to them for no reason . . . (Participant #131, January16, 2013)

During the interview when Donnie spoke of his past violence, he was visibly disturbed even tearing up at various points as his past appeared to weigh heavily on his current sense of self.

Fear of being unable to change also figured prominently among the participants. In fact, 52% of the participants reported feeling fearful that their involvement in organized hate had permanently "scarred" them psychologically and that self-change might ultimately prove elusive.

> In the beginning. When I decided to make these changes, I was petrified that I'd somehow hardwired my brain. That I was constantly, no matter what I did, going to think negatively about other races or cultures or religions. That I would have like . . . to give you an example, if I saw a Black person then automatically I would think negative and that it wouldn't be something I could control. I was so afraid that's how it was going to be and for a while it was . . . (Participant #113, June 5, 2012)

Similar to the fear of being unable to change, participants also reported "ideological relapses" after exit. For many individuals, it was difficult to break free from previous ways of thinking, which created an obstacle toward deradicalization. These individuals successfully disengaged from the white supremacist movement; however, ideological aspects associated with the movement continued to permeate their thoughts. Many individuals were aware of the episodic "ideological relapses" into previous white supremacist beliefs and developed strategies to combat them. The problem with maintaining or relapsing back into a mental model associated with an extremist movement is that it creates a situation where reengagement with activities related to the movement is more likely. In fact, 21% of our sample left and later returned to the movement and most described exiting as a substantial struggle. The back and forth nature of white supremacist involvement is described by researchers of criminal desistance as "intermittency" (Piquero, 2004, p. 105), which is the continual process of termination or abstinence in offending and a resumption of criminal activity at a later point in time (Elliot, Huizinga, & Morse, 1989; Maruna, 2001). As this study finds, intermittency also characterizes the experiences of some former members of the white supremacist movement who struggle to refrain from returning to the movement.

Becoming a "former" is a subjective process and, as such, when a person is no longer active is not always clear-cut. One important aspect of being a former extremist is whether ongoing contact is maintained with active members (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). One previous study that examined the process of leaving street gangs found, "The severing of ties provides a transitional phase between active gang membership and former gang membership" (Pyrooz et al., 2014, p. 507). Although severing social ties might be difficult, 48% of the participants reported having no relations with current members in the time after they left the white supremacist movement. As such, 52% of the participants have varying contacts with active members. Several do so in order to provide outreach to current members in hopes of helping them transition away from involvement. Other participants, who maintain contact with current members, do not believe that it is necessary to cut all ties to maintain their status as a former. This aspect of exit highlights the element of role change associated with disengagement, where the individual maintains social ties to current members, but the dynamics of the social situation has changed dramatically. Although some former white supremacists remain active in helping others transition away from a life of hate, contact with current members places former white supremacists at risk of relapse, increases the probability that radicalization may be reproduced, and may create suspicions whether they are truly a "former" white supremacist.

Discussion and Conclusion

Exit from hate groups is relatively understudied when considered in relation to other deviant groups such as gangs (see Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011); however, recent initiatives such as Google Ideas have begun to explore ways of facilitating the deradicalization process for members of extremist groups (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011). Although recent efforts have begun to address the topic of exit from hate groups

by exploring topics such as deradicalization and disengagement, a great deal of ambiguity remains about the underlying causes and correlates of exit. The current study begins to address this gap and finds that the process of exit from white supremacist movements is facilitated, in part, through self-reflection that results from contact with law enforcement and the experience of incarceration. Part of the self-reflection process involves a growing awareness that certain expectations associated with the movement such as family, loyalty, and unity (Bjoro, 1997; Blee, 2002; Schafer et al., 2014; Simi & Futrell, 2010) are not as genuine as originally expected.

Previous studies of desistance often find that incarceration adversely impacts employment, reduces contact with friends and family, and embeds the person into a prison "breeding ground" of crime (Farrall & Calverley, 2006, p. 75). Our findings show that these negative experiences may provide an impetus for change as a result of "hitting rock bottom" (Greil & Rudy, 1983, p. 8). This finding lends support to Benthonian arguments that prison can indeed provide an outlet for self-reflection (Barnes, 1921); however, it is unclear based on our results how much "dosage" of the prison experience is beneficial and whether the benefits of incarceration are reversed after a certain amount of time. We should also point out that there are far less expensive and likely far more effective ways of helping facilitate change than incarceration (DiClemente, 1993; Saleebey, 1996; Schmitt et al., 2010; Weissman, 2009). Disengagement and deradicalization efforts might consider emphasizing the negative costs associated with membership in the white supremacist movement as well as the inconsistencies between idealized aspects of the movement and everyday realities.

Our findings also show that some members left the white supremacist movement with a small group of one or more other individuals. In some cases, individuals left the group with romantic partners who were also involved in the white supremacist movement. This differs from previous studies of group exit that have focused primarily on the disintegration of the entire group (see Alonso, 2009; Cronin, 2009; McCauley, 2008; Rashwan, 2009) as opposed to a small number of individuals within the group who decide to leave simultaneously (Ebaugh, 1988). This finding may reflect an important dimension of group exit that could be utilized by intervention efforts aimed at deradicalization or disengagement. Specifically, individuals within the movement may be highly influential at instilling doubt in the minds of other members and may help them prepare and envision a life beyond group involvement in the white supremacist movement (Ebaugh, 1988). A promising avenue for intervention efforts may be to help existing members within the movement who have doubts to share their viewpoints and experiences with other members of the movement. This may induce a "trend" and lead others to question certain aspects of the movement that they had previously not considered (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 192).

Finally, our findings illustrate the difficulties associated with the exiting process. Specifically, formers mentioned enduring feelings of guilt, ideological relapses into previous ways of thinking, and ongoing contact with active members of the white supremacist movement. Deradicalization programs currently address education, vocational training, and social networks (Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Neumann, 2010); however, our findings indicate the need for ongoing psychological treatment to address

ideological relapses and problems associated with mental health. Contrary to previous findings that conclude extremists and terrorists are no more likely to suffer from mental health problems than members of the general population (Horgan, 2003; Sageman, 2004; Silke, 1998; Victoroff, 2005), our findings indicate a high proportion of formers who report a history of mental health problems. Future research should examine this topic further to determine the source of mental health problems and whether they are related to involvement in extremist groups or other social conditions. Intervention efforts should also take these issues into consideration and examine the possibility of ongoing treatment that accounts for risk factors, which may contribute to a return to the white supremacist movement. Some of the risk factors may include the occurrence and frequency of ideological relapses as well as the circumstances that surround ongoing social contact with active members. To be clear, we are not judging whether it is "right or wrong" for formers to maintain relationships with individuals currently involved, but rather whether individuals maintain these ties and, if so, do these ties increase the likelihood of relapse? Formers who maintain contact or experience episodic ideological relapses may need to be especially cautious about returning to the movement. The theoretical implications of our findings suggest that exit from hate groups should be considered in relation to other forms of abstinence from dangerous and addictive behaviors. Specifically, the process of leaving hate groups may involve certain triggers that facilitate relapse, and for some individuals, being a former requires ongoing maintenance and coping skills (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). Future research should continue to examine the difficulties associated with leaving extremist groups. Specifically, research should examine the consequences of maintaining social ties to current members of extremist groups as well as the persistence of maintaining or relapsing into extremist ideology.

Authors' Note

The views and conclusions contained in this article are those of the authors' and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, START, or HFG.

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