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White Out: Understanding the Significance of Social Support in the Lives of Former
White Supremacists

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Sociology

by

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September 2020

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

White Out: Understanding the Significance of Social Support in the Lives of Former
White Supremacists

by

April Celeste Robinson Leviton

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Sociology
University of California Riverside, September 2020
Dr. Sharon Oselin, Chairperson

This study aims to better understand how and why people come to join, participate in, and leave white supremacist terrorist (WST) groups based upon their life experiences of social support. Data were collected from in-depth life history interviews and supplemental timelines of former white supremacists in the United States and Canada. Informed by Latif, Blee, DeMichelle, and Simi's (2018) emotional dynamics models and Colvin, Cullen, and Vander Ven's (2002: 27) model of differential social support and coercion this research explicates the role of social support in the lives for formers. This study found that former WST members experience unique chains of adversity which are greatly influenced by their experiences of social support—or lack thereof. This research aims to contribute to the theoretical understandings of social support and coercion's influence in people's engagement and disengagement from WST; public policy initiatives aimed at preventing WST and increasing successful disengagement from WST groups.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States has an extensive history of White Supremacist terror. Although White Supremacist groups are not always designated as terror groups, Simi (2010) argues that there is no meaningful distinction. The lethality of events like the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing and the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia underscore this notion. White Supremacist terrorism (WST), is “violence perpetrated by organized groups against racial [and other] minorities in the pursuit of white and Aryan supremacist agendas” (Blee 2008: 274). WST differs from general white supremacy in the United States—underlying attitudes and social structures which value whiteness above non-whiteness—in that it is more overt, organized, and violent. Experts have called for more research into understanding these groups generally (Simi 2010), including how exiting is accompanied by life-long mental health consequences (Simi, Blee, DeMichele, and Windisch 2017).

WST groups often expect members to take violent actions as part of their radical allegiance. These actions have high-stakes consequences including social stigma, incarceration, and physical injury. It is reasonable to suspect that many would experience significant health consequences due to their affiliation as well. In this vein, Price, Choi, and Vinokur (2002:302) conceptualized a “chain of adversity” to encompass how stressors can proliferate following negative life events and contribute to further adverse events and stressors. This research demonstrates that people who depart violent extremist

groups are likely to have experienced exceptional chains of adversity that are informed by their experiences of social support and coercion throughout the life course. Such adversity may be a cause of entrance, a motivation for exits, or applicable to both. Former white supremacists who exit violent extremism are likely to have endured traumas that are exclusive to their involvement in violent extremism given it is a “totalizing commitment” with destructive effects (Simi et al. 2017).

In fact, Pete Simi and colleagues (2017) even conceptualize membership in WST as an addiction, arguing that leaving racist extremism is a stressful process with long-term cognitive, social, and physiological consequences. Following suit, former WST members experienced withdrawal-like symptoms and described feeling triggers which prompted relapses in ideology and behavior (Simi et al. 2018). Leaving WST requires a rejection of one’s identity as a WST member, disassociation from social networks, and abandoning WST social support (Simi et al. 2017). Often, the WST group social support is the first source of emotional support that is long-lasting in members’ lives. Systems of support are essential in understanding engagement and disengagement from violent extremism as scholars contend that social support can both increase criminal behavior by pulling people in (Brezina and Andia 2018; Cullen 1994) and prompting (Windisch, Simi, Ligon, and McNeel 2016). In other words, the social support within violent groups draws members in, and social support outside violent groups draws members out.

Although research shows an array of factors that facilitate or impede the process through which individuals depart from extremist groups (Horgan 2009; Bubloz and Simi 2015; Kruglanski et al. 2014), little is known about the role that social support plays in

people's engagement, involvement, and disengagement from white supremacist groups. Examining social support from within and outside of WST groups, this project lies at the intersection of criminology and medical sociology and aims to broaden the understanding of how support operates among former white supremacist terrorists. Building off the emotional dynamics models for former white supremacists (see Latif, Blee, DeMichele, and Simi 2018), this study investigates the importance of social support and its health consequences on formers' engagement, involvement, and disengagement from WST.

The research questions that guide this study include: What are the experiences of coercion and social support (in terms of emotional, instrumental, and informational) before, during, and after exit from WST? What are the chains of adversity, if any, that former white supremacists have experienced and how do these inform social support? By addressing these questions, this study will unearth the specific types of social support formers utilize throughout their lives, which may be relevant to other highly stigmatized groups. This project will further advance the literature on white supremacist groups, by including the roles of coercion and social support in our current models (Latif et al. 2018) for understanding the emotional dynamics employed in WST groups which contributes to their assembly and dismantlement. Ultimately, the aim of this work is to understand the deeper mechanisms underlying social support in the lives of those who have left WST to contribute to interventions that prevent people from joining similar violent extremist groups, and help those who wish to exit violent extremism transition out of hate more easily.

THE RELEVANCE OF EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS IN WST

When examining engagement and disengagement from violent extremism, scholars find that social support, depending on its nature, can increase criminal involvement or prompt desistance (Brezina and Andia 2018; Cullen 1994; Windisch, Simi, Ligon, and McNeel 2016). While Simi and colleagues (2017) underscore the significance of social ties, social friction, and shared emotions in participation in White Supremacist Terrorism (WST), they neglect the role of social support in this process. Similarly, research identifies various factors that facilitate or impede departures from extremist groups (Bubloz and Simi 2015; Horgan 2009; Kruglanski et al. 2014), yet little is known about how the three primary types of social support—emotional, instrumental, and informational—impact such transitions.

This project lies at the intersection of criminology and medical sociology to broaden the understanding of how social support operates among former white supremacist terrorists, an understudied population, throughout their “deviant careers” (Becker 1963). This research was informed by the emotional dynamics model for former white supremacists (see Latif, Blee, DeMichele, and Simi 2018), which explains that individual emotional experiences invigorate and destroy WST groups by igniting and extinguishing the emotional energy of the collective. Citing the work of Collins (2001:2004), the authors explain that WST groups thrive on emotional energy—even if this energy is produced by violence and hatred; however, as members feel shame, disillusionment, and fatigue, the energy decreases and the group splinters (Latif et al. 2028) this study explores the various types of social support and the consequences of each as they impact trajectories in white supremacist terrorist groups. In this endeavor, I

consider life course analysis that examines one's social support prior to involvement, during involvement, during disengagement, and post disengagement.

White Supremacist Terror groups thrive not only on shared ideologies and political aims, but on unique group dynamics. In fact, WST groups are strengthened by the shared anger, hate, and violence of their members because the adrenaline associated with WST activities cultivates a shared energy that bonds the group (Latif et al. 2018). Thus, the emotional dynamics of WST groups produce heightened and unique experiences of social support from within a toxic hate group. The rush of excitement and power members feel during involvement is often a main reason they stay involved, and for many, a reason they re-engage after leaving. Latif et al. (2018) conceptualize residual emotions as the lingering, sometimes nostalgic, attachments that people have to their group after they have exited. Residual emotions can lead people to maintain ties with the white supremacist movement and sometimes re-enter the group. Moreover, the shared emotional bonds that the WST fosters makes the group emotionally resilient to outgroup conflict and differences between members (Latif et al. 2018).

Although Latif et al.'s (2018) work focuses on the emotional dynamics of WST groups, emotional dynamics are salient across social movements—extremist or otherwise. Collins (2004) theory of interaction ritual chains explains how rituals galvanize groups by creating shared foci, group-specific symbols, and group emotions that draw people into a group and reinforce their continued involvement. Collins (2004) argues that interaction rituals primarily create emotional energy, group symbols, group-specific morality, and group solidarity. These outcomes keep people involved in their

groups, and when these outcomes break down, the group begins to dismantle. Collins (2001:29) explicated how the emotional dynamics of groups produce unity by explaining that emotions such as outrage, anger, and fear bring people to the group initially and create “distinctively collective emotions, the feelings of solidarity, enthusiasm, and morality...” In terms of former WST’s, giving up these strong collective emotions is undoubtedly stressful and challenging.

Price et al.’s (2002:302) chain of adversity, the “sequence of stressors and responses following adverse life events, “is pertinent for a more comprehensive understanding of trajectories in extremist movements. Price et al. (2002) combined two prominent theories of stress from medical sociology—the stress process model and stress exposure theory—to demonstrate how negative acute live events both can have long-term negative proliferations and be mediated by personal factors. As a result, I apply this framework in my analysis of former WSTs in this study. I argue that social support is a mediating factor that when not present, led participants into WST, and when present and toxic, persuaded participants to exit WST. Moreover, after finding present and positive social support, participants were able to stay out of WST movements and create happy lives for themselves.

The roles of social support and coercion on criminal activity are explicated in the theory of differential social support and coercion (Colvin, Cullen, and Vander Ven 2002). Social support consists of words and behaviors people express to one another to help meet their emotional, informational, and instrumental needs. Whereas coercion is defined as physical attacks, negative commands, critical remarks, teasing, humiliation, whining,

yelling, and threats. Colvin et al. (2002) were especially interested in the outcomes of individuals who experience erratic versus consistent coercion and social support, and whether these result in criminal or prosocial behavior. Overall, Colvin et al. (2002) found that coercion can sometimes lead to law abiding behaviors and social support can sometimes lead to criminal engagement. The authors explain that consistent coercion—for example, constant supervision in a supermax prison—is argued to produce lawful compliance; moreover, implicit coercion via providers of social support, “may have its best crime-controlling effect” (Colvin et al. 2002:23).

In addition, social support helps people cope with stress via emotional, instrumental, appraisal, and informational support (Umberson and Karas Montez 2010), which improves their health outcomes throughout life (Thoits 2010). Social support significantly influences physical and mental health (Hale, Hannum, and Espelage 2005; Schnurr and Green 2004). There is evidence that racists are more likely to struggle with social support and are psychologically less healthy than their tolerant counterparts (Hightower 1997). Hateful views are often (and rightly so) stigmatized; however, a lack of social support coupled with stigma seems to reinforce hateful views as opposed to encourage people to reconsider their views. For former WST members, it is likely that they also struggle with social support because they participated in violent extremist racism, which stigmatizes them from rebuilding healthy support systems even after they exit from organized hate groups.

The four concepts derived from the theoretical perspectives of Latif et al. (2018) and Colvin et al. (2002) are: emotional resilience; residual emotion; coercion; and social

support. From these tenets, my key research inquiry was formed. I sought to investigate if experiences of coercion and social support (or lack thereof) create residual emotions throughout the life-course which inform emotional resilience for formers. I use the term “formers” throughout this paper to describe the participants because this is the term they use to identify themselves. By integrating these concepts, this study aims to better understand explain how and why people come to join, participate in, and leave white supremacist groups based upon their life experiences with social support and coercion. This study examines a consistent story of erratic levels of social support that inform people’s decisions to join, participate in, and leave white supremacist terror groups.

METHODS

Sample

The twelve participants who were interviewed for this research were recruited several ways. First, using a strategy also employed by Bubolz and Simi (2015), I compiled a list of people covered in media outlets as being former white supremacists and used the available information to contact them directly. Second, I relied on snowball sampling, asking the participants to recommend others who were interested in participating and met the inclusion criteria. Third, I contacted programs that help people leave violent extremist groups and asked them if they were willing to distribute my recruitment flyer and contact information to their clients. To be eligible for participation, participants must have identified as former members of white supremacist groups; at least 18 years of age and able to consent in study participation; fluent in spoken English; and living in the United States or Canada. My participant sample consists of nine former

white supremacists. WST groups include but are not limited to the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, racist skinhead groups, The Order, Combat 18, and the National Socialist Movement. Six participants were women and six were men. Participants were born between 1964 and 1990. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Participant Demographics			
Category:	N:		
Gender:			
Male	6		
Female	6		
	Min.	Max.	Avg.
Year of birth:	1964	1990	1973
Employed:	No	Yes	Yes
Current SES:	Working-class	Upper-Class	Middle-class
Childhood SES:	Poor	Upper-Class	Middle-Class
Education:	Less than HS	Master's Degree	Some College
Relationship status:	Single	Married	Married
Children:	No	Yes	Yes
Ever incarcerated/or convicted:	No	Yes	Yes

Participants had diverse experiences with the number of WST groups they were involved in, the duration of their involvement, their roles while involved, and their ages of entry and exit. Table 2 summarizes participants WST involvement information.

Table 2. WST Involvement Information			
Category:	Min.	Max.	Avg.
Number of WST groups:	1	4	3
Age of entry (in years):	5	40	18

Age of exit (in years):	19	47	30
Duration of involvement (years):	3.5	27.5	12
	N:		
Current partner ever involved in WST:	No (8)	Yes (2)	N/A (2)
Antiracist activism/intervention work:	No (1)	Yes (11)	
Roles during involvement*:	General member (1)	Recruiter (5)	Propogandist (3)
	Security (1)	Leader/cofounder (6)	

*Some participants had multiple roles during their involvement in WST.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection began in June of 2019. This research consisted of semi-structured audio-recorded two-hour interviews. Participants were asked demographic questions, as well as about their life histories before, during, and after violent extremism, along with their experiences of social support, coercion (informed by Colvin et al. 2002) and exiting violent extremist groups (informed by Bubolz and Simi 2015; Simi et al. 2017). In exchange for participation, respondents received a \$20.00 gift card. After each interview, I completed a timeline based upon the interview and sent it to each participant for verification of accuracy. All timeline modification requests were honored.

This study employed an intersectional approach which sought to understand the complex and multiple identities of the participants and the power structures under which they operate (Crenshaw 1997). Hankivsky and Grace (2015) have emphasized the need for studies to be designed with intersectionality in mind, rather than waiting until the analysis phase. My interview guide of semi-structured in-depth questions asked participants about themselves and their experiences holistically with the concept of

intersectionality in mind. Thus, I was mindful that participants had multiple identities—as partners, parents, siblings, friends, employees, and activists—outside of their identities as former white supremacists. Following Blee’s (2002) work, I asked participants about the places that they were comfortable being interviewed. However, the majority (8) of the interviews were conducted over the phone because of distance, time, and financial considerations of the researcher. The only in-person interview was held in a coffee shop in the participant’s hometown. Three interviews were conducted via online video.

Each interview was transcribed, and identifiable information was altered to protect participants’ confidentiality. For example, cities were changed to regions and all names were changed to pseudonyms. Moreover, transcripts were first generated verbatim and then unnecessary word fillers, such as “umms” and “likes,” were removed to improve clarity. Transcriptions were analyzed using Dedoose qualitative analytic software. First, the transcripts were theoretically coded according to the tenets of Latif et al.’s (2018) emotional dynamics models and Colvin et al.’s (2002) model of differential support and coercion. In particular, special attention was paid to the following concepts: emotional resilience; identity salience and stability; residual emotion; coercion; and social support. Next, open or grounded theory was employed to enable me to identify nuances and patterns in the data that may not have been addressed by the study’s two theoretical frameworks.

FINDINGS: SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE LIVES OF FORMERS

The data from study participants supports research that establishes exiting violent extremism is a process in and of itself, which seldom occurs instantaneously (Horgan 2009; Bubloz and Simi 2015; Kruglanski et al. 2014) (see Figure 1). Figure 1 shows the key findings of the role of social support through the lives of former WSTs and is organized into four broad categories: before involvement, during involvement, exiting, and after exit. These categories illuminate how the three types of social support varied across the life course stages, which additionally align with movement trajectories. Next, I provide in-depth analysis of participants' experiences with social support as it links to involvement with WST groups.

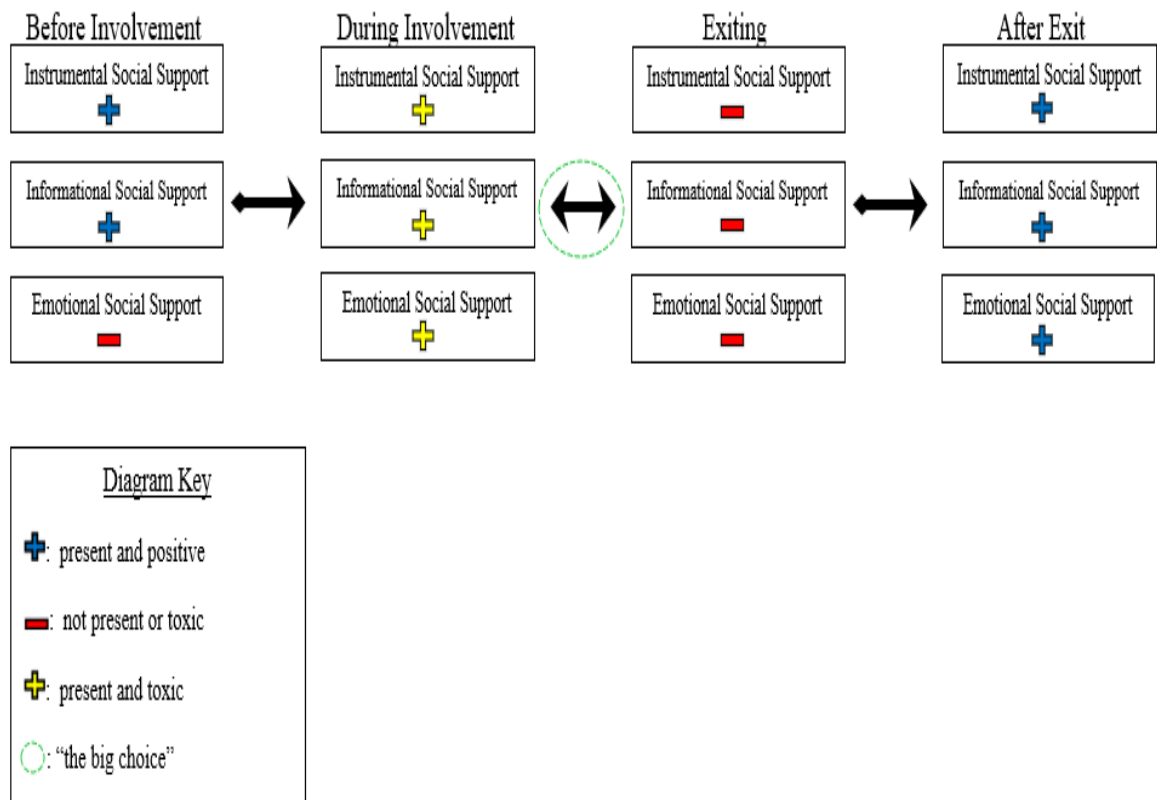


Figure 1. Former White Supremacists' Social Support Chain of Adversity

BEFORE INVOLVEMENT

As you can see from Figure 1, participants described lacking emotional social support (but not informational or instrumental) prior to engaging in WST. It was often the desire for emotional social support which fueled participants entry into white supremacy. Prior to WST involvement, participants expressed that they had deficits in emotional support which led them to seek out emotional support from people who were as angry as they were. These deficits occurred regardless of participants' instrumental and informational resources. Although this lack of emotional support emerged in diverse ways in the lives of the participants, they all experienced a deficit before joining WST and intensely desired emotional support, making them vulnerable to WST involvement as an avenue through which to satisfy that need. For example, some participants explained that prior to engaging in WST they lost a core relationship that provided them with that emotional support (e.g., death of a parent or close friend). Others, however, felt that they did not have anyone they could confide in until they met members of WST groups. Finally, some recognized efforts made by others to emotionally support them, but they were unsatisfied with them.

Several participants emphasized that there is a prevalent misconception that people who join WST are poor, uneducated, and come from broken homes. Yet they argued this characterization was only accurate for a minority of white supremacists. Michael articulated this sentiment when he explained:

I really can't think of anything particularly bad at all from growing up. I know the narrative too, with a lot of the people and a lot of the stories that are out there is these

abused kids coming from broken homes and things like that and there is those people in the movement. But that is not the most common story from my experience and then there is those stories, but I would not say that the majority. I'd say that's more like 10- 20% maybe.

As Table 1 demonstrates, ten out of the twelve formers were not raised in poverty but instead came from working, middle, and upper-class backgrounds (one participant's childhood SES was unknown). Prior to involvement, eleven participants reported a lack of emotional support from parents and family members despite instrumental and informational support. They described growing up in suburban neighborhoods, taking family vacations, and having the instrumental and informational support to participate in extracurricular activities, such as gymnastics, music lessons and wood working. This lack of emotional social support among the participants from varied SES familial backgrounds and often stemmed from time-strapped parents busy working multiple jobs or from over-protective parents hoping to shield them from illness, injury, or rebellious influences. Although at first glance, overprotective parents seem like positive, present emotional support, the participants who experienced it explained that they were seldom allowed to leave their childhood homes and interact with anyone other than their parents. Moreover, their parents often lacked emotional vocabulary; thus, when participants experienced challenges, they did not feel they could express their emotions to their parents or anyone else. Emma, a participant who had a wealthy upbringing, provided an account that exemplified a class-based deficit in emotional support prior to her joining the Ku Klux Klan:

It's terrible to say but that was one of the dysfunctional things is they always bought you stuff. [...] It's kind of like very dysfunctional. I always had whatever I wanted handed to me. No concept of money. [...] My grandmother was around, but once again, a lot of it was just money, 'like here.' I don't know that that's really...when you're young and dumb it's fun but it kind of becomes like a substitute. I think that's common in families where there's money. It's actually, "Okay, I gave you something" that kind of gets equated with love. Now I kind of think maybe time would have been a little better.

In Emma's case, she found her first consistent source of emotional support when she joined the Klan. Although wealthy, she had been raised without a father and by a negligent mother. The Klan provided her with emotional, instrumental, and informational social support despite it being a negative experience overall. Emma explained that her experiences with the Klan seemed to have a prominent quality of normalcy with an "undercurrent" of hate that served as an ever-present subtext. Stephanie, a former neo-Nazi, described her upbringing as, "upwardly mobile middle-class" and explained that although instrumental and informational support were present, emotional support was absent, which became especially painful after she was raped as a young teenager:

I didn't feel like I really belonged in my family. I really felt like the black sheep in my family. They were supportive, though. They were involved with my education and extracurricular activities and stuff. But, our household was very dysfunctional. [...] I didn't have any adults that I trusted or had a good relationship with. My brother and I were not close anymore. I literally, I was just like, I don't have anybody to tell [about being raped]. [...] One of the legacies of my childhood is that I have a really subpar emotional vocabulary... Naming and identifying the emotions that I'm feeling, because we weren't really allowed to express the full spectrum of emotions growing up. It was this very middle ground. So, trying to identify the feelings that I'm feeling has... That, that's always a struggle for me.

Stephanie was not alone among the participants in experiencing major life traumas without emotional social support prior to becoming involved in white supremacy. Other participants discussed experiencing long-term hospitalizations, deaths of friends and family members, and long-term sexual abuse but with no one available to help them process these emotional and (physical) traumas. As a result, they developed excessive anger that was reciprocated, and even encouraged, by members of white supremacist groups. This is consistent with Latif et al.'s (2018) finding of shared emotional energy fueling WST groups. Latif et al. (2018:486) explain, that positive emotional energy can emerge from WST group activities because these activities release energy. Even if the emotions associated with the activities (e.g., hatred and anger) are toxic, the activities cultivated group energy as oppose to draining it. When considering differential social support theory, it appears that a lack of emotional support serves as a pull factor for people to engage in white supremacist terrorism. Thus, the shared emotional energy of WST was attractive for participants because they craved the emotional support that came with it. Although the participants had different life experiences prior to engaging in WST, the theme that they all shared—regardless of the instrumental and informational support in their lives—was a desperate need for emotional support.

DURING INVOLVEMENT

In terms of informational social support, participants had to learn their respective group's norms and ideology, and if they violated any rules, the consequences were severe

and often violent. For example, one participant provided me with their Klan handbook, the “Kloran,” (Figure 2) which listed instructions for conducting 18 different ceremonies, 11 distinct titles and the organizational hierarchy, directions for organizing the Klavern (i.e., the KKK meeting place), as well as other bylaws.

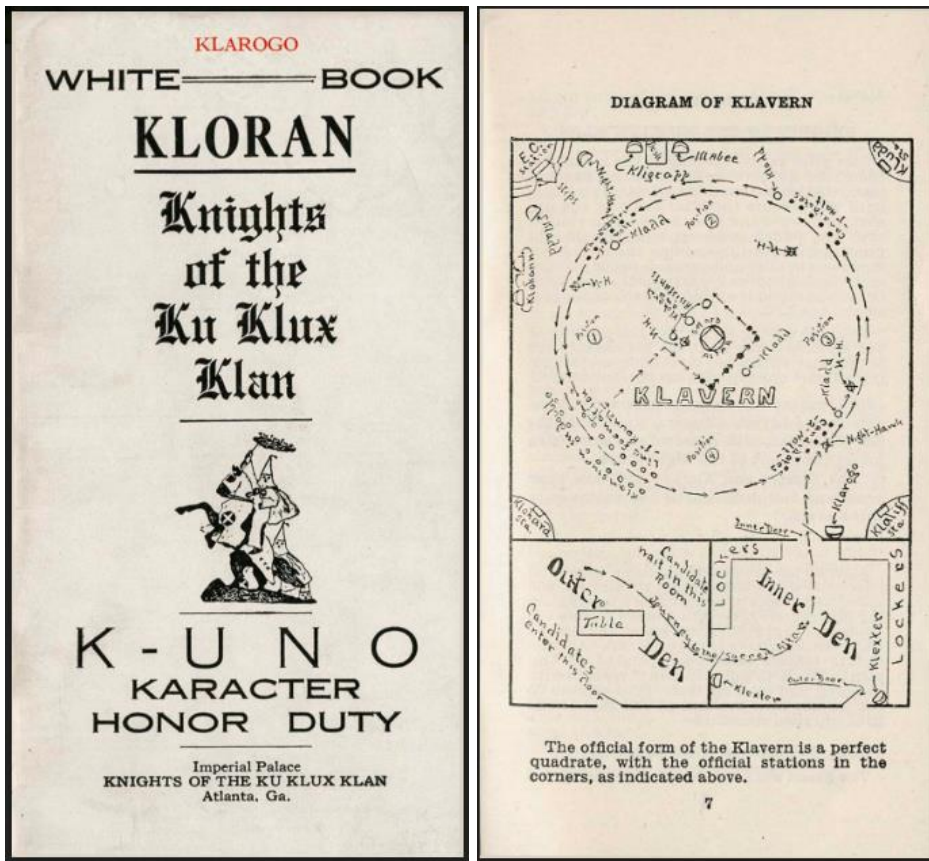


Figure. 2 Copy of the Ku Klux Klan’s Kloran—courtesy of a participant.

Most participants viewed informational support as toxic because the adoption and adherence to group ideology was dogmatic. However, participants were often so grateful for the social support that they were willing to “go along to get along.” Table 2 shows that eleven of the twelve participants were involved in multiple WST groups. Participants often explained that they shopped for the group whose ideology and behavior they found the least abrasive in order to cultivate emotional social support. Once participants received the emotional support they desired, they also received WST-specific informational and instrumental support. The hallmark of the social support that participants received during their involvement was that it was contingent on living a highly supervised, coercive, and isolated life. Over time, participants found the negativity of the social support they received from their involvement to be utterly exhausting, and they desired positive social support. Every participant in the sample experienced an increase of social support when they joined WST. However, all the support they received after entry was highly contingent and toxic. Participants often had to “shop” for the WST group whose ideology that could tolerate the most, and often it took them several years before they fully adopted the ideology and found the best “fit.”

Participants explained that as long as they were in a WST group, they were not given grief from their previous groups for switching to another group. This was because if they adopted an Aryan white supremacist ideology, it did not matter which faction they belonged to because they were seen as being on the same side of the battle (of note, militaristic language was used by participants throughout their interviews when describing WST). Moreover, participants described that it was common for certain

groups to have reputations within the WST movement of offering different kinds of social support. Table 3 shows the typologies of these groups as denoted in the interviews. These typologies are not mutually exclusive and Table 3 is not a complete list of WST groups in the US, UK, and Canada; however, the typologies are classifications of what the groups are said to offer and distinguish themselves from other groups within the WST movement.

Table 3. Typologies of WST Groups.

Typology	Group	Description of Typology
Political	National Socialist Movement	Primarily focused on changing legislation, electing public officials, and holding political conferences.
	British National Party	
	American Nazi Party	
	Aryan Nations	
	National Front	
	American Identity Movement	
	National Alliance	
Religious	Ku Klux Klan	Primarily focused on using Christian doctrine to justify WST views, lifestyles, and violence.
	Christian Identity	
	Church of the Creator	
Gang/White Power	White Aryan Resistance	Primarily focused on using ideology to justify violence, partying, and listening to punk and white power music.
	Hammerskin Nation	
	Blood and Honour	
	Neo-Nazi (various groups)	
	Skinheads (various groups)	
	Aryan Brotherhood	
	Public Enemy No. 1 (PENI)	
Terrorist	Combat 18	Primarily focused on international destruction and mass violence to further WST aims.
	The Order	
Separatists	Sovereign Citizens	Primarily focused on ethnic separation, the creation of an all-white ethno-state, and undermining laws and governments,
	American Militia Movement	

Based on the WST group typologies, it was quite common for participants to be highly critical of the WST groups they tried and rejected. For example, Albert—a former skinhead and neo-Nazi—explained why he did not join the KKK:

They're [Klanspeople] just a little weird with the Cyclops and the dragons and the pointed hats, and all that kind of stuff. And the Christian thing, I wasn't really...the Christian thing was a little bit off for me, because everything that they said, they always had some sort of biblical comparison. And it was just too much. So I just never really subscribed to their way of thinking.

This “shopping” processes helped participants feel a sense of belonging once they had settled upon a group because it gave them a higher sense of autonomy. Often times, participants were shopping for groups in terms of the three types of social support they would receive from joining, as opposed to the beliefs the group espoused. For example, Albert, described the instrumental, informational, and emotional support that were key factors in his decision to switch from one WST group to another:

I had been drinking quite heavily. And by this time, I probably had two DWIs, and I ended up quitting drinking. So there is a little bit of a positive thing out of my whole relationship with those people. And I haven't drank since. So, I think that's a good thing. [...] So, I got involved with the Hammerskin Nation at that time, which a lot of us were starting to do that. Because the Hammerskin Nation was well known for being totally organized, very strict. There was no drugs involved, there was very little alcohol involved. And here I was, you know, recently sober doing the 12-step thing, but at the same time I was doing the political stuff. It just matched. And because of my being in the newspapers and the trial and everything that I was involved with, and doing time, I was sort of looked up to. At least that was what my perception was, is that I was looked up to.

Albert's quote exemplifies that although that his overall social support from Hammerskin Nation was toxic, there is nuance as it still initially had a positive impact on his life in terms of his sobriety. Hammerskin Nation provided with him the informational support to maintain sobriety by have "very strict" rules regarding alcohol consumption. They also provided Albert with instrumental social support by creating an environment that mimicked his 12-step alcohol abstention program. Emotional support was evident in Albert's quote because he described that the group improved his self-esteem and gave him the impression that he was admired.

Participants also described instrumental support—usually financial—which they received from their WST membership. For many, involvement in WST offered some tangible benefits (e.g., romantic partners, housing, income, travel) for participants while simultaneously harming them by exposing them to violence, radical ideological views, social isolation, and stigma. As such, Figure 1 depicts that during involvement, participants had instrumental and informational social support, but despite its presence, this support was toxic in nature. John described the instrumental and emotional support he received from his former WST group during his incarceration:

People from the far right, they collected money for us, and they kept going round make sure my mum and dad was all right [when I was in prison]. In that way that was like that, it was like having an extended family, you know? They really did look out for us. There's no doubt about it. I'd say probably when I was in the far right to be honest. It was... You had a whole brotherhood and friends. There was always someone there for you.

In terms of instrumental support, John described that his former WST group

collected money for him and checked on his parents, both tasks which take time and effort. John's statement demonstrates emotional support in that he felt looked after and that he always had someone there for him despite being incarcerated. Thus, the instrumental support he received enhanced the emotional support as well.

Participants described their involvement in WST in ways that are consistent with Snow and Machalek's (1983) characteristics of converts as a social type that included biographical reconstruction, adoption of a master attribution scheme, suspension of analogical reasoning, and embracement of a master role. By biographical reconstruction, Snow and Machalek (1983), explained that converts often reject their pre-conversion lives because they see themselves as not living with truth, and they are grateful for their conversion for showing them the egregiousness of their pasts. Moreover, this rejection extends to social ties that do not align with their newfound beliefs. Participants described experiences consistent with biographical reconstruction as they would cut ties with their pre-WST lives and only affiliate with other white supremacists. They often explained that over time they came to believe that the white race was under attack and some experienced guilt when they were involved for not joining the fight sooner. For example, Rachel described that her choice to become a neo-Nazi was a direct rejection of her familial history:

My parents were very upset. My father is an immigrant from England, and he grew up during World War II, and he spent his childhood in bomb shelters. And for his daughter to embrace national socialism after what happened to him and his family in the war was just beyond anything that he could cope with. He was just so upset.

Snow and Machalek (1983:270) defined the adoption of a master attribution scheme as, “one causal scheme or vocabulary of motives informs all causal attributions.” This concept was pertinent to the lives of formers because although their WST groups were ideologically different, all of the groups believed in the 14 Words. The 14 Words is a common WST coined by David Lane, a notorious WST who died while serving a 190-year prison sentence. The 14 Words are as follows, “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” The 14 Words served as a master attribution scheme for participants during their involvement in WST because although they were involved in different groups, all of the groups justified violence because they perceived that the white race was being attacked by perceived enemies and liberal agendas. Lynn, explained the significance of the master attribution, “1488” (i.e., symbolizing The 14 Words and Heil Hitler-as H is the eight letter of the alphabet), when she explained:

I got “1488” tattooed right across the side of my neck in old English lettering. That was to prove my commitment to myself and other people [...]

Snow and Machalek’s (1983:275) third component of conversion is suspension of analogical reasoning meaning, “allow[ing] converts to assign incomparable value to their world view. By removing other belief systems from the status of eligible competition, a virtually impermeable boundary is established around the convert's world view.” The suspension of analogical reasoning is evident in participants’ discussions of shopping for the right WST group and fiercely rejecting others—as opposed to seeing them as analogous. Furthermore, this concept is evident in participants describing that they often used cognitive dissonance when they were involved in WST to ignore their own

friendships and romantic relationships with perceived enemies. Several participants also noted that they remained in the movement despite questioning their sexualities and ultimately identifying as LGBTQ+ (i.e., non-heterosexual relationships are strictly prohibited in WST organizations). Tracey explained that although she was involved in the Klan, she never fully understood the racist ideology of the group. Instead, Tracey suspended her analytical reasoning in favor of group membership and social support:

If anything, I didn't share, I didn't share the hatred in my heart. I never understood the point of hating anybody just for the color of their skin. You know, but you go along to get along and when you're surrounded by that type.

Finally, Snow and Machalek (1983:278) found that converts take on master roles meaning that their role as a convert becomes their primary identity, “For the convert, such role identities as father, mother, brother, sister, student, and so on pale in comparison to the role identity of the convert.” Participants echoed this concept when they reported the “totalizing commitment” (Simi et al. 2017) that WST requires. Hank described this commitment by stating, “It was who I was. It was what I listened to. It was what I wore. The clothes that I wore, the books that I read, the movies that I watched. It was where my social validation came from.”

Participants believed their lives did improve initially in all three areas of social support when they became involved in WST. They identified that the key benefits from initial involvement included a sense of belonging, brotherhood, camaraderie, friends, feeling understood, higher purpose, sense of family, protection, feeling important, feeling powerful, and words of affirmation—all examples of emotional support. However, over

time they began to realize that they could once again change their lives to find social support that was not intertwined with hate, violence, and misinformation.

Stephanie explained her experience in wanting emotional support during her radicalization:

I didn't feel any personal value, but I felt like I could be of value to the movement. In fact, the more worthless I personally felt, the more I felt like my life could be given in value to the movement. [...] I mean, I even had the conscious thought as I was radicalizing, as I was hanging out with these people that... I had the conscious thought that I was just like, "Who the fuck is worse than the Nazi's? They have to take me in." Right?

Multiple participants echoed Stephanie's sentiment and explained that it was attractive to them that the groups they joined were highly stigmatized because it increased their odds of being accepted by the group, and they believed they were less likely to be bullied or harassed by non-members because those people would fear them. Many participants explained that they felt powerful and adrenaline rushes from knowing that they were actively feared by non-members in their communities. Post-exit, many formers struggle with residual guilt for the fear they instilled in others when they were involved in WST. This dichotomy of having emotional support from the group at the expense with social stigma and fear from broader society wore on participants over time and question the worth of the relationships they once felt to be so important. In hindsight, John reevaluated the friendships he had during his involvement:

Because when you're involved, that's 15 years of my life that was just filled with violence, negativity, toxic. Like every bad thing you can think of. There's nothing positive. Well I say nothing positive, I did have friends, but are they

really friends if they're just friends because you're in the same group as them? Is that a real friend? Just that negativity, and not just for me. The negativity I put out in the world as well. The way I'd talk to people and just look at people like they was nothing, that I was better than them. Yes, just horrible that was.

Between “involvement” and “exiting,” there is a green dashed circle which represents “the big choice” that my participants described when they began thinking about leaving WST. The big choice is the decision to give up all social support—because it is toxic—in the hopes that one will be able to rebuild their life and find positive social support eventually. Participants postulated that many of the people who they knew personally that left and ultimately rejoined WST, did so because the lack of social support endured during exiting was too much for some to bear. Emma similarly expressed the belief that social support within WST was damaging and forced her to make the “big choice” when she was deciding to exit:

So on the one hand, you have kind of like a big community, but on the other hand it's very isolating which is part of why I had a lot of trouble making friends when I got out cause I had to pretty much leave everything behind. I had to start over from nothing.

The big choice is the decision to give up all social support—because it is toxic—in the hopes that one will be able to rebuild their life and find positive social support eventually. Participants facing the big choice must prepare themselves to completely abandon their social networks and identities and accept that they will likely have a long period of time before they rebuild social support in their lives again. Many participants expressed that the big choice was daunting because they did not believe that they ever

could be accepted or integrated back into mainstream society because of their WST pasts. On the bright side, eleven of the twelve participants expressed that they had the most people they could turn to for social support and the best quality social support in their entire lives, since leaving WST. The one participant who disagreed explained that he had more people to turn to for social support when he was involved in the movement, but that the quality of social support he received since leaving was much more positive.

The primary theme regarding social support during WST involvement was initially a positive powerful force for many participants, as it was usually the first time in years that they could satiate their need for emotional support. However, over time, they began to feel that the emotional support was not worth the negative consequences of this association. These negative consequences came from the informational, instrumental, and emotional support which they received. In other words, although all three types of social support were present during involvement, they all were toxic, and that toxicity took its toll in the long term. Participants often spoke about emotional exhaustion stemming from the stringent restrictions placed upon them by the group: only listening to white power music, dressing in clothes to denote group membership, avoiding Kosher foods, and avoiding positive (or even neutral) interactions with perceived enemies (e.g., people of color, LGBT+ folks, Jews, etc.).

These strict rules are examples of toxic informational support—dictating how WST members must behave. Moreover, the norms associated with punishing disobedient WSTs were severe and encompassed examples of toxic emotional and instrumental support. For example, Lynn, a former WST, explained that she was jumped by four

members of her WST group when she was involved because she was suspected of becoming an anti-fascist because of her behavior. The assault was traumatic and physically disabling, as she attested it took months of physiotherapy for her to regain basic functioning. Lynn's experience is an example of toxic social support because her assault was seen as tough love and an effort by group members to keep her from leaving the group. Moreover, this is also an example of toxic instrumental support as this violent retaliation was the expected response for Lynn's suspected ideological disobedience. Thus, her WST group had informal protocols that were instrumental in both attempting to keep her as a member as well as send messages to the other members that they ought not to violate group norms.

This idea is consistent with Latif et al.'s (2018) Trajectory of Decline model, which posits that non-shared emotions lead to identity turmoil for individuals and social friction within the group and leads people to exit from white supremacist groups. The big choice encompasses both concepts, underscoring that the decision to exit WST is one that involves leaving toxic but present social support in exchange for uncertain social support moving forward. Participants made the big choice because the social support given by their WST groups was contingent on social isolation and hatred, high levels of emotion work, which was difficult to sustain. This finding directly relates to Hochschild's (1979:551) concept of emotional management, "the type of work it takes to cope with feeling rules." Feeling rules refers to the formal and informal expectations of emotional expressions regulated by an ideology (Hochschild 1979). Most of the research on emotional work and management refer to employees being required to express positive

emotions that they do not feel (e.g., nurses remaining positive for patients in dire situations); however, scholars have found that emotional labor manifests into burnout (Jeung, Kim, and Chang 2018). Formers explained that they felt emotionally exhausted from the emotional labor of having to present as hateful when they did not fully subscribe—or were beginning to doubt—their groups’ ideologies. This emotional exhaustion seems to mirror the relationship between emotional work and occupational burnout, as in many ways, involvement in WST was much like a job. In other words, exit enabled participants to search for healthier, more positive, and less conditional emotional social support.

To be clear, while involved in WST, participants received instrumental and informational social support that was both positive and toxic. On one hand, participants learned how to be members of a community, and many felt that they were contributing to larger political agendas. However, the instrumental and informational support they received was contingent on them obeying rigid rules, with dire consequences if not followed. Moreover, the informational and instrumental support that participants received while involved was all intended to make them better soldiers and procreators for the white race, as opposed to their personal growth. Thus, all three types of social support during WST appeared to be initially positive, but overtime the toxicity increased to participants’ breaking points. What differentiates emotional support from instrumental and informational during participants involvement, was that it was the determining factor in participants deciding to exit WST.

EXITING

As illustrated in Figure 1, all three forms of social support are absent during exits from WST. Participants explained that they often had no personal avenues of social support, and thus, they relied on charity organizations—usually homeless shelters—to fully disengage. Several participants also explained that they lost their jobs because their employment was related to the WST group that they were leaving. Michael explained that this lack of emotional and instrumental support prolonged his exit from WST over three years because his only source of income was from the group:

Leaving the movement was really difficult. I mean, I'd been wanting to get out for about three years. And I couldn't see the way out, or didn't have the, I don't like saying I didn't have the courage, because I feel like I'm pretty courageous most of the time about everything, but I didn't have the courage to leave the movement. It's so all-encompassing. Like especially in the position I was in. It was like, I was responsible for this large organization, all these different people looked up to me, depended on me to make the decisions, things like that, for the group. And so, it was really hard. And plus, my business and everything was tied into it as well. Like I literally invested all my finances and the money I made back into the business.

Another participant, Rachel, explained that her exit from WST was so difficult that she contemplated suicide:

The drawbacks unfortunately were quite substantial. I had trouble getting housing. Nobody wanted to rent to me the notorious Heritage Front member. It was very hard to find roommates. [...] I ended up just feeling emotionally just completely burnt out. [...]. And I just couldn't cope with that anymore. I needed some space. So yeah, my mental health took a serious hit. I was very, very lost and I never attempted suicide, but I was certainly suicidal. I ended up in crisis center a few times and I mean it was really hard. I don't regret leaving, but at the same time, I'm glad I won't have to go through that ever again. So it was really a difficult time.

Participants typically described feeling emotionally exhausted from living in a highly coercive environment, having a positive experience with a person of color which temporarily relieved their emotional exhaustion, and that experience fueling ideological disillusionment as people of color are seen as threats to the white race. Steve described that he struggled to maintain an anti-Semitic ideology when he received medical treatment from a Jewish doctor:

We had gotten in this big melee with these Vietnamese folks, and I was laying on the table in the hospital and I was wearing a swastika shirt and all this, and this Orthodox Jewish doctor walked in. So when I look back onto my life, I usually think about that moment. It was so elemental to me because he said not one thing about my politics or who I was, all he did was come in and treat me like a human being and helped me. So when I look back on, like we've been talking about not really believing in the ideology or like it took a while to get there, probably because I didn't. Right? Like really inside me, it's a struggle to believe in Nazism. It's a pretty hard thing. But when I think about that moment, I just think about that particular human being's compassion and how he treated me. Which was like you can't replace that with anything else.

Steve's excerpt demonstrates that although he was receiving emotional support from the doctor who was providing him with medical care, this support was temporary. Nearly every participant expressed that while they were exiting, they had a positive experience with a person considered an "enemy" by their previous WST group. Another

such example is that of Vince who—while exiting—rented an apartment from a Turkish Muslim man whom he befriended over time:

And just over a time period of let's say six months interacting with a Muslim, just showed me some respect and compassion that I thought I didn't deserve it. [...] He even asked me to repair his computer and paid me for some time, and started putting food there, Turkish food which at first I didn't want to touch, but I just ate it because I didn't want to test out how offended he may be if I don't. And it became just normal, more normal, more normal, just wasn't normal to me. At some point I didn't take the money anymore and at the end I was just waiting for him to rip off the mask and show his true face, the Muslim terrorists, that ugly guy. And I just realized I was the ugly guy; I was the one expecting these stereotypes to happen and that just showed me even more how wrong I was. How good it was that I separated from those groups. That I have to explore, actually this world out there more.

Although these experiences comprised instances of social support, they were brief and rare; the continuous social support that they had received while involved in WST took years to replace after exiting. Overall, during their exits from WST, participants described having little to no instrumental, informational, or emotional support. Essentially, once participants left their former WST groups, they were completely shunned by the group, and often threatened. All emotional, instrumental, and informational support was cut-off from the group. Moreover, because of their previous identification—and often appearances—participants were also shunned from mainstream society. Participants described struggling to find jobs and housing after exit from WST because often they still had swastika, 1488, and Hitler tattoos. It was not until participants

had fully disengaged from WST that they were able to cultivate all three types of social support from positive and stable sources.

AFTER EXIT

This study finds that after completely severing ties with WST, participants were able to find positive and stable instrumental, informational, and emotional social support from new sources. All 12 former WST participants concurred that they had the most positive, highest quality social support in their lives at the times of their interviews. Eleven of them agreed that they also had the most sources of social support (e.g., friends, family, religious organizations, non-profit organizations, etc.) at the present than at any other time in their lives. The one dissenting participant explained that he felt that he had more people he could turn to for social support when he was involved in WST but that the support he received was largely toxic. Of note, this participant had exiting from WST the most recently of all of the participants, being out only six months prior to the interview.

There was a clear consensus among participants that there was a need for more social support during the exiting process because their lives have become much more fulfilling after leaving WST. Almost all of the participants currently volunteer or work in countering violent extremism and/or anti-racist activism. A common sentiment shared by all of the participants was that they wanted to tell people who are still involved or who are leaving WST that their lives improved upon leaving and wished they had left earlier. When asked about the positive aspects of life post-exit, Tracey explained:

Getting the truth out and healing. Like I say, the relationship I'm in, very healthy, very much love, much respect going both ways and my children. My children are my greatest joy. My children are my reason for being and they are the best part of me and honestly, I don't know, I have no idea how it is that somebody can bring children into this world and not love them. I mean, because my children are my everything. They saved my life.

Ten the participants talked about finding healthy and supportive romantic relationships after leaving WST. Of these ten participants, eight had partners that had no involvement at any time with WST. The two participants whose partners did have involvement, had also exited WST. Leaving WST often helped participants reconnect with family members and/or start families of their own. One participant, Lynn explained that she was able to reconnect with her mother and found social support from Life After Hate, an organization that provides resources for people leaving white supremacy:

Pretty much everyone around me. I can talk to anybody in Life After Hate about anything I want, even if it's not movement-related whatsoever. My mom and I get along really good now. We're actually doing our own independent project together.

Moreover, participants agreed that the greatest benefit from leaving WST was the relief from no longer living in a hateful and controlling environment, and as a result they experienced a new sense of freedom. Rachel explained,

The immediate benefits were that I would free up these hateful toxic people, that I wasn't being pressured anymore to be doing activities and saying things that were hurting other people. I mean that was definitely a benefit.

Indeed, formers enjoyed the increase in autonomy over their lives and took comfort in the day-to-day living routines with their families. Steve articulated this idea:

Wife, kids, living that life of the day-to-day as much as that sounds super boring, it's like [...] Just the difference of not having to worry about going to your car in the morning and worried about the gang stuff, all of that. I mean, the groups that I was in, it took a lot of your mental time dealing with the ins and out of all that business rather than this present day, you have to think about real things, which can be stressful too but we all know that we have to deal with those things, right? Whether it's bills or your house or cutting the lawn or whatever, it's a lot easier to deal with that than, "Gee, I wonder if so-and-so is going to come and I wonder if there's going to be violence today. I wonder if there's going to be cops today." All of those things were pretty stressful, so it's nice to live without those things now.

Every participant echoed Steve's belief in that they felt that their experiences joining and exiting WST gave them unique perspectives on life that improved their resiliency during life's challenges. Participants felt self-efficacy in making their lives positive through giving and receiving instrumental, informational, and emotional social support.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research indicate that people who have departed violent extremist white supremacist groups have experienced exceptional chains of adversity tied to social support (or lack thereof) throughout the life course. Although each participant's life experiences are uniquely their own, there is a pattern regarding social support and coercion that links them all. The general pattern of social support through the life course of former white supremacists began with a deficit in emotional support prior to extremist

involvement. Participants typically had instrumental and informational social support before they joined WST groups, but they all expressed deficits in emotional social support. Many explained that they got involved to obtain emotional social support and became radicalized after the fact. It is important to note that participants found that emotional support was more important to them than ideology when selecting WST groups.

This finding is significant because it is contrary to the notion that people join white supremacist groups *after* they have already been radicalized. In contrast, my findings underscore that radicalization only happened for certain participants and occurred because they were unwilling to relinquish the social support they found within white supremacy. Formers received all three types of social support when they were in the movement; yet, this support was unique because it was highly coercive and isolated them from all people who were not white supremacists. This coercion took many different forms including violence, threats, humiliation, and intense supervision.

Over time, usually many years, participants began to desire and think it was possible for them to find non-coercive social support. But this prospect was risky since it was at the expense of giving up the only consistent social support many of them had ever had. Nearly all of the participants remarked that the coercion they experienced in the movement could not be compensated for by the social support they received, and they experienced “hate exhaustion” which prompted their disengagement and for many, their deradicalization. After leaving white supremacy, all of formers claimed that the best quality, largest quantity, and most positive social support they experienced at any point in

their lives was happening in the present as *former* white supremacists. Accordingly, the most difficult challenge of leaving the movement was not the residual ideological effects but rather the complete abandonment of social support after experiencing consistent coercion for many years.

Formers began to ponder departures from WST when they had ideological doubts and desire for less manipulative, controlling, and conditional social support. Their past experiences of gaining social support from the hate group ironically increased their hope that they could find more positive social support elsewhere. Upon leaving WST, participants experienced a complete lack of emotional support with the exception of brief positive experiences with people of color. While exiting, informational and instrumental social support were most paramount in being able to exit as many relied on non-profit organizations and shelters to make the transition. Post-exit, participants had the best informational, instrumental, and emotional social support of their lives, they often also became activists to lend social support to others who were exiting.

These findings have both conceptual and pragmatic contributions. In Figure 1, I outline the relevance of social support chain of adversity (Price et al. 2002) and apply that to the former white supremacists' experiences. Similarly, this study's findings support Colvin et al.'s (2002) model of differential social support and coercion by serving as an example of how differential social support pulls people into and out of WST. Furthering Latif et al.'s (2018) emotional dynamics model, my findings illustrate the pivotal role of social support—especially emotional social support—as vital to understand white supremacist group dynamics and why people chose to exit WST. On a pragmatic note,

this research emphasizes the importance of providing social support to people so that they can leave WST, or prevent them from joining in the first place.

The findings indicate that increasing emotional support in childhood may decrease the desire to join white supremacist terror groups and may be more effective than decreasing childhood coercion. Many participants recalled a teacher from their childhood or adolescence that had a positive impact on their life or that they wish they had listened to earlier. For the majority of my participants, teachers were the only source of social support that they could recall before joining white supremacy. This suggests that it may be helpful to educate teachers about white supremacist terrorism and their role in preventing white supremacist terrorism. Along these policy lines, it may necessitate an increase in resources for teachers, and decrease classroom sizes so that they are able to be effective sources of social support for their students. This study posits that programs that provide resources for those transitioning out of WST are useful and effective because they increase the social support that highly stigmatized and isolated people need to become formers. These programs help people recuperate from hate exhaustion by creating support networks of people who have first-hand experience overcoming and managing it. Such programs include but are not limited to: Life After Hate, The Free Radicals Project, The Forgiveness Project, and Parallel Networks.

This study has several limitations. First and foremost, due to resource restrictions, most interviews were conducted via telephone as opposed to in-person which means that facial expressions and body language were largely not included in the data. Secondly, former white supremacist terrorists are a highly stigmatized hard to reach population, and

thus, the sample size was small. The small sample size makes it impossible to determine if the findings of this study are generalizable or applicable to other violent extremist groups. Third, this study is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. Although I cannot track emotions and social support as they vary across time, I rely on participants' recollections. Despite these limitations, the participants were incredibly generous with the information they were willing to provide and thus the data that were collected were full of thick descriptions. Future research should further explore the nuances of hate exhaustion, the effectiveness of different programs seeking to rehabilitate former white supremacists, and other groups in which the Former White Supremacists Social Support Chain of Adversity (Figure 1) may apply. I intend to further study chains of adversity across multiple violent extremist groups and ideologies as well as the "shopping" processes that are used to engage in terrorism.

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