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

April Leviton, MPH
Department of Sociology

Abstract

This study aims to better understand explain 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.

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 supremacism 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).

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; Kruglanksi

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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 model 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.

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.

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.

KEY 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; Kruglanksi 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. 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.
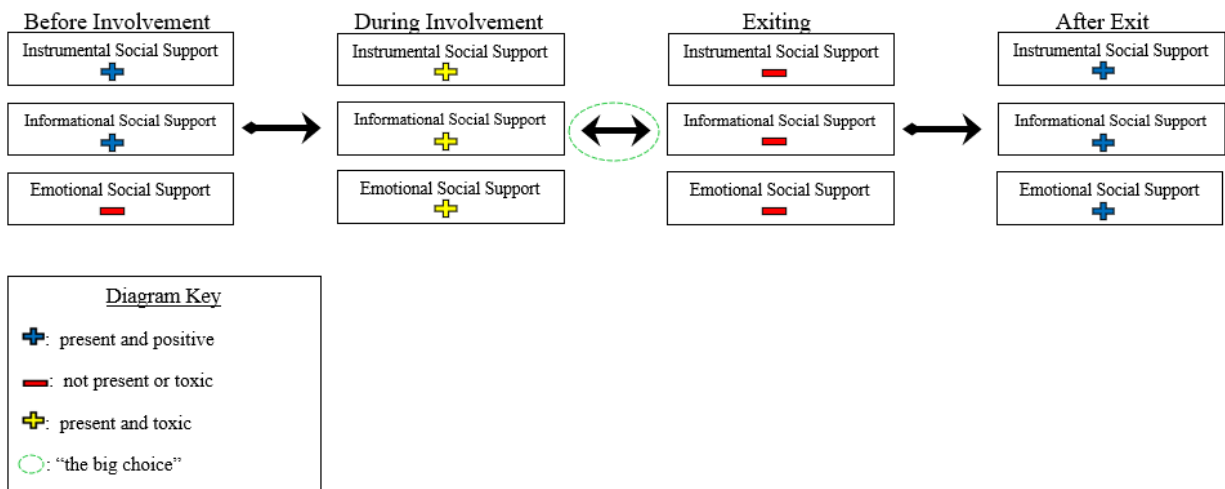

Figure 1. Former White Supremacists' Social Support Chain of Adversity

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.. 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 supremacism.

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. Over time, participants began to desire 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

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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. 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. After leaving WST, all participants 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.

These findings have both conceptual and pragmatic contributions. Figure 1 outlines 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. This research hopes to inform efforts to end WST.