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White supremacy: radicalization, deradicalization, and public health implications

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Chapter 1: introduction

Research rationale: white supremacy as a public health issue

On its most basic level, white supremacy is the conviction that people of European descent are genetically superior to non-whites; it often correlates with a desire to build an ethno-state that would allow whites to forcibly exclude all non-whites (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018). Movements and attitudes associated with white supremacy have existed in Europe, the United States, and across the world for the length of recorded time, making a precise and timeless definition of white supremacy difficult to refine. Even if we confine our attention to the modern United States, for example, we would find that groups that identify as white supremacist often disagree about important elements of their ideology (Tenold, 2018). However, all forms of white supremacy are rooted in racist beliefs and promote racist actions, including violence, to further their goals.

In the public health field, racism is often investigated and implicated as a potential exposure for adverse health outcomes. The American Public Health Association has, in recent years, embraced the obligation to pursue research into racism as a determinant of health outcomes and promoter of disparities, calling for funding to address the injustices caused by racism (American Public Health Institution, 2001). The mechanisms by which racism influences health outcomes vary widely, as do the methods for understanding racism more generally. One particularly helpful way of conceptualizing racism rests on an understanding of the construct as acting on three levels: the institutionalized, the personally mediated, and the internalized.

Institutionalized racism refers to differential access to goods, services, and opportunities; personally mediated racism refers to prejudice and discrimination; internalized racism is the acceptance by members of stigmatized races of the negative stereotypes being promulgated about them by others (Jones, 2000). In designing effective interventions to reduce the effects of racism on health outcomes, some argue that we ought to focus our efforts on institutional racism; effects on interpersonal and internalized racism will follow naturally. Others suggest that public health can act on all three levels to reduce disparities in access to care and health outcomes (Arriola, 2017).

Interpersonal racism is already considered to be of considerable importance in public health. Experiences of chronic discrimination due to race may lead to poor health outcomes in women of color by damaging sleep patterns (Lewis et al., 2013). Both implicit biases, which include stereotypes and beliefs that affect our understanding without our being aware of them, and explicit biases, or our conscious beliefs, have been implicated as potential causes of poor mental and physical health outcomes across racial and ethnic categories (Y. Lee, Muennig, Kawachi, & Hatzenbuehler, 2015; Leitner, Hehman, Ayduk, & Mendoza-Denton, 2016; Paradies et al., 2015). Chronic stress due to experiences of interpersonal racism is generally identified as the causal link between racism and poor health outcomes (Berger & Sarnyai, 2015; Hicken, Lee, Morenoff, House, & Williams, 2014; Prather, Fuller, Marshall, & Jeffries, 2016).

Other fields have made some progress in understanding factors that contribute to racism. Social norms have frequently been studied as potential predictors of racist attitudes in individuals (de França & Monteiro, 2013; Monteiro, de Franca, & Rodrigues,

2009). Factors in media, such as the emphasis of colorblindness over multiculturalism or even nonverbal reactions to characters of color on television, may lead to greater implicit bias in audiences (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Weisbuch, Pauker, & Ambady, 2009). Parental influence, including even subtle behaviors and implicit bias, can influence both implicit and explicit bias in their children (Castelli, Zogmaister, & Tomelleri, 2009; Pirchio, Passiatore, Panno, Maricchiolo, & Carrus, 2018).

While there is immense value in what we already know, rising concern about the threat of violent white supremacy justifies a deeper interest in the etiology of this form of racism in particular (Reitman, 2018). The number of white supremacist groups has grown rapidly in the United States in recent years, as has the number of deaths directly attributable to members of such groups or people acting on white supremacist beliefs (Beirich, 2019). Of the 50 people killed by ideological extremists in the United States in 2018, 49 were murdered by people who were a part of radicalized white supremacist groups (Center on Extremism, 2019). Recent high-profile acts of violence, including the attack on two mosques in New Zealand on March 15, 2019 that left 50 Muslim worshippers dead, have brought freshly critical attention to the motives, mechanisms, and effects of hate groups across the world (Hegyi, 2019). Treating racism as an outcome in its own right might shed some light on exposures that correlate with it, guiding us in developing interventions to fight it. Isolating white supremacy as a focus for this type of study is potentially valuable because it represents an extreme and highly visible form of racism in our current society.

Three aspects of white supremacy make it a potentially vulnerable target for public health methods. The first is that white supremacy motivates violence, which is familiar territory for public health (Gruenewald, 2011; Slutkin, 2016; Slutkin, Ransford, & Zvetina, 2018; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018). Our field recognizes the need for public health work to decrease the incidence of gender-based violence and violence against children, for example. It is possible that interventions against race-based violence might look to interventions against other forms of violence for inspiration, theoretical support, or monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Secondly, literature on institutional and neighborhood-level racism has an established correlation with poor health outcomes, both for minority groups and for white people (Y. Lee et al., 2015; Leitner et al., 2016). White supremacy may contribute to these effects in the same way that racism generally does, making it a potential distal exposure for poor health outcomes. Finally, it is possible that the proof that white supremacy is a public health problem will be the efficacy of interventions designed using a public health theory and framework. Their success would suggest a retrospective justification for their implementation, a validation of the role public health can play in anti-racist work to increase health outcomes.

Radicalization and deradicalization in the public health context

Public health has not generated an extensive body of literature to describe the processes of radicalization and deradicalization. The study of the changes in attitudes and beliefs that can lead to behavior change is firmly recognized as a vital part of public health work, both generally and in the context of several specific behaviors. But with regard to

changes in ideology, public health has generally allowed fields like criminology, psychology, and sociology to take the lead.

Radicalization is widely understood to be a complicated process, dependent on the relevant cultural and political context in which it is occurring. In the modern world, however, definitions of radicalization usually focus on a transition into a state in which a person is willing to commit violence for political reasons (National Security Criminal Investigations, 2009; Radicalisation Action Network, 2018). Reasons for radicalization vary widely enough that it is important to distinguish them by what a person is radicalizing toward: radical Islam, for example, may not motivate its potential followers in the same way that radical white identity movements do. Although radicalization is a highly contextual process, it is still an individual-level one in which people make decisions about their social networks, their values, and their activities, perhaps in response to experiences of trauma or adversity (Rink & Sharma, 2018; Simi, Sporer, & Bubolz, 2016). Interpersonal factors are significant in conjunction with individual factors, which helps us understand some of the variation of experiences; after all, not all people with the same exposures end up with the same outcome.

Deradicalization may be even more difficult to define and study. Criminology, the source of many studies and insights into radicalization, yields comparatively little information about deradicalization. However, other researchers in social psychology note the complexity of the process, the length of time it can take, and the possibility that elements of radical identity can linger in involuntary and unwelcome ways in people

who wish to be, and in many ways are, deradicalized (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014; Simi, Blee, DeMichele, & Windisch, 2017).

Radicalization and deradicalization, like white supremacy, are due for some attention from the field of public health for four essential reasons. Primarily, the best tools of our trade, including the ability to do rigorous mixed-methods research, have yet to be applied to radicalization and deradicalization. Other fields have applied more limited sets of methods to examine these topics, potentially missing important findings and potential interventions (Altier et al., 2014). Secondly, criminology in particular does not emphasize the deradicalization portion of the behavior change, missing out on essential data that could be used for intervention design. In criminology, the focus related to this topic has been on how to prevent crime by radicalized individuals, of course, and so paths of deradicalization have been largely ignored (National Security Criminal Investigations, 2009). Also, most of the academic literature on radicalization and deradicalization focuses on Muslim extremism, creating a massive literature gap in just the space where we need greater understanding about a historically and potentially much more violent population (Altier et al., 2014). Finally, public health is the science of behavior changes that affect health outcomes, and radicalization and deradicalization are, essentially, complicated behavioral shifts. It is possible that the practices we already have developed and tested in public health may give us the insight into the multilevel factors that contribute to these progressions.

Significance of this research

This goal of this qualitative research is to assess whether a theory grounded in established public health practice can be built to describe radicalization and deradicalization into and out of white supremacy. Using grounded theory, it attempts to do so by answering two questions:

1. What are the processes of radicalization and deradicalization into and out of white supremacy?
2. What are the characteristics of and motivations for radicalization and deradicalization processes into and out of white supremacy?

I have two objectives in making this attempt. The first is to contribute new information that could lead to the study of white supremacy in a public health context. The second is to describe radicalization and deradicalization into and out of white supremacy with a theory of behavior change that clarifies its potential susceptibility to public health interventions.

Theoretical framework

Grounded theory is a method of conducting qualitative data analysis based in responsiveness to data as a way of iteratively refining codes and themes (Bazeley, 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). It is intended to guide the formation of new theories or expand upon extant ones.

My use of grounded theory began in the planning stages for this study. Instead of testing the applicability of an extant theoretical model to the processes of radicalization and de-radicalization, I proposed to develop a theory specific to white supremacy. The interview guide was intended to allow participants to reflect on their experiences and opinions as freely as possible, without focusing on hypothesized constructs, and I was able to adapt the guide during interviews to be responsive to each participant's reported experiences. For example, insights into the importance of whiteness as an identity varied greatly between participants; those for whom it played an important role were asked more questions about its effects on their lives. After the first three interviews, I incorporated theoretical sampling to diversify my sample according to unique themes emerging from the data, specifically between people who had been radicalized by primarily offline experiences and those whose radicalization had begun on the Internet. To apply grounded theory during the analysis phase, I began by using line-by-line coding and extensive memoing, then moved from initial codes to axial codes, which allowed me to begin connecting themes and important experiences as I built constructs. For more information, please refer to Chapter 3.

Chapter 2: literature review

This literature review will examine academic knowledge related to racism, white supremacy, radicalization, and deradicalization, drawing on diverse academic fields such as criminology, psychology, and sociology to do so. Because of the extreme paucity of studies related explicitly to the three topics, some of what is covered here will come from the study of radicalization and deradicalization related to radical Islam. The lessons may not be fully applicable to this research; reviewing these studies, however, could be helpful in thinking through what a theory of radicalization and deradicalization might usefully include.

Public health contributions to the understanding of racism

The public health contribution to understanding racism has been in treating racism as an exposure that correlates with poor health outcomes, both among the victims of racist attitudes and those who hold them. Research into the mechanisms that explain poor mental and physical health outcomes as a function of racism is widespread. The minority stress model was developed as a result of a review of research on mental disorders among lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations (Meyer, 2003). It suggests that stigma and discrimination create an environment in which stressful and even hostile interactions with prejudiced individuals and systems causes a wide range of negative mental health outcomes. The model encompasses both subjective and objective views of stress, as well as factors at both the individual and environmental levels. In the years since the model was advanced, chronic stress caused by racist environments as described in the minority health model has repeatedly been implicated as a potential

mechanism for various poor health outcomes, including mental health issues, substance abuse, reproductive and sexual health problems, and hypertension and cardiac health issues (Gattis & Larson, 2016; Hicken et al., 2014; Pachankis, Hatzenbuehler, Rendina, Safren, & Parsons, 2015; Prather et al., 2016).

The first systematic review and meta-analysis of racism as a determinant of health outcomes was conducted in 2015 (Paradies et al., 2015). After looking at 333 studies conducted predominantly in the United States, its authors concluded that the evidence demonstrated that racism was associated with poor outcomes in both physical and mental health. They note that of the studies included for review, 37.2% found that exposure to racism was associated with depression and 21.3% of studies linked it to elevated stress. Among the studies, the largest mean weighted effect size was for negative mental health in general (r = -.23, 95% CI [-.24,-.21], k = 227). The effects of racism on health were not moderated by age, gender, place of birth, or level of education, but the effects on mental health were stronger for Asian and Latinx Americans compared to all other groups, while the effects on physical health were more severe for Latinx Americans compared to all other groups.

Racism can be understood as acting on three levels to perpetuate poor health outcomes: the internalized, the interpersonal, and the institutional (Jones, 2000). An analysis of access to renal transplantation among African Americans finds specific mechanisms by which racism on all three levels contributes to racial disparities in access to care and may be a helpful illustration of how public health can conceptualize and act upon the multi-level mechanisms of racism (Arriola, 2017). It suggests that African American

patients view themselves as not worthy of kidney transplants, an example of internalized racism; that physicians' explicit or implicit bias against African American patients may lead to fewer recommendations for transplant, an example of interpersonal racism; and that social and economic factors, such as education and access to care, reflect institutionalized racism. However, not all public health research on racism reflects the three levels of action developed in this work.

Further studies have also demonstrated that harboring racist attitudes is correlated with negative health outcomes, perhaps connected with poor stress regulation mediated by unhealthy stress hormone levels (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Leitner et al., 2016; Mendes, Gray, Mendoza-Denton, Major, & Epel, 2007; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008). In one study, implicit racial bias among white participants moderated their responses to being in the presence of African Americans during stressful tasks, such as being asked to perform math problems. Stress responses included elevated levels of observed anxiety, catabolic hormones, and self-reported threat appraisals (Mendes et al., 2007). White participants in this study were not screened for extreme racism, white supremacist sympathies, or any form of explicit bias. Another study that used bias data concluded that counties in which white people harbored higher rates of explicit bias against black people, white people died at a higher rate; in counties in which black people harbored higher rates of implicit bias against white people, black people died at a higher rate (Leitner et al., 2016). These correlations were independent of both county-level socioeconomic data and racial biases from the outgroup. While the white participants in this study were evaluated for levels of explicit bias, they were not assessed for white supremacy in particular.

Insight into white supremacy as a specific form of extreme racism, its manifestations at the internalized, interpersonal, and institutional levels, and its effects on health outcomes is absent from the public health literature.

White supremacy

Scholars taking a longer view of history, especially those in the field of sociology, may see white supremacy stretching backward in time, beyond contemporary experiences of people of color in the United States and elsewhere. The contention of social scientists who study it is that white supremacy is a historical force that shaped Europe's colonial history, ushered in the institutionalization of enslavement of Africans, and predicts recent and current policies toward formerly colonized countries (Christian, 2002). Sociologists may see white supremacy as the political and practical result of white people perceiving people of color as a threat, or of white people believing that segregation and stratification of the races is a natural tenet of biology (W. V. Z. James, 1959). This interpretation places white supremacy as both a sociological phenomenon and a historical one, tracing its lineage from the roots of slavery all the way to the current desire among some white supremacists to establish white ethno-states from which people of color and Jews would be forcibly excluded. Though some sociologists have attempted to focus on labor issues and social welfare programs as mechanisms, sociology gives us little understanding of what might be happening on the individual level to perpetuate white supremacy (Martin, 1972).

The field of psychology brings us closer to an understanding of what white supremacy is on the level of the individual white supremacist. White supremacy is a mechanism for white people, and white men in particular, to enjoy advantages conveyed upon them because of their whiteness; it is a co-construct of white privilege and cannot be understood without an investigation of privilege as unearned authority (Ming Liu, 2017).

Radicalization and deradicalization

The issue of radicalization into violent extremism has received a significant amount of academic interest in recent decades, with professionals from fields like criminology, psychology, sociology, and political science working to develop deeper understandings of the two processes.

The field of psychology has been especially prolific in its exploration of radicalization. A recent review of relevant articles, all focused on people who experienced radicalization into extremist Islamic ideology while living in western countries, consolidated five theories of radicalization and found two consistent contributing factors: perceived material deprivation relative to others and an incidence of a personal crisis of identity (King & Taylor, 2011). Here and in other studies relevant to extremist Islamic ideology, the role of organized movements, encountered either online or in real life, has been debated. Some models stress internal processes, such as perception of unfair deprivation and placing blame upon an enemy, in the path toward radicalized Islamist beliefs, with almost no consideration for the role of organized radical communities

(Borum, 2003). Others place more emphasis on joining a group and experiencing radicalization through social networks (Wiktorowicz, 2003). Mental health issues are commonly described as potential risk factors for extremism (Bhui & Jones, 2017; Marvasti & Rahman, 2017; Webber et al., 2018). Loss of significance, which is sometimes an emotional response to humiliating, demeaning, or shameful events, was associated with Islamic extremism among suspected militants in the Philippines (Marvasti & Rahman, 2017). In particular, radical Islamists have received attention from both the law enforcement and academics communities. A review of several major theories of Islamist radicalization revealed the constructs and stages of radicalization described in Table 1, parts of which were adapted from King and Taylor, 2011.

Table 1. Models of radicalization.

Authors	Ideology	Constructs
Borum, 2003	Islamic fundamentalism	Social and economic deprivation Inequality and resentment Blame and attribution Stereotyping and demonizing the enemy
Wiktorowicz, 2004	Islamic fundamentalism	Cognitive opening Religious seeking Frame alignment Socialization
Moghaddam, 2005	Islamic fundamentalism	Psychological interpretation of material conditions Perceived options to fight unfair treatment Displacement of aggression Moral engagement Solidification of categorical thinking The terrorist act
Rink and Sharma, 2018	Islamic fundamentalism	Historically troubled social relations High levels of religiosity Exposure to radical networks

Webber, 2018	Islamic fundamentalism	Desire for meaning Self-uncertainty Need for closure after significant personal loss
Densley, 2012	Street gangs	Relationships with people already in gangs Belonging to a particular neighborhood Demonstrating capability of violence Demonstrating capability of other criminal behavior Vouching, referrals
Maxson, 1998	Street gangs	Stressful events Delinquent self-concept Inconsistency in punishment at home Violence in home Violent peers School truancy

The literature on deradicalization tends to be focused on accounts of a single person's deradicalization journey or descriptions of programs aimed at preventing radicalization in Muslim youth. A number of publications that describe theories of deradicalization that were constructed from data analysis are included in Table 2.

Table 2. Models of deradicalization.

Authors	Location/ideology	Constructs
Reinares, 2011	Basque region nationalist and separatist organization	Changing political context Changing societal reaction to radicals Disagreement and discord within organization
Demant, 2010	Islamic fundamentalism	Ideology loses mass appeal Weak leadership within extremist group

Bubolz, 2015	White supremacy	Incarceration Group exit (e.g. romantic couples)
Ferguson, 2015	Northern Ireland political terrorism	Life changes Finding space to think Transformative leadership
Pyrooz, 2014	Street gangs	Lingering emotional or social ties to individual gang members

While some attempts have been made to distinguish religious extremism from other forms, many reviews do not distinguish between radicalization into various ideologies, compounding what may be significantly different experiences (Rink & Sharma, 2018; Vergani, Iqbal, Ilbahar, & Barton, 2018). One of these studies, searching for universal experiences within the process of radicalization, found that who radicalize report "push factors," such as relative depravation, repression by the state, and poverty; "pull factors," such as consumption of extremist propaganda; and "personal factors," such as mental health (Vergani et al., 2018).

Some research has been more focused on the radicalization process specific to white supremacy, but all but the most recent of these studies missed the development of the Internet as a forum for recruitment into extremist groups. Some factors, such as the perception of changing social norms as being threatening to the social and economic status of white people, and particularly heterosexual white men, are commonly listed by theorists (Blazak, 2001; Johnson, 2018; E. Lee & Leets, 2002). Non-ideological factors, such as a childhood history of abuse, have also been implicated in the search for a path through radicalization, suggesting that radicalized white supremacists resemble generic

gang members and violent offenders more generally (Simi et al., 2016). A criminological study into violent extremism reported correlations with lack of stable employment, radicalized peers, and a history of mental illness, while education and marital status were not significant predictors of violence (LaFree, Jensen, James, & Safer-Lichtenstein, 2018).

As complicated as radicalization can be, deradicalization from white supremacy may be an even more difficult topic to examine carefully, and even more vital for the purposes of public health work. A single individual may report multiple equally important reasons for choosing to leave violent extremism (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Horgan, Altier, Shortland, & Taylor, 2017). Disengagement with radicalized peers, including by being imprisoned, may be an important factor (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Horgan et al., 2017). There is also evidence to suggest that the process of deradicalization may never truly end for some former white supremacists, in spite of a strong desire to change and long-term, supported efforts to do so (Simi et al., 2017).

To date, no published study has investigated radicalization and deradicalization in tandem by speaking with the same people about both experiences. Instead, studies focus on either radicalization or deradicalization, suggesting the potential for richer and more complicated data gathering and analysis has yet to be met. A comparison of the themes that emerged from this thesis research and the themes described in the works cited here can be found in Chapter 5.

Violence as a public health problem

White supremacist ideology is increasingly a motivating factor for violence in the United States (Anti-Defamation League, 2018; Center on Extremism, 2019; Gruenewald, 2011; Reitman, 2018; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018). Other forms of violence have been described from a public health standpoint, often allowing clarity and success in addressing them. For example, Cure Violence is an organization in Chicago, Il., that considers gang violence a contagious disease and has successfully used that understanding to build effective interventions based on the principles of epidemiology (Slutkin, 2016; Slutkin et al., 2018). The organization's "interrupters" respond to reports of gang violence as laboratory scientists respond to foodborne disease outbreaks, finding associates of violence victims and treating them as being at elevated risk for carrying out further acts of violence. Other programs within the Cure Violence model treat the more distal causes of gang violence, addressing the social and economic issues that motivate gang affiliation.

Gender-based violence is another example of a form of violence that has been accepted as a public health issue. Its connection to sexual and reproductive health has allowed public health practitioners to develop a socioecological model to explain GBV and to focus on a wide range of related topics, ranging from obstetric violence to intimate partner violence (Abramsky et al., 2012; Das et al., 2012; Heise, 1998; Krishnan, Subbiah, Khanum, Chandra, & Padian, 2012; Lila, Oliver, Galiana, & Gracia, 2013). Finally, violence against children is widely held to be a public health problem. The field of public health has expended considerable energy in developing surveillance methods

and interventions specific to violence against children across cultures, even within humanitarian and conflict-affected settings (Chiang et al., 2016; Lilleston, Goldmann, Verma, & McCleary-Sills, 2017; Stark & Landis, 2016; World Health Organization, 2016).

Conclusion

The paucity of rigorous review of white supremacy, racism, and radicalization and deradicalization from a public health perspective reflects a deeper lack of understanding and knowledge on this topic, and the utility of lessons learned from criminology, sociology, and psychology is limited for public health practitioners. Criminologists tend to focus on radicalization, a natural limitation given the scope of their focus. Sociology under-focuses on the individual, while psychology exclusively focuses there. If we seek a theoretical understanding of radicalization and deradicalization into and out of white supremacy that will allow us to build testable interventions against white supremacy on any of the levels of influence in which it acts, we must do our own work in public health.

To date, no study has attempted to examine radicalization and deradicalization together within a given individual, and no efforts have been made to build a theory of the two processes that could be used as the basis for public health interventions. The possibility that public health practices could be applied to white supremacy remains open and not fully investigated. The purpose of this qualitative research is to assess whether a theory grounded in established public health practice can be built to describe radicalization and deradicalization in to and out of white supremacy.

Chapter 3: methods

The following chapter describes the methods of sampling, data collection, and analysis used to conduct this research.

To date, little information is available about potential exposures and experiences that may prime people for radicalization into white supremacy. Academic research has also largely neglected the emotional and intellectual changes that lead to deradicalization. An emic, qualitative approach to the two processes specific to white supremacy is a necessary first step.

Two primary and related concerns were in gaining enough trust from potential participants that they would be willing to speak honestly about sensitive topics and in maintaining confidentiality. These two challenges shaped many aspects of the methodology. For example, participants were not asked their names. They were able to contact me and conduct interviews using "burner" emails and Skype handles, i.e. single-use accounts that were not linked to their full names or any identifying information. Interviews were conducted over Skype to minimize the possibility that the conversations would be overheard. I repeatedly encouraged participants to ask questions about data management and use, the aims of the project, and any concerns they had. Finally, the transcripts themselves were heavily redacted, with names of the participants, their friends and associates, and all locations being removed before analysis began. At the specific request of one participant, the names of the various white supremacist

organizations to which he belonged during his life were also redacted, because he believed that he could be identified by those parts of his history alone.

Internal Review Board clearance

The Emory University Internal Review Board (IRB) approved this study, IRB no. 00104279, along with a waiver of written consent. Waiving written consent decreased the possibility that identifying information could be discovered and used to discredit, harass, or embarrass study participants. The study was considered to have minimal risk potential. Suggested edits were formal and focused on the specific paperwork needed for the written consent waiver.

Population and sample

To be eligible for this study, participants had to self-identify as former white supremacists. Those who described themselves as former Ku Klux Klan members, former skinheads, and formerly violent racists were also included, and all participants described having held similarly racist and anti-Semitic beliefs in the past. Individuals who were under the age of 18 were excluded. I was not contacted by any potential participants who did not speak fluent English or who identified as white supremacists in the present, two groups that would have been excluded under the guidelines determined at the beginning of the study.

The initial plan for recruitment rested on an offer of assistance from an organization that works with former gang members to intervene in the cycle of gang violence.

However, the organization was unable to follow through, so I turned to the Internet and snowball sampling. I contacted the small number of men and women who openly identify as former white supremacists, informed them of the purpose of my research, and answered their questions about my work, intentions, and qualifications. These men and women were connected through their outreach work to formerly violent white supremacists and were uniformly helpful and interested. They forwarded my research goals and contact information to people within their networks. With their help, I found many potential participants, but I was unable to interview them all. For example, one potential participant asked repeatedly to reschedule the interview before finally not responding to my inquiries.

After the third interview, it became clear that there would be at least one critically important divide between groups of participants: whether they experienced radicalization before or during the era of the Internet. Most participants up to this point had been radicalized before the Internet was commonly available in homes, and the single participant who was recruited over the Internet described a different path into white supremacy. The distinctions seemed worth developing, especially considering that this research was not being carried out for historical interest, but rather to gain both current and thorough knowledge of radicalization and deradicalization. I decided to attempt to recruit additional younger participants whose radicalization would have been more shaped by the Internet. To do so, I created an Internet-ready sharable graphic including the purpose of the study, the commitment to confidentiality, and my contact information, and asked my online networks to distribute them widely. These graphics were disseminated via Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, where they attracted the attention

of a younger and more internet-savvy group of potential participants. All potential
participants contacted me between June and September of 2018.

After recruitment was complete, the participant population was comprised of six people,
including five men and one woman. Three participants had experienced radicalization
before the era of the Internet and three either began their radicalization experiences or
were primarily radicalized online. All six participants self-identified as former white
supremacists, though they used a variety of terms to describe themselves or different
phases in their evolution, including punk, skinhead, fascist, anti-Semite, racist, and
white nationalist. All participants described themselves as having moved beyond their
involvement with white supremacy, assigning themselves to the group known as
"formers," but one described struggling with lingering anti-Semitism; another reported
keeping himself from reading the news to suppress what he felt were the remnants of his
white supremacist beliefs. In spite of the continuing sentiments some participants
expressed, all described themselves as deradicalized and were able to describe the
process by which they changed their minds about white supremacy.

The interview guide

The interview guide was developed to allow participants to speak openly and at their
own level of comfort about their experiences. Open-ended questions covered all life
stages and both radicalization and deradicalization processes. The guide included
questions on both the emotional and intellectual experiences that led to major changes

in ideology, important familial and social relationships, and the participants' own understanding of what they had experienced.

At times during the semi-structured interviews, I used both scripted probes and probes suggested by the natural flow of the conversation to gain more in-depth information. For example, a participant who described two important sets of friends during the years in which he was experiencing radicalization was asked to expand upon the role each set of friends played in his life.

In addition to questions related to consent to be interviewed and recorded and solicitations for participants to ask questions, the scripted interview guide included 20 questions and 31 prompts for further details. The prompts were selectively employed when I felt that the participant had not covered certain details in his or her response to the previous question.

All interviews lasted between one and two hours. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed and uploaded to MaxQDA 11, which was used for each step of the analysis. Once they were transcribed, the interview recordings were destroyed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

The interview guide is included in the appendix.

Interview format

After the introductions and attainment of verbal consent, each interview began with questions about participants' childhood experiences and education. These questions were kept as vague as possible (e.g. "How would you describe your childhood?") in order to allow participants to frame answers in a way that felt most relevant to them. In addition to the collection of basic bio-data and demographic information, these questions often allowed participants to begin constructing their own narratives around radicalization. For example, where there was a history of trauma, difficult relationships with parents, or trouble with authority figures, it was frequently mentioned first here. These questions also allowed me and the participant to build conversational comfort and rapport before moving on to more difficult and sensitive questions.

The next section of the interview guide was related to the time period when participants were experiencing radicalization. They were asked about first contact with radicalized people and groups, major life changes during that time, gang membership, influential relationships, and activities associated with the expression of white supremacist beliefs. Two questions focused on political beliefs and beliefs about whiteness. Others were centered on participants' perceptions of political, social, or emotional shifts in their lives.

The third section of the interview guide was about deradicalization, and its various topics mirror, to some degree, those of the previous section. Participants were again asked about life changes, including those in political, social, or emotional spheres. They

were also asked about people or institutions who supported their transition away from white supremacy and barriers to change.

The final question, which was intended to help end the interview on a positive note, was "What do you like about your life now that feels really important, or that would have surprised you a few years ago?" Participants were then encouraged to ask questions or to add anything they thought was important to their narrative.

Data management

I collected all the data personally and kept it on a password-secured laptop in password-secured files, regularly backed up to a secure device as analysis continued. Interview recordings were deleted from the recording device after being transferred to the secure laptop, then deleted from the laptop after transcription. Participants were first issued a number, then a pseudonym as the analysis process began. No document that links pseudonyms with real names or initial identification numbers exists. All identifying information, including names, places, and in some cases affiliated group names, were redacted from the transcripts before analysis began.

Analysis

The analysis phase began with the transcription process, which allowed me to become deeply familiar with all six participants' reported experiences. After the transcripts had been migrated to MaxQDA, I began reviewing the transcripts individually, conducting line-by-line coding, and writing memos on potential codes, possible patterns, and

questions to be explored during analysis. I then drafted an initial codebook, used it to code three of the transcripts, and gave un-coded copies of the same three transcripts and the codebook to two colleagues, both also graduate students at Rollins in the Behavioral Sciences and Health Education department who were conducting qualitative research for their own theses. Their coding efforts and subsequent conversations revealed high intercoder reliability and agreement and yielded a slightly altered second draft of the codebook, which was then used to finalize initial coding of all six transcripts.

After initial coding was completed, I continued the analysis by writing a brief case report for each participant, which included a description and life history, important themes of their stories, and short explorations of at least three critical codes. These are not included in their entirety within this paper, but they informed further readings and allowed me to become more intimately familiar with the data set. Next, I began to write descriptive analyses of codes across the interviews, focusing on the central experiences connected to each code, variations across or within interviews, and how saturated each code was across the interviews. At this step, I refrained from drawing direct comparisons between interviews. While moving on to write short comparisons of the experiences connected with each code, I also began the process of axial coding, which involved linking together codes to begin building constructs. Axial coding and construct identification yielded several significant themes that were either present in all interviews or were deeply important to some of the participants. After describing these themes thoroughly, I was able to arrange them in something resembling chronological order, yielding the beginnings of the theoretical models presented here. Further review

of the interviews illustrated important cycles and connections between the themes, also represented in the models.

Grounded theory

Because this research was motivated by a desire to build a theory of radicalization and deradicalization into and out of white supremacy, grounded theory guided both the data collection and the analysis processes. Grounded theory was developed to enable rigorous and evidence-based development of new theories and to extend extant theories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Many of the practices aligned with grounded theory are common in qualitative research. My efforts to incorporate grounded theory rigorously and consistently throughout both the collection and analysis stages are rooted in an understanding of grounded theory as requiring three particular elements: an interest in building theory, an effort to do so with evidence-based constructs and relationships, and the use of theoretical sampling and iterative analysis (Bazeley, 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

My use of grounded theory began in the planning stages for this study because I proposed to develop a theory specific to white supremacy. The interview guide was intended to allow participants to reflect on their experiences and opinions as freely as possible, without focusing on hypothesized constructs, and I was able to adapt it during interviews to be responsive to each participant's reported experiences. For example, insights into the important of whiteness as an identity varied greatly between participants; those for whom it played an important role were asked more questions

about its effects on their lives. After the first three interviews, I incorporated theoretical sampling to diversify my sample according to some interesting distinctions I had begun to see, specifically between people who had been radicalized by primarily offline experiences and those whose radicalization had begun on the Internet. To apply grounded theory during the analysis phase, I moved from line-by-line coding and initial codes to axial codes, allowing me to connect themes and important experiences as I built constructs.

Chapter 4: results

The six former white supremacists interviewed for this research were generous, thorough, and thoughtful in recounting their experiences with radicalization and deradicalization. This chapter presents the results of those interviews, beginning with brief case analyses of each participant. It continues with explanations of important themes and a proposed theoretical model of radicalization and deradicalization into and out of white supremacy.

Case analyses of former white supremacists

Janet

I was just so rage-filled. Anger and rage. And I didn't understand it. And at the same time, I felt so personally worthless. I felt I was trash.

Janet is a 44-year-old woman living in the south, where she is married and raising a family. She grew up in a two-parent household with an older brother. From an early age, she struggled to fit in with her family, which she describes as having an outwardly functional but inwardly precarious dynamic. Janet was not abused by any family members as a child but talks about a lack of boundaries and an unstable emotional connection with her parents, describing a childhood in which she always felt like she was walking on eggshells. Early on in her education, it became clear that she was intellectually gifted. However, she struggled to find the motivation to complete schoolwork she felt was meaningless, in spite of her parents' insistence. Janet enjoyed playing team sports until her adolescence.

When Janet was 15, she was raped by two men at a party. At the time, she was attending a private Catholic school and felt unable to report the event either to any adults at her school or to her parents, whom she felt would be angry at her for attending the party and drinking alcohol. At around the same time, Janet began to spend more time with members of various counter-culture groups, initially becoming close with other teens who identified with the hippies of the 1960s. Through them, she moved closer to a teen and young-adult culture associated with skateboarding and punk rock music. These associations, fueled by the rage and self-hatred she felt after being raped, facilitated the beginnings of her connections to white supremacist groups. She found the skinheads at the periphery of the counter-cultural groups and felt close kinship with them. She began to engage in and enjoy violence.

Through escalating acts of violence and other activities, Janet became increasingly tied to the white supremacists. With each step toward them, she felt increasingly unable to break away. In her mind, she was continually becoming less fit for life among any other group of people through her actions. Her late teenage years were spent ditching school and running away from home repeatedly, seeking out old and new skinhead friends, and living with them until she was found and returned to her parents' house by law enforcement.

Ultimately, her parents stopped allowing her to return home. She moved in with the mother of her boyfriend, a skinhead who was in training at a nearby United States Army base and frequently away from home. This maternal figure did not confront her son or

Janet about their extremist affiliations, but she gave her the emotional space, comfortable and consistent family life, and intellectual push that she needed to choose to leave white supremacy behind. Janet eventually cut all ties with the white supremacist community, went to college, and started a family.

Stephen

I did bad things, but I'm a good man.

Stephen, a retired Army veteran in his fifties, has lived most of his life in the west. He was a bright and well-liked child who received a Catholic education in spite of growing up in poverty and was an active participant in a local Boy Scout troop. His family was not motivated by their religion to send him to a Catholic school, but rather by a desire for Stephen to be educated among predominantly white children. Catholicism and scouting became important parts of Stephen's life and identity.

As a young teenager, Stephen was mischievous and frequently in trouble at the public school to which he had transferred. He identified with nerds and felt that his scouting experience, though deeply enjoyable, was somewhat paramilitary. A deepening sense of alienation at school led him to create a white supremacist group with a friend. The two boys started to attract the attention of formally organized, prominent groups of Neo-Nazis in the area, who felt that Stephen had mastered a young, articulate presentation they wanted for recruitment. By the time Stephen joined the Army at 18, he had committed and been convicted of various acts of violence motivated by white

supremacy. His deep involvement led him to change his name legally when he enlisted, but his beliefs remained unchanged and he continued to commit violence.

Stephen was on active combat deployment as a medical corpsman when his beliefs began to change. His strong ties with the others in his unit, which included people of color, made him doubt the white supremacist views he had harbored for so long. By the time he had returned home after the combat deployment, Stephen no longer considered himself a white supremacist. However, to this day, decades later, he struggles to trust Jewish people.

Ben

When you look at yourself and you know that deep down somewhere inside of you there's a Nazi hiding in there, it's scary. And you want to make sure that it never comes out.

Ben is a young man who has lived most of his life in the south, where he currently attends nursing school. He is engaged to be married to a woman of color who has been with him throughout his years of radicalization and deradicalization. Ben's involvement with white supremacy started with an intellectual fascination with religion and morality, and later, biological aspects of race. As a teenager, he held liberal and even leftist political and economic views. In college, he began to worry about loosening moral standards. He sought out the company of a group of Christians who, he says, acted less as religious mentors and more as intellectual peers with whom he could discuss taboo subjects. His religious beliefs grew increasingly conservative as he affiliated himself with

a right-wing campus reading group, where a professor guided discussions on what is called the Jewish Question and other taboo, racially charged topics Ben was curious about.

Increasingly, Ben enjoyed the intellectual and religious companionship he found in these circles. When he found the Daily Stormer, an alt-right and white supremacist online community, he thought at first that he had found a massive online book club where his intellectual curiosity would be encouraged and satisfied. Through the website, he made in-person contact with a local group of white supremacists. Some were more violent than Ben was comfortable with; his main activities, beyond his intellectual pursuits, involved public efforts to normalize pride in white identity and did not include violence.

In the end, the pressure to be involved in violence and an ultimatum from his partner compelled Ben to leave white supremacist circles. He also struggled to hold on to his racist views as his intellect pushed him to continue asking difficult questions. Finding other intellectual exemplars helped Ben deradicalize. However, he feels that he cannot engage in politics or even closely follow the news without running the risk of falling back into old habits of thought.

Zachary

Those questions can either, I think, lead you to a really dark place if you can't tussle with them in the proper manner, or you can mature and learn how things really are and, you know, be a better person.

Zachary is a young man living in the Pacific Northwest, where he grew up among a large minority Native American population. He remembers hearing Native children make what he considered racist statements about white people at school with impunity and wondering why it was unacceptable for him to speak about them in the same way. White members of his community frequently spoke disparagingly of Native Americans, which Zachary says influenced him strongly as a child. On the other hand, he remembers learning about the history of maltreatment of Native Americans in the United States and feeling both guilty and awkward among his classmates, whom he feared might judge him as a white child.

Zachary's parents raised him to be skeptical of authority figures. His rebellious nature and an early aesthetic interest in the appearance of Wehrmacht soldiers, who reminded him of the Empire's soldiers in Star Wars, led him to look online for further information about Nazi Germany. At the same time, he started reading more about politics. He found online platforms where he could ask some of the more taboo questions he had been thinking about and express admiration for the aesthetics, and later politics, of fascists and Nazis. An early influential online friend who identified as a Nazi came out as bisexual to Zachary, who was beginning to feel that he was attracted to men. The online friend helped Zachary craft an identity where he could be both openly gay and consider himself a Nazi, in spite of that group's notorious oppression of all non-heterosexual identities.

Zachary's experiences with white supremacy were entirely online. Beyond his activities as an Internet troll, he was probably his own most wounded victim, since he struggled to incorporate his queer identity with his beliefs in genetic essentialism. He speaks about

being depressed, bitter, and angry during this time of his life, and how he regarded himself and his sexuality with disgust. However, he regards his time believing in the ideology of white supremacy as a valuable learning experience and something vital to his personal intellectual growth.

Toby

I started reading about World War II and the Holocaust, then I started reading about why Hitler was doing all this stuff. And I guess I kind of found a way to link it to my problems, you know, being bullied.

Toby had a difficult childhood. Frequently bullied at school and without strong familial relationships, he struggled to graduate from high school and was eager to start a new life once he did. Toby's radicalization began with an interest in history, specifically World War II. After a brief stint in the Army stoked his nascent racist views, he began looking online for more information about Nazi Germany. His search eventually led him to meet up in person with a recruiter for Volksfront, a neo-Nazi group that at the time was active in his area. Toby began performing manual labor for the local group to begin his journey to being patched, or made a full-fledged member of Volksfront. The gang's leadership offered Toby financial support for his family and protection from the people who used to bully him. Finally, for the first time, Toby felt cared for and appreciated.

Even at the beginning of his time with Volksfront, Toby felt uncomfortable with his affiliation. His search for a community with whom to talk about the intellectual implications of his white supremacist ideology had failed; his new comrades were more likely to spend the day drinking than debating the genetic basis of race. He was often

physically intimidated by the other members and feared being the victim of violence. Toby began reaching out to a more active and violent extremist group, the National Socialist Movement, hoping that he would be able to learn more about the ideology behind white supremacy while carrying out direct actions with them.

At the same time, his disillusionment with Volksfront was motivating Toby to question his own ideology. He was worried by the contradictions in himself and the white supremacist movement as a whole, and he felt unable to resolve them. In the end, Toby's exhaustion and disillusionment motived his deradicalization. He decided to move to an urban area with more cultural, racial, and religious diversity in order to broaden his horizons. He began dating a woman of color and got deeply involved in leftist political and social movements. He also helps other white supremacists in their deradicalization journeys.

Andrew

When we talked about deporting non-whites, it was phrased as the financially assisted repatriation of all non-whites, not brutally throwing them in trucks and forcing them out. It was always made to sound very reasonable. And I would say that my greatest gift then, if you could call it that, was the ability to make the unreasonable sound reasonable.

Andrew's struggles with his parents in his childhood echoed through difficult relationships with authority figures throughout his school years. Bright and strong-willed, he was frequently in trouble with his teachers. When he was expelled from his Catholic school, he was sent to a boarding school, where he first encountered skinhead

culture. Andrew was drawn to the skinheads through punk music, but it was the violence that he found the most thrilling. Regular fights quickly became a weekend routine. Andrew felt that his new friends respected and admired him more, and the status he gained with the skinheads made it easier for him to end his old friendships. The more Andrew was willing to commit extreme acts of violence with the skinheads, the more protected he felt by the group, in spite of the increasing chaos of his life.

It was only after he had been involved with the skinhead groups for a while that Andrew's activities and ideologies started to be motivated by racism. His cadre of skinheads began identifying as racist after white power music, specifically the Screwdriver album White Power, became locally popular. Andrew, motivated by a desire for more notoriety and power, was increasingly radicalized. His intelligence and ability to articulate the white supremacist ideology propelled him into a public, open role as a spokesperson. As an intellectual leader of the white supremacist movement, Andrew stopped engaging in street fighting and focused on making a public argument for racist ideology.

Andrew's deradicalization began with the birth of his first child. With a new identity as a parent, his radical connections and activities felt less important. He was also beginning a new career path that he felt took him further from his extremist roots. However, it took years for Andrew to fully disengage his radical ties. He found the safety and community he craved in other settings, which helped. Although his connection to white identity and his sense of its superiority lingered for years, Andrew has done a great deal of emotional work to pull himself away from extremism, and he considers himself to be on a perpetual journey of self-discovery and improvement.

Important themes in radicalization

This section presents a thematic analysis of radicalization, drawing upon the experiences of all six participants to describe the following important themes from their radicalization journeys: aesthetics, identity and identity construction, feelings of power and self-worth, searching for community, escalation of engagement, intellectual curiosity, the stigma surrounding taboo subjects, violence, and ambivalence.

Aesthetics

An early compulsion toward the aesthetics of white supremacist groups was very common among the participants. For some, the attraction was toward fictional portrayals of fascist-like groups, including the Storm Troopers from Star Wars. Others were first drawn toward the appearance of Wehrmacht troops, the German soldiers during the Nazi era, and their tanks and weapons. For others, however, the interest in aesthetics was based in personal experiences. These were the individuals who spoke the most about the changes their own appearances took on during their radicalization. Whatever the motivation behind the interest in the aesthetics of fascism, all participants spoke of the power of a uniform, which allowed them to connect with other white supremacists and intimidate people who disagreed with their politics.

For some of the younger participants, the interest in clothing and appearance was rooted in fantasy and history. Zachary remembers watching the Star Wars movies and noticing the visual connections between the appearance of the fictional Storm Troopers and the historical Wehrmacht soldiers who fought for Nazi Germany. He believes that it was that aesthetic appeal, combined with an interest in politics, that guided his first steps toward fascism. Toby, who shared Zachary's fascination with World War II, found

himself drawn to the appearance of modern white supremacists. For Toby, however, the clothing was less important than physicality in general. He describes in detail the effect that meeting a member of Volksfront had on him, especially the man's size, muscular appearance, and tattoos.

Toby and Zachary, two of the youngest participants to be interviewed, also did the least to change their appearance as an expression of their views. Their attraction to the aesthetics of fascism and white supremacy were rooted in fantasy and history, with only a passing interest in how they could elevate their status or find community by changing their own appearances. For Janet and Stephen, however, their interest in aesthetics was rooted in their personal experiences of trying to find a place in their communities, both radicalized and, in Stephen's case, mainstream. They also both did more than Toby and Zachary to change their personal appearance during their radicalized experiences.

Stephen dates the beginning of his interest in white supremacy as far back as his early childhood, when he began to be drawn to any community or group that required its members to dress in a certain way.

> I have a thing with uniforms…. I love Boy Scouts, I was involved in Boy Scouts, and, uh, heavily involved. Anything that involved a uniform. I loved serving mass because I got to wear all the stuff. I liked all the trappings like that. And I think that's also a big thing, um, for a school, for the military, the Marine Corps, anything. Same thing in the Army. It makes you feel special, it makes you feel elite, you know?

The clothing associated with racists helped Stephen and Janet identify as white supremacists and connect with others in new locations who were also radicalized. Their interest in the aesthetics of white supremacy were deeply personal. For Janet, adopting

the aesthetic of the racist skinheads with whom she was associating made her feel strong and untouchable, a powerful combination after surviving sexual violence.

> And the power that my physical appearance had to intimidate, bother, agitate people, that was really appealing. I really liked that. My shaved head, you know.... I had this skinhead girl haircut where it's like, a shaved head, a bridge of bangs, um, you know, like, I liked my physical appearance being abrasive. That felt empowering. That was something that I really liked, the idea that it was a power that I felt like I had, that I felt so good about.

With such a commanding physical appearance, Janet delighted in public confrontations with people who wanted to challenge the racism she was espousing.

Identity and identity construction

Participants described how their identity changed as they became increasingly radicalized. For some, like Janet and Toby, the transition felt natural and proceeded smoothly. For others, the changes in their identities disturbed them and created barriers to further radicalization.

Zachary struggled from the beginning with the changes in his identity. Having been raised by his parents to question authority and build his own belief system with rigor, Zachary felt strongly about the importance of building a style, philosophy, and identity from first principles. Although that part of the process compelled and fulfilled him, his first steps toward radicalization caused fundamental clashes within his identity. While he began exploring Nazism, Zachary was coming to the realization that he was attracted to men.

I think it definitely made me more extremely bitter and, like, um, especially repressed, because it made me constantly question my homosexuality and my transgender feelings, which, they're not like, it's not strong, I don't want to transition, I just feel l like there are feminine aspects of my personality. Like, it's difficult for me to integrate it when I'm believing in like this genetic essentialism, I have contradictory feelings inside all the time. I was always beating myself up and trying to find ways to justify myself or fix myself.

One of the first people he spoke with online about Nazism identified as a bisexual man who tried to help Zachary resolve his gender identity with Nazi ideology.

[H]e would always make stuff up, point to evidence that Nazis were actually pro-gay, that the Nazi persecution of gays was Soviet propaganda, stuff like that, to fit his own Nazism, to fit Nazism into himself without really…. And so that kind of helped me fit Nazism into myself, because I felt gay or whatever.

In spite of this assistance, Zachary continued to struggle throughout his time as an avowed white supremacist and Nazi, especially when he began to date men. He never felt fully able to embrace an identity as a white supremacist or fascist, in spite of the strength of his beliefs. In part because of that identity gap, he never engaged in violence or extreme in-person activities as a member of a radicalized group.

The second dimension of identity construction reflects the relative ease with which some participants were able to change their identities fundamentally. Janet and Toby, both motivated by a desire to claim agency, personhood, and self-worth by constructing and acting out an identity that would earn them a secure place in a community, experienced much greater and more seamless identity changes. They both experienced wide swings in politics from the extreme left to the extreme right and, in Toby's case, back again, before moderating.

Janet grew up feeling that her family would never accept her; Toby spent his young life

with the same sense, compounded by the knowledge that their poverty was also a factor

in supporting him. It became vitally important for both Toby and Janet to find people

who would welcome and support them, something Janet felt she could only do by

changing herself to meet the standards of a new group. As a pre-teen, she was attracted

to the hippie culture of the anti-war movement prominent in the 1960s, which

eventually brought her into contact with white supremacist skinhead groups. Her

growing importance in that context was very important to her and formed a large part of

the identity she was building. Over time, she felt that an increasingly large portion of her

identity was tied to the white supremacist movement, with little left of her old self.

Toby's identity shifts cover similar ideological ground, but much more quickly.

> And it was all pretty rapid. I went from a vegetarian left-wing hippie,
> almost, trying to figure out myself. I made this drastic 180 and came back
> into the right wing. For a second, yeah, they got pretty extreme. But it
> didn't go from wanting to talk to somebody and then wanting to be out in
> the streets with tactical gear and the NSM, so yeah. But then it turned
> around again, I got tired of it and was realizing that this wasn't the way to
> live, this isn't right, so I made a quick change back as well.

In spite of the vast span of ideology and identity that Toby and Janet covered, neither of

them spoke of challenges associated with changing the fundamentals of who they were.

It was, for Janet, part of the intoxication of extremism.

> As I was in longer, more and more, my identity was, like, all caught up in
> the movement, and that my personal identity is more and more stripped
> away, and my identity only in terms of the movement... I was more and
> more attached to that, and to the belief system as my identity, rather than
> my own personal identity.

Feelings of power and self-worth

Feeling powerful or worthy, either as an individual or as a member of a group, was an important element of radicalization for all participants. For some, like Toby and Stephen, power and self-worth were characteristics imparted upon an individual by radicalized groups. Others, like Zachary, thought about power as a group characteristic and felt that white people as a group were in danger because of modern social changes. Janet's experience shared elements of both categories.

At the time of their radicalization, many participants who later felt a sense of power as a member of a group were coming from a place of perceived powerlessness or weakness. Toby and Stephen were both bullied in school in the years immediately preceding the beginning of their alliance with white supremacist groups; both felt marginalized and unpopular. When the small white supremacist group Stephen started with a school friend as a young teenager caught the attention of a large, powerful radicalized group, Stephen was ecstatic.

> We all felt we were, wow, we're legit now. And we were like, 14, 15. And we got recognition down there, they know we're serious, we're in the cause…. We were alienated then, we didn't…. People didn't think we were cool at school, we weren't jocks…. I was into Latin and the astronomy club. I know, right? Super hot. Big on D and D [Dungeons and Dragons], we had a big D and D club. And then it was like, oh, here we are, fucking Nazis, that's pretty badass.

Toby also felt a surge of confidence and power when he began to meet with white supremacists in person. He had been impressed with the physical appearance of his first contact at Volksfront, and his sense of the group's power and strength did not waver as he met more of its members.

> I'm a scrawny guy, I'm weighing in at 145, 150 pounds, I don't have a lot of meat on my bones, so me compared to this guy, who's like, 6 foot something, all muscle, and just looks like he could rip you apart, it made me feel better, it made me feel more confident in myself as well.

Like Toby and Stephen, Janet struggled with an extreme sense of worthlessness in the time before she radicalized; however, for her, that feeling was rooted in surviving sexual violence. As her teenage years continued, Janet leaned more heavily on what she describes as her counter-culture contacts for a sense of her own worth. Moving to the margins of the punk scene, she found the skinheads.

> I was just so rage-filled. Anger and rage. And not just teenage angst, I mean, I was just in a rage. And I didn't understand it. And at the same time, I felt so personally worthless. I felt I was trash. And on the very periphery of the punk scene were the skinheads, and they were like, they were the most violent people who were part of that scene. And um, but they all always stuck together, you know, I mean, and that all really appealed to me.... They were the worst of the worst, so surely, they'd have room for me, this worthless piece of trash. Surely, they'd got to take me. And I didn't even have to try.

Her feelings of worthlessness meant that Janet could not imagine another group or community that would accept her. Unlike Toby and Stephen, who rejoiced in the sense of power connected to the communities they found, she simply could not believe that she had any options. As one of a small number of women in white supremacist circles, Janet's experience was also one of more individual sexual empowerment.

> And again, it was part of the draw for me.... The sense of, hey, I could go anywhere, and all I had to do was find other skinheads. And I'd have a place to stay. I could get a boyfriend. So there was that twisted sense of sexual empowerment, even though interpersonally, most of my relationships at that time were terrible and filled with violence. It was a counter-culture based on dehumanizing and objectifying those perceived as weaker, so women don't fare very well in that hierarchy. But I also, because there were very few women that were part of that, I could essentially go out with whoever I wanted. For my fractured, broken, sexual identity, um, that was its own sense of empowerment.

Being a woman gave her a power and specific role in the white supremacist movement, along with a perceived ability to choose partners, none of which she had experienced outside of it. In spite of the violence she experienced at the hands of her sexual and romantic partners, she felt strong and validated within her radicalized community.

Not all participants were compelled by individual power or worth in the same way. Zachary did not speak of individual feelings of powerlessness or worthlessness, but he worried, and in fact still worries, about the declining power of white people in general. While radicalized, he felt that Jews and people of color threatened white people and were even plotting on a global scale to eliminate them. In coming to view the world as a warzone, he felt the need to choose a side, defend whiteness, and fight back.

Intellectual curiosity

Intellectual curiosity, or a fundamental interest in racist ideologies rooted in thoughtfulness about the world rather than an emotional reaction to experiences, was an important part of the radicalization for some participants. The three participants who were recruited before the Internet was widely available in homes, Janet, Stephen, and Andrew, did not speak extensively about intellectual justifications for radicalization. For the three younger participants, however, intellectual curiosity played a fundamental role in their radicalization.

Janet, Andrew, and Stephen did not experience intellectual curiosity about race as a precursor to their radicalization. After Andrew had been heavily involved in radicalized communities for a long time, however, he found himself becoming a leader in

communicating the white supremacist message. He was clever, skilled with words, and trained in debate; he delighted in tripping up opponents with their own statements and rules. His role became a purely intellectual one.

> Then I was respected. I was writing the literature, I was building websites where no one had them before. I could articulate our position in a way that not many could, not any of the skinheads anyways. So when the media became interested, I became the spokesman. And it was when I was well into that, there came the conflicting identity between the pseudo-intellectual and the street theater. And I stopped wearing bomber jackets, I'd wear a suit and tie.

At the zenith of his involvement with white supremacy, rather than being violent himself, Andrew promoted the use of violence to others, selling them the dream of a white ethno-state with the type of sophistry that ensnared Toby, Zachary, and Ben. For these younger participants, radicalization into white supremacy started with intellectual curiosity rooted in a desire to make sense of life by matching their lived experiences to a wider understanding of the world. Their skepticism about global power structures and race relations fueled online research and a desire to talk with others who were asking the same questions. These Internet forays either led to intellectually and emotionally unsatisfying conclusions or to in-person communities of white supremacists, with the same result.

For Zachary and Toby, their radicalization can be traced to their early school days. Zachary's intellectual curiosity about the difference between white people and people of color started in school. He felt that, as a white child attending a school with a large minority of Native American children, he was treated poorly in some situations.

It's not like there was incessant harassment towards white kids… but sometimes they would say things, like a double standard that you would never get away with as a white kid. That makes you ask certain questions, you know? And those questions can either, I think, lead you to a really dark place if you can't tussle with them in the proper manner, or you can mature and learn how things really are and, you know, be a better person.

Zachary, reflecting on the awkwardness of learning the history of attempted genocide in a classroom with Native children, was especially worried that he would be judged for the historical transgressions of white people. Like him, Toby also started linking his personal problems with bullying to the historical forces that combined to cause World War II and the Holocaust, which both boys had been reading about with fascination.

I started reading about why Hitler was doing all this stuff. And I guess I kind of found a way to link it to my problems, you know, being bullied. I started noticing in high school that the minority students would separate themselves, not really understanding it myself, why they were doing that. But I assumed it was because they didn't like us.

Eventually, Zachary and Toby's questions about race, politics, and history led them online, where their intellects were satisfied in the company of people who were willing to talk about the taboo subjects they were thinking about. Political questions were paramount to Zachary, while Toby was more interested in race relations. Zachary continued to turn to dubious, crowd-sourced corners of the Internet until he fully embraced conspiracy theories about the role of Jewish people in the world, fully immersed in skepticism about who was in power in the world and who was to blame for global problems. For both men, their desire to engage intellectually eventually carried over into his real life. Toby was confused about his nascent racism and in search of a guide, so he posted in Storm Front that he was ready to meet someone in person.

I think I was just having trouble coming to terms with ideas in my head. I
didn't know if they were right, I didn't know if they were wrong. Not
having any type of key figure in my life, I mean, my mom, while she was
around, we didn't have a very good relationship, so I didn't feel like I had
anybody real to talk to about it. And I don't know, I just was interested in
speaking to somebody who really felt that way.

Both young men saw themselves as personally persecuted but chose to align themselves

with historical white persecutors in what began as purely intellectual engagement. Ben

shared their intellectual curiosity, but it was not rooted in a feeling of personal

victimization. For him, the first moments of his radicalization began when he started to

wonder about the genetic and biological differences between races. Early contact with

racists who were also highly placed in his academic circles during college fed his

interest.

And I had a friend who was also in the same place, that, um, he was a
graduate studies student, he was getting his PhD in biology. And I asked
him one day, like, hey man, what do you think about this? This is what I'm
thinking about right now and I just want to know your perspective. And he
was like, you know, I think about that a lot, is how genetics is impacted by
small differences. And he was like, you wanna know something
interesting? He said black people don't get delta sleep.

At the same time, Ben was becoming increasingly involved with conservative, traditional

religious sects. He found himself disgusted by the state of the modern world, which he

perceived as irredeemably diseased.

I wanted to understand what the disease of the modern world was, and I
saw that it was abstraction. And I was like, hmm, that's interesting. So
who's pushing abstraction? I thought maybe it was Protestantism, but I
ultimately came to the conclusion that a lot of it was the Jews. I saw how
they affected the modern world, you know, Freud, Marx, Einstein. What
had they given us? Communism, infantile sexuality, and the nuclear bomb.

Ben found people at his university, including a professor, who were willing to discuss his

ideas. They were sympathetic and interested, but not as extreme in their conclusions as

Ben, who began to look online for more information. When he found the Daily Stormer, a popular website and message board for white supremacists, he at first believed he had found a book club where he could continue to explore fascist and racist texts.

The stigma surrounding taboo subjects

The cultural consensus that prohibits the open discussion of some controversial topics and bigoted opinions inflamed many participants' curiosity about racist pseudo-science and conspiracy theories. The two most interesting dimensions of this theme class the participants as having either used that stigma to manipulate other extremists or as having been manipulated by it. Andrew, as a member of a previous generation of white supremacists, led efforts to develop communications techniques that would take advantage of this cycle of stigma and curiosity. His success is reflected in the radicalization journeys of some of the more recent former white supremacists.

The first dimension of stigma relates specifically to Andrew, who had an understanding of stigma and its effects that allowed for the manipulation of the younger generation of white supremacists. As a figurehead and spokesperson for the white supremacist movement before the Internet era, Andrew started a racist telephone hotline that people could call to hear recorded messages, including information about international affiliated groups. Andrew also used these hotlines to spread racist messages, cloaking the more openly anti-Semitic claims in what seemed to his audience like reasonable speculation about Jews and Judaism.

> Oh, we did a message on kosher facts. Described what it was. You didn't have to say anything derogatory about Jews, just say that there are these little symbols on the food packaging. If they're there, that company has

paid a bunch of money to a rabbinical organization, and it you buy that, you're paying this hidden tax. People don't like to be taxed. You didn't have to say anything negative towards Jews, just say, oh, you're being taxed, they're using cryptic symbols, why don't they put it out in the open? ...We designed it without explicitly saying it, but we designed it to create an obvious solution in the listener's head.

Andrew's technique allowed the people hearing his messages to take the last cognitive step for themselves, imagining that they had come to a logical conclusion based on facts and inviting them to think of themselves as a member of a small, enlightened cohort of free thinkers. It also invited them to question why they were not permitted to simply speak openly about these taboo subjects, prompting further indignant curiosity and a more focused search for racist misinformation.

Although his radicalization started years after Andrew had left the white supremacist movement, Zachary and Ben were attracted to the communication style that Andrew had popularized. Zachary enjoyed engaging in conversation and humor around the taboo subjects of race, heritage, and politics. In addition to seeking out conversation online and among his friends, his sense of humor changed as he radicalized, ultimately warping into an extension of his racist ideology.

I liked laughing at black people and I liked laughing and saying forbidden words, racist words, because it felt empowering. It was like, ha, I'm breaking the rules. Everyone's got it wrong, saying these is ok because I'm a part of the white race, I'm superior, my culture and heritage is strong, what are you gonna do?

What started as a curiosity-driven desire to ask questions about taboo topics became a search for power and strength. Instead of challenging himself intellectually, Zachary was

now throwing taboo material into the world as a challenge to others. Ben never lost the intellectual drive, and for him, the turn to the Internet was motivated by the curiosity that Andrew had recognized and exploited in others. Storm Front and the in-person group he joined through Storm Front started out as places where he could speak with others who seemed to share a secret, vital understanding of the world. Ben struggled to find the same fulfillment elsewhere because his white supremacist views permeated all other intellectual pursuits, and he knew he would not find people who were willing to engage with him on the topics he cared most about.

> Because how can you discuss modernity without discussing the Jewish Question...? And a lot of these things I couldn't discuss in public. I couldn't just go up to anyone, like, what do you think about Jews?

Ben learned to recognize the coded language used by racists online as a message of welcome and a sign that his questions would be taken seriously, just as Andrew had intended and hoped.

Searching for community

An emerging theme across all the interviews was the desire to belong to a community. Group activities and protection were the most substantial categories of attractive elements for people joining radicalized communities.

For some participants, especially Stephen, the joy and companionship that they found among radicalized networks was so great that the racial hatred was a secondary element of their interest in the group. Stephen fondly recollected barbecues and other parties he attended with his fellow neo-Nazis:

> Super nice guys, man! I had just gotten set up there and they were super
> nice. The guys who were married would bring me over for barbecues,
> potlucks, get you in there just like churches do.... I loved hanging out with
> these guys, because we loved the same music, liked the same clothes.... We
> fucking hated Jews.

Even after moving in an attempt to distance himself from his violent past, Stephen found the social scene associated with white supremacy impossible to resist. Others, including Janet, Andrew, Ben, and Toby, spoke about attending concerts, house parties, and other social events that made them feel welcome, connected, and socially accepted, an unfamiliar feeling for many. But for Zachary and Ben, unlike Stephen, discussing race and acting on their racial hatred was often the primary activity they wanted to share with their new communities. Toby, too, became disenchanted with Volksfront when it became clear that their main activities were social. These younger men enjoyed their time with radicalized groups significantly less than Stephen, experiencing almost immediate disappointment with their online and in-person companions.

Participants also spoke about the value of physical protection that being a member of a radicalized community offered. White supremacist communities often served as ersatz families. Janet was able to run away repeatedly from her difficult home life because of the pervasiveness of skinhead culture: wherever she went, she was able to find a place to stay. Others felt that their adopted extremist communities felt them safe from bullies at school, other gangs, or the extreme physical needs of poverty. For example, Toby noted that the leader of the gang he joined offered to help his family financially when they needed food. After being bullied to the point of a suicide attempt in school and lacking the supportive presence of family members, Toby recognized the value of the violent community as a means of self-defense. When he met a particularly prominent member,

Toby shared his childhood stories about being bullied, along with more recent issues with his family's struggle to survive in poverty.

> [T]hey basically go down the line saying, when you're with us, you're not without a family, if you ever need somewhere to stay, you call one of us up and we'll take care of you. If you ever need food in your pantry, if you're ever being bullied, give us a call. So that kind of excited me, it made me feel good, it made me feel like I finally had somebody that cared about me. It gave me a sense of belonging to something.

On the other hand, the way to earn protection from radicalized communities was usually by committing more frequent and extreme acts of violence.

While Zachary never sought out an in-person community centered around white supremacy, he felt drawn to white supremacist ideals because he identified people of color and Jews as threats to whiteness, the community with which he identified most strongly. Finding others online who agreed with his fears and could suggest ways to protect himself and his white identity was deeply reassuring. However, as he was spending more time with these online communities, he felt that he was becoming more aggressive in real life and facing increasing depression, anxiety, and bitterness. While his community was online, he experienced the same emotional journey as the other participants.

Escalation of engagement

While community played a role in every radicalization and deradicalization journey described, participants' experiences of escalating engagement varied based on whether they were radicalized before or after the Internet became widely available in private homes. For the participants who experienced radicalization before the era of widely

available private Internet access, their relationships with radicalized people and individuals began in person, progressed quickly, and led more frequently to violence. Those who were radicalized online were less likely to engage in serious violence.

For Zachary and Ben, the Internet was a way to test ideas and become comfortable with them before moving on to in-person contact with white supremacists. It allowed a slower escalation of engagement in which Zachary could find new groups of white supremacists, try to understand the particulars of their ideology, and decide what steps he wanted to take next.

> I'd go on there, I just lurked for the longest time, I'd just read other people's postings, not really saying anything myself, just trying to get a grasp on what was going on, you know, what these people actually thought. And then one day I went on there and I posted that I was ready to meet somebody, wanted to talk to somebody in the area who had the same views.

Zachary and Ben both became involved with in-person extremist groups after online contact. Their initial periods of in-person activities with white supremacist groups were characterized by the hope that they would be able to find intellectual peers with whom to engage on their beliefs and questions. Once they were involved in person, Zachary, Ben, and Toby's radicalization journeys began to resemble those of the older participants more closely. Soon after joining Volksfront, Toby began to engage in manual labor for the group, cleaning up the compound where they held their annual meeting. By carrying out whatever menial tasks full members asked of him, Toby hoped to prove that he was ready to join their ranks. For all three men, the Internet was still an important part of their radicalized lives, pushing them toward increasingly marginalized groups.

Zachary and Toby in particular returned to the Internet throughout their active periods; Zachary was motivated by unmet intellectual needs, and Toby used the Internet to find and connect with a more violent group of white supremacists.

Janet, Andrew, and Stephen, all radicalized in person before the Internet was widely available in homes, all spoke of the pressure to carry out increasingly violent or frequent attacks as a way of demonstrating their allegiance to the group. Both Andrew and Stephen became increasingly radicalized and willing to commit violence as they moved from group to increasingly violent group. Andrew was willing to engage in more violence because of the reputation he was earning, which came along with a sense of power.

> At that point, identifying with that got your more fear and notoriety. There's always this push towards the extreme. I went from punk to punk-half-skin, to letting go of the punk, to going more to the extreme…. But there was always—the more fear and notoriety, that's where I was drawn to. And fear and notoriety, it gives you a false sense of power.

When Stephen was young and just getting involved with a radicalized group, the leaders pushed him to commit his first violent act with a combination of threats and flattery, appealing to the same sense of power Andrew gained through violence.

> They got in my head, saying I needed to do something big in order to shine. You gotta do something big or you're out, is what they pretty much told me. We trust you, you're the leader, man, you're the one that has the voice, you're getting all these guys joining, we need you to do something really big. And that's when we decided to do the whole, uh, synagogue thing. Which was really bad.

Increasingly violent behavior cut Janet, Andrew, and Stephen off from their old lives and friends, making it more difficult for them to imagine a life outside of their white

supremacist circles. Janet, who described listening to white power music and slowly becoming more comfortable with using the racial slurs and slogans of hate she heard in it while also becoming more violent, compared the dynamic to an abusive relationship.

> Like, who's going to take you now? You can't leave, because now you've been with us here, who's going to accept you? Sometimes it was explicitly said, but very often, it was not, you know, but it was the idea of, well, now I'm in, who's gonna take me now? It was very much an abusive dynamic. There's the violent buy-in…. As it was happening, and these were the only people I was associating with, and I associated with them more than anyone else, I became more and more unpalatable to other people who were not associated with the white power movement.

For all participants, escalation of involvement with white supremacists was both an internal and external process. Their actions, while gratifying, forced an awareness that they were cutting themselves off from other parts of society.

Violence

For the three older participants, violence was the most important method they used to demonstrate their allegiance to white supremacy. They shared a single, strong motivation: to identify themselves with their radicalized groups. In many ways, however, their emotional reaction to violence differed. Janet and Andrew both found the violent aspects of their involvement with white supremacist movements to be thrilling, while Stephen, in spite of a strong affinity for guns and weapons of all kinds, was more reluctant to engage in violence.

Janet, struggling with rage in the years following her sexual assault and fully invested in the new identity she created for herself as a skinhead, simply always wanted to fight. In violence, she found a way to express the anger she felt at all times. Her appearance, with

her clothes and hair fashioned to intimidate and provoke, both invited recognition of her as a white supremacist and served as a warning to anyone who might be inclined to fight with her on that account. Andrew also welcomed violence and looked forward to the predictable melees each weekend brought, even though not all of the fighting he engaged in was motivated by race. At times, his gangs would start fights over perceived slights and minor provocations. Belonging to a group that habitually fought together made him feel safe, even though the perceived threats were, at that point in his life, in the past. He contextualizes his enjoyment of violence by referring back to the times as a child when he was punished in school.

> It was thrilling, it was dangerous, exciting, all of that kind of stuff. And, you know, I felt safe with them. This is weird, but I felt safe with them. When I was in the office getting caned, I don't think I ever felt more powerless to this day than I did in those sessions in that office. And nobody was gonna fuck with me when I was with them two. Because everybody was scared of them. So it became a safe space. It was a completely not safe space when you sit back and look at it rationally, but in that moment, in that scene, it was a safe space.

In addition to the joy he experienced in fighting, Andrew also recognized that his need for safety and respect compelled him to commit violence on behalf of his radicalized group.

> In order to have their protection, I had to have their respect. In order to have their respect, I had to commit all those same violent acts that they did.

Andrew spoke of walking away from certain fights feeling disgusted with what he had done, but he justified his actions to himself by reflecting on what he regarded as the inherent evil in all people. In any case, even after those fights, there was always plenty of

reinforcement from his comrades to make Andrew feel that he had done the right thing, and for the right reasons, by fighting.

Stephen never found the violent acts he carried out thrilling in the same way that Janet and Andrew did. For Stephen, the violence was almost a necessary evil, just the price he had to pay for companionship.

> I got in a lot of fights. A lot of physical fights. You could never understand how physical we were. It was very physical. I was getting my ass kicked or I was ass-kicking, but when you're ass-kicking, you're still getting beat up. They're never fun, these violent altercations are never fun.

Stephen is also an Army veteran who saw active duty and, as a medical corpsman, saved lives while under fire, an experience that shaped how he saw his prior participation in violence and pushed him toward deradicalization.

Ambivalence

Most participants experienced some feelings of ambivalence during their radicalization experience. During the radicalization and active portions of their lives, participants chose to ignore their doubts, unwilling to recognize the importance and validity of the part of them that conflicted with white supremacy. For Andrew and Toby, ambivalence was based in fear of the violence they were, at the same time, enjoying. Toby and Zachary struggled with an ambivalence that sprang from a clash between a personal identity and a group identity when a part of themselves did not fit in with white supremacist ideology. Stephen and Ben experienced ambivalence rooted in important relationships with people of color.

Violence was both attractive and terrifying for Andrew and Toby. Andrew talked about being sickened by some of the violence he participated in and witnessed, but his revulsion only added to his fascination and enjoyment.

> I mean, that was part of the excitement, the apprehension, the fear. What am I getting in to, right? Oh my God, I can't believe they said that. Look at how cool those machine guns look. It was all of that, combined. That was part of the attraction.

Although Toby was eager to spend more time with his contacts in Volksfront, he was also intimidated by their physical appearance and the amount of time they spent fighting. He quickly realized that, as a smaller junior member, he was at risk of becoming a victim of violence himself.

> At the beginning and all throughout the events that we would go to, I would watch these guys just get drunk and get in fights at every event that they had. I got to a point where I was wondering when this was gonna be me, you know? When are they gonna look at me and accuse me of being a cop and do something to me?

On the other hand, like Andrew, his self-confidence grew because of his association with these physically intimidating people.

Toby and Zachary struggled with ambivalence rooted in parts of their personal identity that clashed with white supremacist ideology. Toby often thought back to his younger days as a political liberal and wondered whether his identity really fit with his new companions. Zachary struggled with his sexual and gender identity and the implications for his Nazi ideology during his period of radicalization. His confusion and contradictory feelings lasted throughout the time he identified as a fascist and a Nazi.

For Ben and Stephen, ambivalence was rooted in important relationships: they both struggled to align their white supremacist views with the love or friendship they felt for individual people of color. Ben often spoke to his romantic partner, a woman of color, about his beliefs and made no effort to hide his thoughts from her.

> I still whole-heartedly believed that the media and different influencing powers wanted to have white women breed with black men and things like that, even though at the time I was in an inter-racial relationship with a Native American woman. She's now my fiancée.

Stephen struggled to resolve his connection to white supremacy and his extreme anti-Semitism with the close relationships he had developed with people of color. He had grown up in a part of the country with a large Latinx minority, and although he had known relatively few of them personally, he felt no hatred toward them. When the group he had joined pushed him to commits acts of violence against people of color, he genuinely agonized over what to do.

> And then it got really weird, and then they wanted me to do violent things against Mexicans. Jews are easy to hate. Blacks are easy to hate when you're not around them all the time…. I could not hate Mexicans, I mean, like, what the hell, dude? Everyone around me was Mexican. I didn't dislike any of these people. But I loved that brotherhood…. To hate Jews, that was easy. They do despicable things…. The blacks, every black guy I knew was pretty cool. So that's where I kinda got in to conflict with them. Cus I didn't really think a lot of what they did. I was afraid of them, afraid of saying the right thing around them.

While he was in the Army, Stephen became particularly attached to a number of African American soldiers. Off base, however, he associated with violent Ku Klux Klan members.

> They would go and pick black guys, man, they'd drag them, they'd chain them to the back of their trucks. And they'd pull guns on me, and then I'd be like, sure, fucking drag him, bro, we're good. I told them they couldn't fuck with soldiers, they couldn't fuck with working black guys, fuck with bums all you want. And it got bad.

His willingness to commit violence was rewarded when the Aryan Nation paid for him to travel to a particular compound where they met for training and indoctrination. In spite of his fear, he felt at home among the extremists.

> The whole time, I was just really scared. They were tough. I got worried because I just didn't feel the way they did. But I still loved that sense of brotherhood, the way they treated you. Like I never got treated before. They were your team. They made me feel really special, like what I said mattered. And made me really feel like I belonged, like I was part of something. They made me feel good about myself.

Like the other participants who described their history of ambivalence, Stephen's desire to maintain relationships with his radicalized community was stronger than his ambivalence and discomfort.

Important themes in deradicalization

The following is a thematic analysis of all six participants' experiences with deradicalization, which include new communities, ambivalence, changing identities, lingering beliefs, and healing.

New communities

While most participants mentioned the effects of new communities, these communities played different and complicated roles in their deradicalization journeys. Whether the new community came first and helped prompt deradicalization or embraced participants after they began to deradicalize, new communities provided physical safety and an escape from racist echo chambers. On the other hand, communities of white supremacists were also barriers to disengagement.

New communities came before deradicalization and helped to make that process possible for Janet, Stephen, and Ben. Janet and Stephen escaped the racist echo chambers they had inhabited during their radicalized periods: Janet accomplished this by moving in with her boyfriend's mother; Stephen, by being deployed on active duty with the military. Both found all-encompassing new communities that demanded more of them than their old homes, but that also promised more camaraderie and a better future.

When Janet moved in with her boyfriend's mother, she effectively joined his family. "The physical echo chamber for me was kind of broken," she said, "because I'm not living in a house with a bunch of other skinheads." The echo chamber had been replaced

with a supportive and loving family, in total contrast to the instability and chaos of

Janet's life with the white supremacists. Janet finally had a place to live where she was

not constantly under threat of violence, and where she did not have to fight for

acceptance as she had with her own family.

> I had a place where I was physically safe. I was not in the midst of an
> abusive relationship at the time, I was not in a place where my safety was
> under attack all the time, because that was a part of gang life or whatever,
> putting myself in danger all the time. So slowly, over time, I started
> growing my hair out.

Stephen's deployment introduced him to the camaraderie, pride, and sense of purpose

that being a member of the military can provide.

> I felt so good in the Army. It was the first time I ever felt complete, whole,
> with a purpose. First time I got good leadership was from my sergeants in
> the Army. First time I got real, unconditional leadership was from my first
> company commander. And my job was real. I took care of hundreds of
> guys every day. The clap, broken bones, dead dudes, guys with their heads
> blown off, the whole bit. Best job I ever had. The Army was the best thing
> that ever happened to me. Cus in the Army, it doesn't matter what sex you
> are, what color you are, nothing. The Army I what fixed me. And they have
> plenty of medics, they didn't need me. But it was the best thing ever for
> me. I grew up without a dad, but I had so many dads in the Army. We were
> all soldiers. That fixed me. I don't give a shit what color you are, you're
> wearing my uniform, we're equals.

Confrontations with people in the new communities led some participants to back away

from their white supremacist beliefs and physical symbols. Stephen was also forced to

give up some of his racist memorabilia and reading materials during his time on duty,

when some of his comrades found his hidden cache. Ben had a similar moment of

confrontation with his girlfriend, a woman of color, when she made it clear that if he

attended an upcoming white supremacist rally, she would end the relationship.

And my girlfriend was like, if you go to this, we're done. And I moved to (redacted) just to date her. I was really committed to her. And, uh, yeah. I think that that was what really pushed me over the edge. I was like, I'm not doing this anymore. If it's you or white supremacy, I'm choosing you. And she said it was definitely her or white supremacy. And I told her, like, ok, I'm quitting.

New communities could also be a reinforcing factor that helped the deradicalization process after participants had already decided to change their lives. Toby wanted to break away from white supremacy even before his ideology had changed, and to do so, he knew that his racism would have to change too. He decided to move to a very diverse urban area.

So I lived in downtown, and many of my neighbors were Middle Eastern, or Indian, or Asian, and I always had a lot of neighbors who would give me stuff. So I was getting that first-hand experience of people of other cultures.

As Toby's direct exposure to people of different races and cultures grew, he began to embrace his new community and ignore the calls of his former friends to attend Volksfront events. His engagement with the new community changed again soon after, in a way that helped him shape a new identity within it. When Michael Brown, an African American teenager, was fatally shot by a white police officer in the town of Ferguson, Missouri, Toby felt a profound call to become an activist for his new community.

So the night Michael Brown was killed, I actually went up to Ferguson that night. I actually told my story that I'm telling you now, told it to people so that they'd understand why I was out there, that I felt that I needed to be out there to support them, to make up for my past, and everybody accepted me. I expected to get beat down at least once, I expected somebody at least to punch me, because I deserved it. But no, nobody did

anything, they welcomed me with open arms, they thanked me for coming out.

After his time in Ferguson, Toby played an increasingly active role in the activist community that mobilized in the aftermath of the shooting. He developed new friendships and habits that reflected the growing importance of the activist community and its values in his life, fully embracing his new political identity.

Communities also presented barriers to change for some participants. After making the choice to deradicalize, Ben did not want to cut his racist friends out of his life entirely, but he struggled to put boundaries in place that would keep him from re-engaging with white supremacy.

> It was really hard, because you have this community, you have this group of guys, and even when I talk with some of my old friends from college, like, they just know not to talk about certain subjects around me. I just kinda had to set a line, like, hey, if you're gonna talk about the JQ *(the Jewish Question),* or, you know, any racial stuff, just don't do it around me. They were really surprisingly respectful of that. It got lonely. That was the worst part. I can't tell you how much I wanted to go back to it, which is sad.

Even though his friends respected his wishes to refrain from racially prejudiced conversations around him, Ben felt isolated because he could not maintain the same degree of close contact and familiarity as he had when he identified as a white supremacist. For Toby, the radicalized community played a somewhat more pressing role as a barrier: at times, he felt targeted through social media by his former comrades, especially as his romantic relationship with a woman of color blossomed.

Ambivalence

Ambivalence experienced during radicalization was ignored by participants; the elements of their personality that did not mesh with white supremacist ideology were ignored. However, when ambivalence surfaced or resurfaced, it contributed to deradicalization. For Stephen and Janet, the ambivalence came from a sudden new clashing realization that challenged their opinions about the world or themselves. Andrew and Ben's ambivalence came from interior sources and doubts that created subtle shifts in the balance of their convictions.

Major changes in the environment, especially for Janet and Stephen, forced ambivalence about their racist affiliations to the forefront of their minds. Stephen's moment came during deployment as a medical corpsman, when he was charged with taking care of both white soldiers and soldiers of color under combat conditions while relying on them to defend him. Finally in a safe space, Janet was rediscovering the classic high school literature she had missed when she was skipping school to hang out with skinheads while hearing music beyond the white supremacist punk songs she had been listening to for years.

> And I was like, oh, I had been listening to this music, and it was music that I loved…. And I was like, how could I listen to this music and hold these beliefs? How could I… I was reading Fitzgerald at the time, and how could I love these books, love ideas so much, and at the same time, hold these beliefs that I had?

Stephen took advantage of his deployment and time in the Army to cut off all ties with white supremacist groups, to dispose of most of the books, pamphlets, and mementos he

had been collecting, and to legally change his name so that he was more difficult to find

and link with his criminal record and past as an avowed white supremacist. Janet grew

out her skinhead haircut and took the necessary steps to apply to college.

For other participants, the changes that introduced ambivalence were purely internal.

Ben and Andrew, both intensely caught up in their inner lives, experienced ambivalence

through internal struggles with ideology and identity, not as a result of an exterior

circumstance. Ben's ambivalence was based in intellectual or faith-based disagreements

with the positions taken by white supremacists. Although he was particularly excited to

meet people with whom he could discuss the intellectual aspects of his ideology, he was

also worried about the ramifications, especially when one new friend was open to talking

about abortion.

> I was and still am very pro-life. And he, uh, he was like yeah, but how do
> you feel about n-word death? And I was like, what are you talking about?
> He was like, as long as we don't abort white babies and just abort black
> ones, that's good, right? And I was like, no. It's still a living thing, you have
> to give it a chance. And he was like, you don't understand, they're just
> going to be a drain on society. And I was like, I don't know, man. And that
> was one of those points where I realized that maybe what I thought about
> the human experience wasn't the case. Because at that point, in that
> conversation, I was saying even though they're black, even though they
> may be genetically inferior to white people, they should be given a chance.

Just as a large part of Ben's radicalization had been prompted by intellectual curiosity

and a desire to understand the logical implications of his opinions and experiences, so

his deradicalization took shape, in part, around intellectual concerns. Throughout his radicalization, he retained an ability to ask himself challenging questions and to pay close attention to the matters that caused him to feel ambivalence. Andrew's inner life played a critical role in his deradicalization too, but his ambivalence was centered around questions of identity more than politics.

> I was bright, sensitive, curious, mischievous, defiant, a little bit stubborn. That's who Little [Andrew] was. But along the way, it wasn't emotionally safe to be those things…. I was living a life that couldn't really, couldn't have been more out of integrity with and in contradiction with my younger self.

The contradiction between identities gradually became too much to support; the ambivalence collapsed.

Changing identities

Participants experienced both subtle and major changes in their identities during deradicalization. Some participants, especially Stephen, felt their identities change as a result of their racist ideologies evaporating, while Janet and Andrew left white supremacy behind before their identities changed.

Janet and Andrew were among the participants who stopped being involved in racist activities and group before their identities changed. They both experienced strong pulls and ambitions outside of white supremacy that made it impossible for them to continue with their lives as active racists. Andrews began to feel the demands and obligations of being a single father while experiencing a moment of frustration with white supremacy and the groups he had been working with. Janet realized that she wanted to go to

college, earn a degree, and achieve the goals she had held as a child. Now that she had

the encouragement of her boyfriend's mother, her goals were within reach. Neither of

the two thought they could achieve their goals without a significant change in identity.

But Andrew was not ready to leave the ideology behind entirely; his disillusionment and

familial focus prompted a mere change in tactics.

> And it was, the way I rationalized it was, why should I care, why should I
> be a Don Quixote, jousting windmills for a bunch of white people who
> didn't give a shit whether I lived or died? So I really wanted to do
> something for the white race, and that was to make sure my children
> thrived and survived. I was close to being a full time single parent at that
> point. And that was how I gave up the movement and turned focusing on
> my children as the compromise to keep my identity alive.

Andrew was emphatic that he left the white supremacist movement with his beliefs

intact. As time passed, his identity as a father took up more emotional space in his life,

just as he became less available for the activities of the white supremacist movement.

> But I had a new little tribe, you know, attention, acceptance, approval for
> something that was really positive. And I fully embraced the identity of
> single dad. At that point, it accelerated the letting go of that other identity,
> which, you know, I struggled to keep as I left the movement. I still had
> many of the beliefs, but at that point, I was letting go of the identity piece,
> replacing it with something positive.

Participants more aligned with the other side of this dimension shed their racist

ideologies before they felt their identities change. Especially because of the context of

the heightened stakes of war, the ambivalence Stephen felt about relationships with his

fellow soldiers of different races prompted a realization: he did not hate them.

> You gotta care for everybody in your outfit, because they care for you.
> When you go out there, you don't watch your own back, you pretty much
> just dive out there to pull somebody out and take care of them, so you
> gonna rely on a lot of other guys of many colors to watch you and give you

covering fire. They make sure you're covered while you're treating that patient. And mine were of many colors. And these motherfucking racists had never had people of other racists watch their back, make sure they've covered while they're saving a life of a person of another color. And that's pretty much it.

During combat, Stephen's identity as a medic superseded his identity as a racist. After his combat time, Stephen experienced what he described as a general mellowing of his identity, which he now describes as calm, centrist, and equally skeptical of all extremist mindsets.

Lingering beliefs

Some participants, like Stephen and Ben, spoke about struggling with their racist beliefs after they no longer considered themselves white supremacists. Others, like Janet, experienced a clean break with their racist ideologies or, like Toby, quickly embraced a new ideology.

The first dimension within the theme of lingering beliefs reflects the difficulty some participants had in shedding their racist ideologies. Stephen and Ben are both adamant that they are no longer white supremacists; however, they struggle with parts of their ideology to this day. Stephen is still an anti-Semite.

> The only ones I could dislike were the Jews. They're the ones I distrust. I know that sounds terrible. I got that hang-up. I don't get it. I don't get why I distrust them so much. I don't like it. Just, every Jew I meet. They're just assholes. I would never, like, kill a bunch of them.

On the other hand, he feels that, as a Catholic and conservative, he has an obligation to defend Israel. His identity as a Catholic is still in conflict with the portion of him that

retains racist beliefs, even decades after deradicalization. Like him, Ben feels that he struggles with lingering racist beliefs, and his determination to control his convictions is as clear as Stephen's. Ben draws on language typically used in the context of addiction to explain why he feels he cannot engage at all with political news.

> When you look at yourself and you know that deep down somewhere inside of you there's a Nazi hiding in there, it's scary. And you want to make sure that it never comes out. And that you can overcome that, overcome yourself, and put parameters on what you think and feel…. It's insane when you realize that if I had lived in Nazi Germany, I would be closer to the concentration camps, the camp guards, than I would the people who resisted. That's a really bad and depressing thought. Because now, like, I just kind of distance myself all around from ideology, if that makes sense. I no longer am trying to be a priest. I'm in nursing school. I'm just trying to be normal, if that makes sense. And um, I just kind of, I'm trying not to make sense of the world as much as I used to.

Both Stephen and Ben express confusion and concern about their lingering beliefs. Stephen describes his shame and his desire to work past it repeatedly.

> The thing that hurts me most is being quiet when people were being hurt, but I was really afraid of being hurt myself. So I have to say, do you stand up to 200 rednecks about to beat the shit out of this black guy? Or do you stand up and get the shit kicked out of you? So I got that guilt. But I liked the group, I liked being around people who got together. I did really horrible, terrible things, but I never agreed with what I was doing, which sounds terrible. But I take full responsibility for everything I did and was a part of. I was a part of it. I was there.

Ben suggests that there is a certain type of person who, as he says, is predisposed to Nazism, and that the best he can do is mediate that tendency in himself by abandoning all search for ideology or an understanding of the world. While he is not an avowed racist now, he believes that little stands between him and a return to his former ideology, especially because of the strain placed on him by the changes he has made.

Politics had been my identity since I was 15, ten years ago. It's just weird. It's really weird. And now, like, I moved in to a new apartment a few days ago. And my fiancée was helping me move books. She found my old books, you know, *Mein Kampf* and Mussolini, and she was like, what do you want to do with these? And I just kind of set them off in the corner, because I don't really know what I want to do with them. Yeah, and I think the hardest part about all of this is making the dramatic shift from an obsession and addiction and lifestyle. Because a lot of the music I was listening to was like Screwdriver or Blink 1488, just trying to get in the mindset. And now it's none of that. It's weird, it's a huge life change.

In some ways, the changes Ben made in his life, while major, were relatively superficial. The same curiosity and instinct to question received wisdom that drove him toward fascism and white supremacy are alive in him today.

Participants closer to the other dimension of this theme experienced a cleaner break with racist ideology. Frequently, they could describe the moment of their deradicalization clearly, either as a chronological or philosophical point. Janet, Zachary, and Toby all expressed much more certainty about their deradicalization than Ben and Stephen. Janet was particularly certain about the moment she left white supremacy behind, even though the mechanism clear to her at the time.

... I really wanted to go to community college for a year to demonstrate that I had academic sufficiency to be able to go to the college that I wanted to go to, so I—So my parents agreed that I could move back home. So I got on the bus and I did. And I knew that my life as a neo-Nazi white supremacist skinhead was over at that point, but I had no idea—I didn't understand at all how I got there.

Zachary describes similar certainty when he speaks about his deradicalization, which he experienced as the inevitable conclusion of his intellectual journey.

> ... I grew older and started to become less attached, kept asking more questions, inevitably starting to question myself and my own beliefs and this fringe that I was following. Those questions turned me—There was a point in my life where I wasn't ready for it at all. It wasn't like I challenged myself to pull myself out, it just kind of dawned on me, sort of.

Like Zachary, Toby also sees his deradicalization as a logical next step, given his environment and personality. And like Janet, he experienced deradicalization with certainty. After meeting up with activists in Ferguson, Toby was immediately convinced by the need for violent protest tactics on the left.

> I'll admit that I went a little more extreme on the left side. I talked to one of my English teachers from middle school and she told me the same thing, that I have a tendency to do that, and I have since gotten out of that extremism from the left. I still consider myself an anarchist, I still consider myself an anti-fascist at heart, but not on the extreme scale.

Toby's passionate movement from one extreme to another left him with no lingering white supremist feelings, but he still felt the need to moderate his quick swing to the political left.

Healing

Deradicalization involved, for every participant, some element of healing from the emotional turmoil and violence of the active phase of radicalization. For some, like Janet and Andrew, healing seems successful; they are able to live full, active lives without shying away from politics or current events and they talk openly about their experiences. For Stephen, on the other hand, his experiences while radicalized seem to haunt him and limit the ways he is comfortable engaging in the world.

In addition to struggling with lingering anti-Semitism, Stephen, a devout Catholic, remains in a stage of spiritual drive to repent for his behavior. His language and motivation are explicitly religious. "Dear lord Jesus Christ," he said, "forgive me for being a part of this. Put that in whatever you write, this man is really repentant." Stephen sees himself as a fundamentally good person who was exploited as a young man and pushed to commit crimes for which he must spend his life atoning. His participation in this research was partially motivated by a desire to keep others from similar situations, but he also saw it as an act of penance. He does not seem like he has succeeded in fully resolving his past, his choices, and his former ideology with who he is now: a community leader, a role model for young people, and a devoted father.

Other participants fell within the second dimension of this theme, explicity describing comparatively more healing in their time since deradicalization. Janet and Andrew seem to have recovered more fully from their radicalized years, but they both spoke of a long process of self-reflection and healing. For Janet, that long struggle was centered on the worthlessness that led her to white supremacy. Her radicalized experiences compounded that difficulty by adding to her experience of trauma.

> And as I went back, I still had all this unprocessed trauma. I was super promiscuous, I was always picking up guys, my identity was still…. I still felt really worthless, like my body was a piece of trash. But there was that something in me that was like, ok, just hang on for the future.

Andrew's long healing process has been centered on what he characterizes as a life-long journey of self-discovery. He is heavily involved in various forms of therapy and self-reflection.

> And, uh, and I found another rabbit hole to go down…. There was stuff around how to manifest your reality, focusing on how to get out of your own way and take on the ego and stop it from interfering in a negative way in your life, how to have relationships, all these different things…. And my life, as I was applying the things I learned, my life started to shift noticeably.

Andrew's radicalization was, in part, rooted in these rabbit holes he describes: like Zachary and Ben, he wanted to see a train of thought through to its logical end, in spite of the potential danger. His process of healing reflects a similar process, in which Andrew is dedicated to a full exploration and as much healing as is possible.

Janet speaks thoughtfully about her time as a white supremacist, with the power and clarity born of years of reflection. She still feels at times as if she has basic life experiences to learn about; she runs potential new outfits past her daughters, now teenagers, for their approval, still concerned that her years wearing only the skinhead uniform had an impact on her style. But when she speaks about the parts of her life that bring her joy, she reflects a rich understanding of her role in the world and the complicated nature of her past.

> I am in a really amazing position to like, you know, wage the war for equity and peace and justice, day in and day out in my life, because my children are all just warriors for creating a diverse and equitable world. That they have an understanding of their privilege, simply by accident of being born white in the United States of America, that they understand how to use that privilege to try to elevate others. That would have totally surprised me. I mean, I've spoken at the UN about this, that would have surprised

me! Even just the fact that I'm still alive. I never thought I would be alive at this age.

Proposed theoretical models

Based on the qualitative data analysis described in this chapter, I am proposing two theoretical models: one for radicalization into white supremacy, and one for deradicalization out of it. The themes detailed above are constructs for the theoretical models, which are outlined and described in this section.

Figure 1. Radicalization.
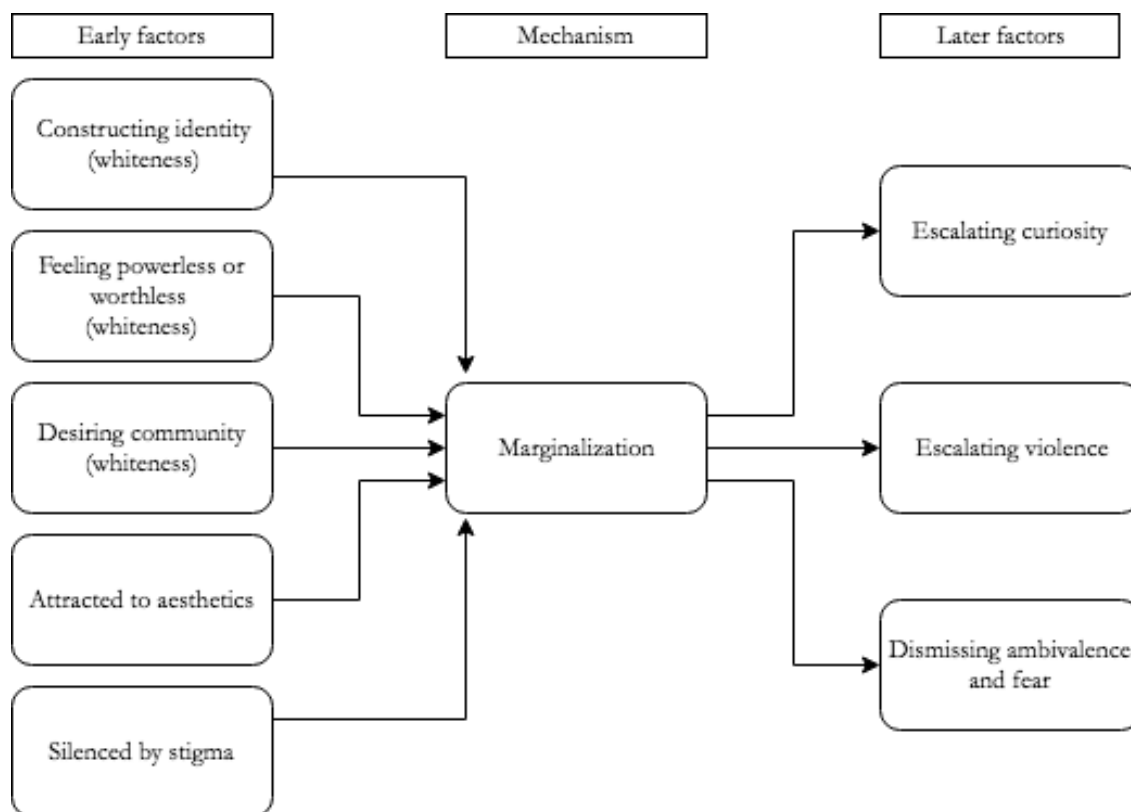
The radicalization model describes early and later factors contributing to radicalization, as well as marginalization as the mechanism by which the early factors lead to the later factors.

People experiencing radicalization enter their time of increasing attachment to the movement with an interest in constructing an identity. Some need to construct an identity that will keep them safe in their new communities; others want an identity that allowed them to fully express their whiteness and how they feel white people ought to be stationed in a global racial hierarchy. The new identity pushes them away from their support networks, communities, and families, who either repudiate the changes they see in their radicalizing loves ones or who are themselves repudiated.

The drive toward radicalization can also originate in intense feelings of powerlessness or worthlessness. In some cases, the sense of being worthless might be rooted in trauma. A sense that white people in general are being threatened on a social or global level can also cause a destabilizing feeling of powerlessness in some individuals, especially those to whom their whiteness is already an important part of how they self-identify. These feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness push people toward curiosity about perceived differences in the way white people are treated, about the role of Jewish people in global power structured (i.e. "the Jewish Question"), and other racially biased ways of interrogating the world. For some, engaging in intense violence is a way of temporarily deadening the depression associated with low self-worth. Whether violence is involved or not, these feelings marginalize radicalizing people from their communities and support networks.

A desire for community is a powerful part of the radicalization process. The desire might be rooted in a need for a group of people who espouse racist beliefs, but white supremacist ideology might be a secondary concern for people who feel marginalized:

they may simply want a social group with whom to make consistent, enjoyable plans, and around whom they feel safe and validated. The group's dynamic often involves earning trust, responsibility, or status by committing escalating acts of violence or by cutting off important ties with former friends and support networks, pushing the radicalizing individual into a cycle of increasing engagement with radicalized communities and decreasing connections with mainstream support systems.

An attraction to the aesthetics of fascist and white supremacist groups, whether historical, fictional, or modern, is a common precursor to radicalization. Sharing a uniform is a way of reinforcing group identity, intimidating non-radicalized people, and identifying as a member of radicalized group in new environments. Aggressive styles of dress further isolate radicalizing individuals from mainstream culture and drives them deeper into radicalization.

The widespread cultural taboo against openly speaking racist ideas or asking racist questions pushes pre-radicalized people to corners of society, especially on the Internet, where they will find answers to their questions about race. Those answers are uninformed or malignantly crafted, openly or obliquely racist, and dangerously compelling. Their writers claim esoteric knowledge, deep understanding, and forbidden wisdom, a heady brew that breeds further curiosity in their audiences while leading them down the path of radicalization.

Whatever combination of these factors leads them away from the mainstream, people undergoing radicalization experience marginalization as a mechanism. Willingly or not,

they lose the ability to connect with their old communities, friends, and families. In doing so, they lose opportunities to stop the radicalization process or to deradicalize entirely, as they engage with fewer people outside their radicalized circles over time or consign them to less important roles in their lives.

Escalating curiosity leads radicalizing people to seek out in-person engagement after an initial period of online activity, raising the possibility of violence. While spending more time researching and reading white supremacist materials, people dedicate less time to their lives outside white supremacy and become more deeply convinced of their views. They may be open to debate their opinions and even actively searching for that type of engagement, but they continue to find that only radicalized people are willing to speak with them about their developing ideologies, increasing their own marginalization and radicalization.

Violence is often a required method of demonstrating allegiance to a radicalized group. As a person commits each act of violence, they bind themselves more tightly to the white supremacist movement, out of either a changing sense of self or because of fear of the legal consequences or for their personal safety. Closer ties to white supremacist groups increase the distance between radicalizing individuals and mainstream society.

During the process of radicalization, people experience moments or consistent periods of doubt. Some, with escalating alarm, note that their lives are changing in ways they do not want. Others have conversations or participate in particular acts of violence that make them wonder whether they are making good choices. But the strength of the

various factors pulling them more deeply into radicalization leads them to ignore their feelings of ambivalence and fear, delaying or eliminating the chance to deradicalize.

Figure 2. Deradicalization.
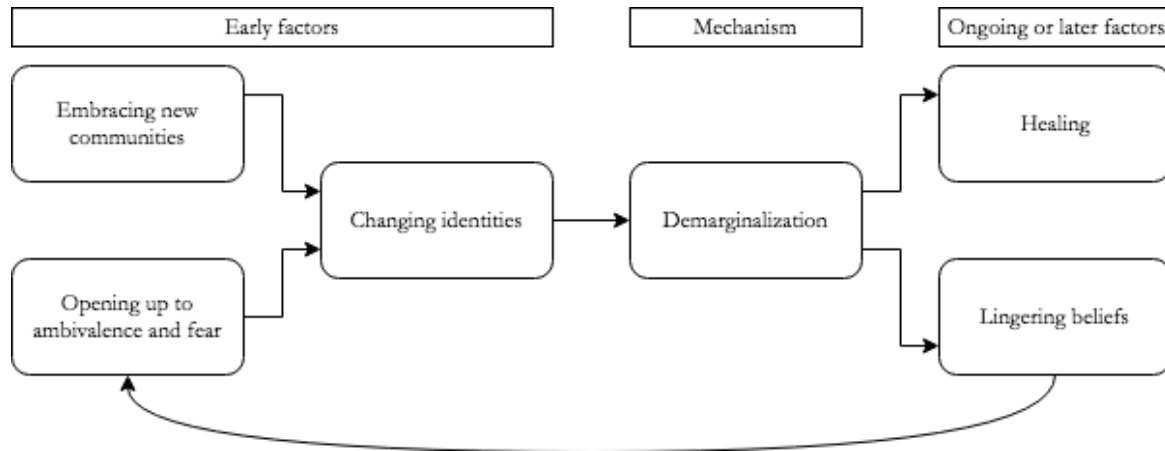
Just as in the model for radicalization, the deradicalization model describes early factors, the demarginalization they cause, and ongoing or later factors in deradicalization.

Embracing new communities, and being embraced by them, is an essential component of deradicalization. Non-violent, non-racist communities provide necessary safety and encouragement while imparting values and standards of behavior that formerly radicalized people need to re-learn. New communities can give purpose to individuals whose lives were previously dominated by a conviction that race war was inevitable and necessary. They can also provide social support and companionship to former radicals, whose social structures are likely to be intimately connected to white supremacist circles. A new community can shape an individual's identity, easing the deradicalization process and ending the marginalization radicalization enforces.

Some of the changes in personality, values, activities, and communities that come with deradicalization are prompted by opening up to the ambivalence and fear that can be present at every stage of radicalization. Each experience of hesitation is an opportunity to make a change, even a small one. During deradicalization, those moments may come more frequently, may be forced by more important concerns or people, or may present with higher stakes. These moments provide the emotional or intellectual space necessary for changes in identity to take place.

Fundamental changes in identity are necessary for the process of deradicalization to move forward. From how people identity politically, philosophically, and socially, to whether whiteness is a critical part of how they see themselves, to how they define their whiteness itself, all these changes are rooted in identity. These changes allow formerly radicalized people to re-engage in mainstream society, further contributing to the end of the marginalization they have been experiencing.

Formerly radicalized people may experience lingering remnants of racism after they leave white supremacy behind as a lifestyle and ideology. They may be gradually continuing the intellectual process that led them to white supremacy, taking the necessary time to build and embrace new opinions. They may also revert to old impulses, beliefs, and communities during times of stress. However, they may continue to experience the same ambivalence that motivated their deradicalization, especially at this stage of greater involvement in mainstream society. That ambivalence helps them continually re-examine their beliefs and allows their identity to continue to shift.

Deradicalization is, fundamentally, a process of healing. The wounds suffered by white supremacists may be physical, emotional, or social, and all take time to heal fully. Some formerly radicalized people lost formative years from their young lives and experience the need for guidance as they try to dress, speak, and act in accordance with mainstream cultures. A time – or lifetime – of penance may feel necessary. Healing may bring a desire to share their experiences with those who may be at risk of radicalization.

Chapter 5: discussion

After interviewing six self-identified former white supremacists using a semi-structured interview guide, I used grounded theory to build theories of radicalization and deradicalization specific to white supremacy. My analysis suggests early factors that contributed to initial movement toward radicalization and later factors that cemented it, connected via the mechanism of marginalization. Similarly, demarginalization caused by critical early factors in deradicalization led to further progress away from radicalized communities and activities.

The theoretical models

Psychology, sociology, anthropology, and criminology have contributed to our understanding of radicalization into other forms of extremism by constructing theoretical models to describe those processes. Most of the models proposed in these fields share no constructs with the proposed model for radicalization into white supremacy. Rink and Sharma identify a history of troubled social relations as predictive of radicalization, which has a clear resemblance to the participants in this study and their struggles with authority figures and propensity to seek out radicalized communities that could replace difficult families or peer groups (Rink & Sharma, 2018). Webber's work also comes close to some of the constructs in the white supremacy model, with overlap between the construct of escalating curiosity in that model and a desire for meaning in Webber's (Webber et al., 2018). In general, however, it appears that there is a need for models of radicalization to be developed for specific ideologies.

Interestingly, many features of radicalization into street gang membership resemble the themes of radicalization into white supremacy, in spite of the fact that not all white supremacists join an organized, in-person, actively violent group. The need to demonstrate capability of violence and criminal behavior described by James closely resembles some of the descriptions of escalating violence from the interviews conducted for this thesis, while Maxson identifies sources of trauma and stress that are also reflected in the accounts given by the former white supremacists (A. D. James, 2012; Maxson, Whitlock, & Klein, 1998). It is possible that people who feel marginalized, regardless of their socioeconomic status, race, or environment, face similar emotional responses that guide their choices about who to associate with and how to act upon their feelings of marginalization.

While there is significantly less research into deradicalization than into radicalization, the constructs identified in these studies are, in some cases, much closer to the constructs identified in the course of this thesis. For example, Pyrooz discusses the role that lingering emotional or social ties to individual gang members can play in prolonging gang membership, a difficulty that is also reflected in the stories of the participants who wanted to leave their white supremacist circles but struggled to imagine another community that would accept them (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). However, many of these theories are focused on social and environmental factors within or surrounding extremist groups and reflect almost historical processes, e.g., a changing political context. Other research that did not aim to build a model for deradicalization suggested the important of lingering beliefs and posited using the language and understanding of addiction to think about it (Simi et al., 2017).

Several important factors about the two models I propose are novel. No published attempt has been made to understand radicalization and deradicalization together, in spite of the richness and complexity that brings to the data. Many of the constructs are novel, including feeling powerless or worthless, the attraction to aesthetics, the role of stigma, and the dismissal of ambivalence and fear in radicalization; and opening up to ambivalence and fear and the process of healing in deradicalization. Finally, the models I propose reflect all levels of socioecological models: having constructs at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy levels will eventually help frame a diverse and effective set of potential interventions.

Implications and recommendations

White supremacy as a public health problem

Participants describe toxic stress, mental health problems, and intimate partner violence in their accounts of radicalization and deradicalization, all of which are widely accepted as public health problems. Furthermore, their activities contributed to a racist context in their communities, changing the way non-radicalized people experienced their lives in those places. In terms of both white supremacists and the people who inadvertently live in community with them, white supremacy presents exposures and outcomes that are commonly implicated by other public health problems (Y. Lee et al., 2015).

Some of the constructs of the theory developed here resemble constructs from other widely used theories in the field of public health. For example, feeling powerless or worthless is related to self-efficacy, a construct that appears in social cognitive theory: a

sense of powerlessness is the opposite or total lack of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001). Ambivalence can be compared to relapse in the context of the transtheoretical model (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992).

In the context of drug use, Dr. Robert Redfield, the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has commented that stigma is the enemy of public health work (Redfield, 2018). Public health practitioners have addressed stigma in a wide variety of ways, including in work to prevent the spread of HIV, to address suicidal behavior, and to increase the acceptability of pre-natal care (Howard, 2016; Kennedy, Versace, & Brumby, 2016; Lohiniva et al., 2016). If an expanded model demonstrates that stigma and marginalization are significant parts of the experience of radicalization, public health is well-placed to address it.

Participants in this study consistently spoke about the importance of community in their stories of radicalization and deradicalization. When community was lacking, they found a welcome in white supremacist circles; that welcome made it difficult to walk away from white supremacy, in spite of fear and hesitation. Public health interventions are often helpfully targeted to the realm of social or contextual elements, which can include community building and mobilization and helping individuals connect with supportive peer groups that reinforce healthy behaviors. Given the role of community in radicalization, public health interventions might be usefully mobilized in the fight against white supremacy.

In addition to public health's theoretical models, the methods of public health may also lend themselves to the study of white supremacy. Lifecourse epidemiology and its focus on the accumulation of stressors, as well as the use of cortisol and other biomarkers in analysis of health outcomes, might provide interesting methodological insights on how to conceptualize radicalization. Furthermore, the science of public health is deeply rooted in moving rigorously between data analysis, program planning, program evaluation, and back again to analysis: this level of fluidity between data and interventions is necessary for a topic as complicated and dangerous as white supremacy.

The importance of the Internet

The interviews of people who experienced radicalization in recent years suggest that the Internet is a critically understudied and misunderstood environment where white supremacy thrives. In part, according to the participants, the power of the Internet comes from the proliferation of spaces where anonymous commentary is allowed: people are able to test out responses to racist questions and assertions without jeopardizing their reputations. When the young people interviewed for this thesis were pushed out of in-person spaces because of their nascent racism, their curiosity led them online, where the only people willing to engage with them were already radicalized.

The field of public health is well-versed in the complexities of designing interventions for online use. From workplace safety to smoking cessation and bystander interventions to reduce sexual harassment and assault, many sectors of the public health world have become increasingly comfortable with online programming (Burns, Eaton, Long, & Zapp, 2018; Cheung, Wijnen, & de Vries, 2017; Nery-Hurwit, Kincl, Driver, & Heller,

2017). This familiarity with the environment might be an asset for public health professionals to explore when designing anti-racist interventions.

Age at time of radicalization

One of the most striking results of the in-depth interviews conducted for this study was the conclusion that radicalization is a process that starts in childhood. Almost all participants in this study were fully radicalized or well on their way to that result by the age of 18. Those for whom violence was a part of their radicalized lives had committed their first act of serious violence as children.

It is unsurprising that children are vulnerable to the promises of community and purpose that white supremacist groups can offer, but it is a reminder that radicalization is a result of that vulnerability, which must be addressed carefully in any interventions aimed at preventing or reversing radicalization. Interventions aimed at reducing other types of violence among young people are sometimes carried out in schools, where the possibly of further marginalizing high-risk children is mitigated by the universal participation of all students. Given the role of stigma and intellectual curiosity, placing education about race in the classroom and giving young people the chance to have guided conversations about it might be helpful in inoculating them against white supremacy.

Interventions

Given the validity of white supremacy as a public health problem, the question of the utility of public health principles and practices becomes important. After further

elaboration of the theoretical models proposed here, we can begin to imagine what interventions to prevent or reverse radicalization into white supremacy might look like.

For example, motivational interviewing, a practice developed in the field of clinical psychology to treat substance abuse disorders, is a therapeutic technique with which interviewers help clients explore feelings of ambivalence about their addictive behaviors (Miller, 1994). It has been adopted to many settings and purposes, including in prisons as a method of reducing recidivism (Anstiss, Polaschek, & Wilson, 2011). Through exploring ambivalence about alcohol and drug use, clients are invited to reflect on what might change about their life as a result of sobriety, ideally sparking momentum for movement from one stage of the transtheoretical model to the next and creating the basis for lasting behavior change (Prochaska et al., 1992). Considering its potential utility at each stage of the trans-theoretical model and the consistent presence of ambivalence in the accounts of the former white supremacists interviewed for this thesis, motivational interviewing might be a useful example of a public health practice that could be adopted for anti-racist work.

The "no-platform" practice and other failures

Another important implication of this research is for what is called the "no-platform" practice, a policy some organizations adopt that prohibits people or groups with objectionable opinions from using their space, airtime, or amplification mechanisms from expressing their views. No-platforming has been used to block racist speakers from bringing their messages of hate to college campuses, to remove content from YouTube and Facebook, and to fuel protests against fascists and racists when they make public

appearances. However, its stigmatizing power is also felt by individuals at the beginning of their radicalization journeys, when they begin to ask questions and are pushed out of in-person dialogue.

Although the concern that speaking with racists or nascent racists may be a way of legitimizing their assertions is important and valid, the result associated with motivating young people to ask questions online, among already radicalized company, is also a serious issue. More research is needed on the power of stigmatization, marginalization, and the silencing of curious young people; it may be the case that a well-timed intervention in the form of serious conversation could effectively derail radicalization into white supremacy. Several participants referred to the no-platforming experiences they had explicitly, emphasizing that being blocked from hearing a racist argument never made that argument less enticing.

Participants described a handful of further attempts their friends, family members, or others used in efforts to encourage deradicalization. Violent confrontation, especially in the context of counter-protestors such as Antifa members, was not successful at any time. Toby, who joined Antifa after his deradicalization, later stopped being as involved with the organization once he realized that the confrontations with white supremacists, while emotional cathartic, were not effective. Also, several participants described periods of incarceration, sometimes suggested as an effective way of encouraging deradicalization by segregating individual white supremacists from their communities. However, no participant was discouraged from participation in extremist activities or

groups after time in jail or prison, suggesting that more intense research into prison gangs and white supremacist activities in law enforcement settings is necessary.

Strengths, limitations, and next steps

This study is weakened by a number of limitations. Most importantly, I was able to interview only six former white supremacists about their experiences, and I did not reach saturation on any factor or theme related either to radicalization or deradicalization. There may be elements to both processes that I have missed because of the small sample size. Secondly, I am a novice in the use of grounded theory; this was my first attempt to apply it to a data set. I am also at the beginning stages of learning how to conduct qualitative research, and it is possible that I missed important themes due to the limitations in my own skills.

Like all theories, the one developed here ought to be reconsidered and refined in light of further research. The thematic constructs could be used in qualitative research specific to certain groups within white supremacy; women, for example, or people who experienced radicalization after the age of the Internet. More usefully, however, this theory could be expanded by recruiting a diverse, larger group of former white supremacists. Before it can be used to design interventions, it ought to be refined further.

In spite of its methodological limitations, the strengths of this study are still considerable. Through the use of grounded theory, I was able to tailor the interview guide and my method of recruitment when necessary. I had the assistance of two fellow

students in coding and confirming the quality of my codebook. Participants consistently reported feeling comfortable with the questions being asked, and many said that they felt better after talking about their experiences, suggesting that the interview guide may be widely acceptable to its intended audience.

Reflexivity

As a person of Jewish heritage raised in a mixed-race family who has lived in large, multicultural American cities, a small village in the majority-Muslim country of Senegal, and a small town in Israel, which is functionally the Jewish version of the ethno-state envisioned by the same white supremacists who described strong anti-Semitic beliefs, maintaining a sense of objectivity during the course of this research was a challenge. Dr. Gary Slutkin, a doctor and epidemiologist who has argued for decades that violence is a contagious disease, speaks eloquently about the need to suspend moral judgement in the realm of complicated public health problems:

> People with leprosy, plague, typhus, cholera, tuberculosis, and other maladies were frequently considered morally 'bad,' suffering stigma at a minimum, and in many cases worse treatment, including being put in dungeons, burnt at the stake, or thrown down wells. (Slutkin, 2013)

After a year of close contact with this subject matter and several months of intense data collection and analysis, I have yet to come to the point where I am comfortable with the suspension of moral judgement and emotional reaction that Slutkin suggests. I am not eager to throw anyone down a well, but that was never a strong inclination for me, and I feel myself clinging to my right to fear, judgement, and revulsion even as this analysis comes to a close.

I want to believe that some middle ground is possible; that my mind is capable of containing two conflicting paradigms; that I can both feel genuine fear and condemnation of white supremacy while studying it as a public health phenomenon. If by naming white supremacy a non-moral issue and fully embracing the public health paradigm for it, we can come closer to a world without extreme racism, then it will have been worth holding the condemnation in my heart and acting with acceptance, encouragement, and openness in these interviews and whatever research comes next. And there may be some things of value in my emotional reaction to white supremacy, too: a motivating factor to continue the work; a reminder of my own need as a researcher for a supportive intellectual and emotional community; and, in the stories of deradicalization, the knowledge that people are fundamentally capable of changing for the better.

Conclusion

This research represents a first attempt at establishing theoretical models for radicalization and deradicalization into and out of white supremacy. The models are a promising beginning of a process that will involve further theoretical refinement through additional foundational research and eventual intervention development, all allowing us to do anti-racist work in the field of public health.

François Viète, a mathematician living at the end of the sixteenth century, was one of the first people to use letters as parameters for unknown numbers in equations, opening the world up to algebra in an entirely new and necessary way. He had a sense of the importance of what he had accomplished, too: his proclamation, "There is no problem

that cannot be solved," is astonishingly arrogant. But it is possible that his words ought to be read as optimistic rather than arrogant. I see his optimism in public health, a field whose first principle is that people can change their minds, their behaviors, and their world, all for the better. White supremacy is a public health problem; the tools of public health are ready.

Appendix: the interview guide

Hi, my name is Jessie Seiler and I'm student at Emory's Rollins School of Public Health in Atlanta. I'm studying white supremacy, how our society responds to it, and whether we could be doing things differently or better.

Thanks for taking the time to talk with me today. This interview will last about 60 minutes. We're going to be talking about your experiences with getting into and out of white supremacy. Some of the questions might be difficult to answer, so please feel free to skip a question or come back to it later. You don't have to answer any question you don't want to. *If there is a question you don't feel comfortable answering, please just say pass.* Also, you can stop the interview at any time, either to end it altogether or just to take a break, and there is no need for you to explain yourself to me. Finally, everything you say to me will be kept confidential and anonymous. I won't mention your name or the name of anyone else I speak with to anyone. Your name won't appear in anything I write, and I'll leave out any details that could be used to figure out who you are.

Also, I want to get your explicit permission to record this interview, so that I can be sure of accuracy when I transcribe it. I will delete the recordings once I transcribe them, and the transcriptions will not refer to your name or any identifying information. My study team at Emory will be the only other people to see the transcriptions. Are you comfortable with me recording the conversation?

If yes, start recording.
If no: Thanks for letting me know that. I'm going to try to take a lot of notes by hand, in that case. I'll be writing a lot while we're talking, but I promise I'll be listening as carefully as I can. Is it ok if I take notes while we talk?
If yes, get ready for note-taking.
If no, end the interview with thanks for their time.

Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

Questions

I'm going to start out with some questions about when you were young.
   1. Where did you grow up?
   2. How would you describe your childhood?
   3. How would you describe your education?

Now, I have a few questions about when you were involved with white supremacists.
   4. How did you get involved with white supremacy?
      • How old were you?
      • How did you first learn about white supremacy?
      • Who did you know who was involved in it?
   5. What changed about your life when you got involved with white supremacy?
      • What did the people in your life think about it?

- Did you make new friends?
- Were you happy with the way things in your life changed when you got involved? Why or why not?

6. Were you ever a member of a gang?
   - How did you become involved?
   - (*If no gang membership reported, skip to question 9*)

7. (*If gang membership reported*) Can you tell me what the gang members cared about and stood for?

8. (*If gang membership reported*) How did being in the gang change your life?
   - What got better in your life?
   - What got worse?

9. What appealed to you about your connection to white supremacy back then?
   - Why did that appeal to you?
   - What, if anything, worried you about your affiliation?

10. Who are the people who shaped your opinions and beliefs the most when you were involved with white supremacy?
    - Did you have any close friends or family members who were involved? How did they change how you felt about white supremacy?

11. When you were involved with white supremacy, what role did you think white people should play in the world?
    - How did you define whiteness?
    - What did you feel was good about your experience as a white person?
    - What did you feel was difficult about your experience as a white person?

12. When you were involved with white supremacists, what were your political beliefs?

13. How did your political beliefs change as you became more involved?
    - Who did you talk about politics with, if anyone?
    - What political topics, like immigration, crime, or healthcare, were important to you? Why did those matter?
    - Did you enjoy following political news?
    - What would you have said was the most important thing about America, or Americans?

14. When you were involved with white supremacists, what were some of the things you did to promote your political beliefs or make them known to other people?
    - Did you talk to people online? (*If yes*) What was that like?
    - Did you attend rallies or protests? (*If yes)* How did it feel to be part of the movement in person?
    - Were there certain things you wore that made it clear you were a part of the movement?

Now I have some questions about what happened when you left the life we've been talking about.

15. When did you decide that you didn't want to be involved with white supremacy anymore?
    - Had something in your life changed?
    - How did your political beliefs change?
    - How did your beliefs about whiteness change?

16. What did the people closest to you think about your decision?
    - Who was supportive?
    - Who challenged you or thought it was a bad idea to leave?
    - How did their reactions feel to you?
17. What were some challenges you faced when you were making these changes in your life?
    - How did you deal with those challenges?
18. Who, if anyone, helped you make the changes you're talking about?
    - What did this person do for you?
19. What do you like about your life now that feels really important, or that would have surprised you a few years ago?
20. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your life, your thoughts, or anything else?

Those are all the questions I have. Thanks so much for talking with me about your experiences. I really appreciate the courage it takes to be open with a stranger about this. Do you have any questions for me? If not, then we're all done.

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