

WHITE SUPREMACISTS SPEAK:

RECRUITMENT, RADICALIZATION & EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGING AND
DISENGAGING FROM HATE GROUPS



Anne Speckhard, Ph.D.
Molly Ellenberg M.A.
TM Garret

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Executive Summary

The following report is an interim report of an ongoing study, with the current results based on 50 in-depth psychosocial interviews of white supremacists in five countries (the U.S., Canada, Germany, UK and New Zealand) collected over the time period of October 2020 to October 2021. The interviews focused on the subjects' childhood histories, exposures to white supremacy, recruitment and joining processes, experiences in the group including ideological indoctrination and with violence and if disillusioned their disengagement and deradicalization experiences. All of the interviews were conducted over Zoom and video recorded with most participants agreeing to have their interview used to produce a short counter narrative video for use in disrupting white supremacist online and face-to-face recruitment.

The report's important findings include:

- This particular sample of white supremacists had a much higher level of adverse childhood experiences than to be expected in the general population and were as a result more vulnerable to groups that gave out the expectation of belonging or familial relations and who conferred on new members a sense of purpose and significance. If this result bears out in larger samples, it shows that addressing childhood abuse and neglect is an important measure for preventing recruitment to white supremacy.
- Individuals in this sample who joined white supremacist groups generally were much more motivated by a need for belonging, purpose, dignity, and significance rather than from outright hate or even bad experiences with minority and ethnic groups but many over time took on the hateful ideology, supported and took part in violence as well.
- The white supremacists ideologies tend to focus on Jews as the ultimate enemy, posit white replacement/white genocide as a Jewish backed plot to replace/eliminate whites from their claimed rightful position in society and many embrace the idea of kicking off racial holy war, i.e. RAHOWA and the Day of the Rope which is when Jews, liberals and race traitors will be hung and minorities either killed or relocated.
- Ideological indoctrination and embracing antisemitism occurred by means of a process labeled Directed Hate in which new members were made to feel they belong, are significant and have a purpose based on their whiteness which they then had to maintain by isolating themselves from minorities, supporting the groups ideology and at times supporting and engaging with their violent actions as well (Speckhard, Ellenberg, & Garret, 2022). Through this process members learned to shift blame for their failures and channel their anger about any number of grievances toward minorities, and above all Jews. Most interviewees in the present sample had never met a Jewish person but learned to hate and blame them for the ills of the world.
- For some interviewees who later realized that they were members of the LGBTQ community, joining groups with internalized and violent misogyny and homophobia allowed for projection

and splitting, wherein they were able to separate themselves from their closeted identity which they felt they needed to reject. We have labeled this phenomenon Projected Hate.

- Many were only peripherally racist or had been raised in systemic versus overtly angry racism, especially those who grew up in the American South, which made it easier to buy into white supremacist ideology over time.
- Like cults, white supremacist groups demand ideological and behavioral loyalty from their members and begin to isolate them from dissenting opinions as well as from members of the hated minority groups making it hard for them to have any positive exposures. As isolation and the echo chambers of hate increase, fusion with the ideology and buy-in to conspiracy theories sets in. This underlies the usefulness of measures designed to create positive interactions and dialogue across racial, ethnic, and religious divides.
- Individuals in white supremacist groups often see themselves while active in their groups as heroic race warriors acting in self-defense of their white ingroup.
- Some white supremacist recruiters and leaders use religion and pseudo-religion, such as Christian Identity, Creativity, and Arastú/Odinism, to portray their mission as religious and morally sanctioned by God.
- As was also shown in the Capitol Hill riots, some white supremacist groups recruit from both active duty and retired members of the military and police hoping to benefit from their weaponry knowledge and skills which can be imparted to the group, possible access to weapons and for their already developed sense of discipline.
- Similarly, both active duty and retired military and police recruits serve to lend an air of prestige and legitimacy to such groups, reinforce the idea that the groups are patriotic in nature and these members are also good recruiters as a result.
- As with most violent extremists and terrorist groups, females generally played support roles, were seen as “breeders” and did not hold leadership positions, with some exceptions occurring in the NSM, and there were far fewer women reported upon than men among the ranks of all the groups studied.
- Youth are more easily recruited by white supremacist groups who actively prey upon youth from broken homes and chaotic and painful childhood experiences by offering them a sense of a substitute family, personal significance and positive identity based upon their “whiteness.”
- Recruitment occurs through leafletting and literature as well as face-to-face interactions, but also increasingly relies on Internet-based exposures and online recruitment interactions which now with the advent of social media, video chat and texting contain the possibilities of increased intimacy.
- White supremacist groups capitalize on using the mainstream media to sensationalize their demonstrations and egregious actions, which widens their recruitment exposure via the media.
- Gang and prison-based white extremist groups were the most violent and, in some cases, follow a “blood in, blood out” recruitment strategy meaning one can expect to only exit the group by dying.
- Tattooing permanent markers of white supremacy on one’s body is common and makes it more difficult to re-enter society as these marks of hatred are feared and reviled by others. Hence tattoo removal may be an integral part of rehabilitation and reentry.

- Of those white supremacists who turned to psychotherapy for help exiting and rehabilitating from white supremacy groups, some found their therapists afraid of them and lacking relevant knowledge. Others deeply benefitted from addressing both the adverse traumatic experiences that had led them to being vulnerable to join in the first place as well as those they encountered in the group.
- Reciprocal radicalization plays an important role in further radicalizing white supremacists and keeping them involved in their groups. Many referenced violent interactions with Antifa as further radicalizing events that influenced them.
- Doxxing has a serious effect on white supremacists causing some to leave their groups for fear of losing jobs, being arrested, etc. Likewise, the effect of significant others threatening to or actually leaving their white supremacist partners caused some to reevaluate the worth of staying with their group.
- Spontaneous deradicalization occurs in some when they have positive interactions with members of groups they were taught to hate, thereby causing them cognitive dissonance that for some results in questioning what they were taught.
- Given the isolation and echo chambers that characterize white supremacist groups, disengaging from a hate group often means losing one's entire group of friends.
- Ebbs and flows of engagement are common as individuals exit and again revert to their groups or move among various groups. Assistance for exiting is an important feature of a successful walking away from white supremacist groups and was mentioned only in some cases as being available.

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Introduction

On May 11, 2021, Attorney General Merrick B. Garland and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas gave testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee, pointing out that the greatest domestic threat facing the United States emanates from, as Mr. Garland stated, violent extremists, specifically “those who advocate for the superiority of the white race” (Sullivan & Benner, 2021). This followed March 2021 testimony of FBI Director Christopher Wray before the Senate Judiciary Committee in which Director Wray warned of a rapidly growing threat of homegrown violent extremism that law enforcement is scrambling to contain through thousands of investigations. Echoing previous FBI warnings on the threat of white supremacist groups, he added that the domestic terrorism threat has been metastasizing across the country for a long time now and is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. He also pointed out that the number of white supremacists and other racially motivated extremists has almost tripled since he became director in 2017 (Tucker & Jalonick, 2021). Likewise, last year, a former head of the Department of Homeland Security’s intelligence branch filed a whistle-blower complaint in which he accused the department of blocking a report about the threat of violent extremism and described white supremacists as having been “exceptionally lethal in their abhorrent targeted attacks in recent years” (Sullivan & Benner, 2021).

Indeed, in 2019 alone, the Anti-Defamation League reported that domestic extremists killed “at least 42 people in the United States in 17 separate incidents” with the numbers rising steadily year by year. “This number makes 2019 the sixth deadliest year on record for domestic extremist-related killings since 1970,” the ADL reports, noting, “as is typically the case, the extremist-related murders of 2019 were overwhelmingly (90%) linked to right-wing extremists” (Anti-Defamation League, 2019). Moreover, when the January 6th 2021 Capitol Hill riots were analyzed it became clear that an alarmingly significant number of members of both police and military had joined in on attacking our nation’s institutions, many having been exposed to disinformation that led them to conclude that violent action was needed to save our democracy (Milton & Mines, 2021).

Clearly, we need a better understanding of these domestic terrorist groups and movements, how they operate, what their ideologies are, and how they find resonance to recruit. In that vein, the present study was undertaken in which 50 current and former white supremacists were in-depth interviewed to learn what sorts of motivations and vulnerabilities exist within those who are recruited into them and how these individuals begin to believe that violence is heroic and begin embracing hate and at times carrying out or supporting hate crimes. Likewise, it is important not only to know how individuals join, what their experiences are within such groups but also how they become disillusioned, deradicalize and disengage. This information is needed both for prevention efforts, to stop the radicalization and recruitment that is currently swelling the ranks of white supremacy in many countries but also to understand how to address and remove the grievances, vulnerabilities, and motivations for joining. Likewise, for those already in, it is important to understand what may make them leave white supremacy and how they can be reached and served best to exit and deradicalize. This report is an attempt to identify many of these issues.

Categorizing White Supremacist Groups

The present study includes interviews with white supremacists and white nationalists who were members of a wide spectrum of groups/movements including: Aryan Nations, Aryan Brotherhood, Christian Identity, Creativity Movement, English Defence League, National Socialist Movement [NSM], Proud Boys, Ku Klux Klan [KKK], various Skinhead groups, Volksfront and the loosely affiliated Unite the Right actors. In studying such groups, Bertlet and Vysotsky (2006) placed modern white supremacist groups into three broad categories: Political, religious, and youth subculture. The political groups are largely based upon the fascistic neo-Nazi ideology. They are authoritarian and militaristic, with strict hierarchies and strong, charismatic leaders at their helms. These groups laud traditional values and narrow definitions of national identity. Nationalism is then used to create clear out-groups which can be demonized and scapegoated in order to strengthen the in-group and pursue power. As such, political white supremacist groups tend to use legal methods of recruiting new members (through on- and offline propaganda) and enforcing their ideology (by running for office or by holding legally sanctioned events which serve to threaten their delineated out-groups). Some political white supremacist groups mentioned by Bertlet and Vysotsky that are also featured in this article are the White Aryan Resistance, the National Socialist Movement [NSM], and Volksfront. Paramilitaries would also fit into this group, such as the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, and the Covenant Sword and the Arm of the Lord, the paramilitary group in which one interviewee, Kerry, was involved.

The religious white supremacist groups derive their white supremacist ideology not from a narrow definition of nationalism, as the political groups do, but through a religious belief system. These groups engage in similar activities as those engaged in by the political groups, but members believe that their actions are divinely sanctioned and may eventually lead to a racial holy war (RaHoWa). It should be noted that preparing for a coming race war is an idea also endorsed by groups that are not religiously aligned, with the view that it is a necessary eventuality to achieve their goals and will include the fall of the current governing system with the fantasy of their group and ideology taking over. Two of the religious groups detailed by Bertlet and Vysotsky are also featured in this article and their ideologies are defined herein: Christian Identity is an extremely warped version of Protestantism, emanating from the UK but further developed in the U.S., which holds that white Aryan Christians are God's chosen people rather than the Jews, as commonly held by Judeo-Christian beliefs. Christian Identity defines Jews as the primary enemy of white people and of humanity itself. Jews, in this ideology, are either a cursed people in the one-seed theory or in the two-seed theory, the literal spawn of Satan who tricked Eve into sexual relations to conceive a non-white child whose offspring becomes the bane of white people into eternity. In Christian Identity, races other than the Jews are believed to have existed prior to the creation of white Adam and Eve who were given dominion over all created beings. Hence, this is an ideology diminishing "inferior" people of color to existence on the level of common animals with whites being installed by divine right into positions of power, to dominate the world. In the Christian Identity ideology, Jews are credited with carrying out crafty tricks (possibly inherited from the Garden of Eden's serpent himself) while constantly attempting to subjugate or even exterminate white people and replace them with people of color. This ideology may therefore logically expand to the "White Replacement Theory" in which the Jews are viewed as manipulators trying to wipe out the white race.

The Creativity Movement is also linked with the RaHoWa idea and holds that at some undefined future point there will be an apocalyptic race war that white people will win. At that point, "mud races" (including Jews and people of color) and "race traitors" – that is, white people who have intermarried, had mixed

race children, or helped nonwhites, i.e., do not adhere to their ideology, will be deported from the United States if not eliminated entirely. We should note here for the sake of inclusivity that there are many Jews of color, thus “Jews and people of color” are not two mutually exclusive groups. However, mentions of Jews by white supremacist groups are typically referring to Eastern European, Ashkenazi Jews. Likewise, some groups, such as the NSM, will admit nonpracticing and renouncing “white” Jews into their ranks. Adherents of the Creativity ideology are not Christian; in fact, they consider Christianity to be a religion polluted by Judaism. Rather, the Creativity Movement’s sacred texts state that “spirituality is expressed through nature as the collective will of the white race,” and that “what is good for the white race is the highest virtue; what is bad for the white race is the ultimate sin.”

Finally, the youth subculture white supremacist groups are tied to the white power music scene, a subsection of the skinhead scene, which developed in the 1960s amongst British working-class youth as an apolitical sub-culture. These groups hold a general white supremacist ideology more similar to the political groups than the religious (though not always), but groups are tied together through shared interests such as music and partying, and a sense of belonging and brotherhood (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006).

Theoretical Considerations in the Study of White Supremacism

With a basic understanding of white supremacist groups and ideologies, one may ask how individuals come to join one group over the other. Those with religious upbringings may be predisposed to the religious groups and those whose primary existential need is that for belonging may be drawn to youth subculture groups, but there are many factors which may play a role in these decisions with simple exposure to one group over another often being the key element as will be explained further in our findings below.

Our theoretical orientation to studying white supremacists is to take a systems theory approach locating the individual within a complex of familial, psychosocial, religious, cultural, historical, and economic systems. Based on the first author’s previous work of in-depth interviewing over 700 terrorists and violent extremists, we view any violent extremist, including a white supremacist, as formed through the interaction of four main things: 1) exposure to violent extremist or terrorist group, 2) exposure to its ideology, 3) experiencing some level of social support for the previous two, and 4) on the level of the individual, taking into account his or her, specific personal vulnerabilities and motivations for which range from a complex interaction of the need or longing for belonging, significance, dignity, adventure, and love (Speckhard, 2016). Similarly, this could be couched within the needs, narrative and network theory which posits a similar systemic approach to individuals who join violent extremist and terrorist groups (Kruglanski, Bélanger, & Gunaratna, 2019).

While Schafer, Mullins, and Box (2014) view joining white supremacy as an ideologically driven process of being drawn into white supremacy, “awakening” to a radical ideology, after which the radicalization process occurs, we did not find strong support for this view, but rather the opposite—that ideological indoctrination follows joining to meet needs rather than from an ideological awakening. Schafer, Mullins, and Box label the events prior to the awakening as “the seeds of discontent,” most often social interactions with members of minority groups wherein the individual believe that they witnessed differences in the ways that these minority group members behave or are treated. These seeds of

discontent are planted in ordinary daily environments, including school, the workplace, the military, and prison. The seeds may also be planted, however, by specific triggers – negative personal interactions with members of minority groups. Our research found some cases like this, but far more where belonging and significance were much more operative than previous negative interactions with minority groups and that ideological indoctrination followed rather than preceded joining. Schafer, Mullins, and Box’s article also mentions networks, including family members and friends, as playing a role in awakenings by introducing the individual to the ideology. After the seeds are planted, in ordinary environments, in negative interpersonal interactions, and by trusted networks, the individual does research related to the ideas sparked, which has increasingly occurred online since the late 1990s. They may then wander between a few different groups until they find one that meets their needs, though, again, the Internet has hastened this process. Notably, the latter half of the 2010s saw an increased normalization of some far-right and white supremacist ideologies, perhaps making such research and group membership easier and more above-ground (Hartzell, 2018). Again, we found some cases that fit their theory of ideologically driven radicalization but more that did not.

While Schafer and colleagues’ theory is based upon 115 open-sourced online individual accounts of radicalization, it will become clear in this study that radicalization in our sample is often not the primary element at all, but belonging and searching for a positive sense of identity, protection, a sense of significance are often far more important than any resonance with a radical or extremist ideology and that some of our respondents state that while relationships in the group and belonging became paramount to them, they never even fully took on the ideology but remained silent about it in order to retain their sense of belonging. Others described gradually taking on the ideology and coming to believe they were “warriors for their race” on a heroic mission and described themselves as not realizing they had become filled with hate. Likewise, very few in this sample had negative personal interactions with minority groups which served as a grievance or “seed of discontent” propelling them into white supremacy. Other factors, as will be discussed below were much more prominent in terms of vulnerabilities and motivations for joining. Likewise, in fact, the opposite—having positive interactions with other races and ethnic groups—often occurred and had a very strong effect in kicking off a deradicalization and disengagement process. Hence, existing theories about white supremacy may need to be updated with more reliance on interview data and current research, such as the present study, although we do acknowledge this is a small and nonrepresentative sample at present while the research interviews base continues to grow.

Once people join white supremacist groups, questions may then turn to their actions in these groups. In contrast to violent extremist and terrorist groups operating in active war zones, like ISIS, domestic violent extremist groups in the United States and elsewhere do not require that all members take up arms. In fact, some groups, such as the NSM, at least officially, only allow engaging in violent activities for self-defense, while perhaps implicitly encouraging street fighting and other violent acts. Often, violent action is not required, with rank-and-file members being obliged to distribute flyers and attend rallies while others create social media propaganda. In some skinhead groups street fighting is the norm and in some white supremacist gangs and prison groups criminality, drug abuse, and violence are the norm. In their 2018 study, Windisch and colleagues found through sociological interviews with 89 members of white supremacist groups that emotional and cognitive strategies were used in order to override initial hesitance to commit violence as a member of a white supremacist group. These strategies included controlling such hesitance by targeting vulnerable victims where fears of retaliation were minimized,

participating in a group supportive of violence, conducting clandestine attacks where one's identity was unlikely to be discovered, and creation of group coherence such that adherence to the group's subcultural norms begin to override social norms prohibiting violence. This study stands to reason that group cohesion and members' desire for belonging cause them to over time allow the group to redefine their individual norms concerning violence as they fuse with the group and that violence carried out against victims less able to retaliate and in secret eventually move members to dispense with their own belief in favor of taking on the group's violent ideology (Windisch et al., 2018). This matches with Scott Atran's theory of identity fusion (Atran, 2016).

As will be seen, this same phenomenon happened with our respondents as well, with most saying they did not join initially or seek a group out of a strong sense of strong hatred, nor the expectation of or wish to engage in violence but were much more often isolated and in emotionally painful circumstances and looking for a sense of belonging, purpose and what they saw as a positive identity. Likewise, having grown up with a background of systemic racism also made it much easier to accept the white supremacist ideology. Thus, it is important to point out that obtaining a strong sense of belonging and a positive identity based upon one's "whiteness" often initiated a slippery slope of actions carried out on behalf of retaining that sense of belonging and positive identity and this was initially much more operative than ideology but led to taking on the group's ideology and in some cases to carrying out and tolerating group-initiated violence. Furthermore, it should be noted that those who do not follow this path into violent action but nonetheless serve the group also favor belonging and ignore that their actions contribute to the group's larger efforts, including its hateful rhetoric and violence.

Finally, a summary of some of the existing research on radicalization to violent extremism is not complete without a discussion of deradicalization. Generally speaking, we can distinguish between disengagement and deradicalization. In the former, the individual leaves their group and refrains from violent action but may not necessarily abandon or renounce the ideology. In the latter, a cognitive, in addition to a behavioral, change occurs in which the individual leaves their group, refrains from violence, and disavows the ideology (Horgan, 2008). Past research on disengagement and deradicalization from white supremacist groups has found that leaving groups is often the result of a confluence of factors but can be difficult due to feelings of guilt, fears of losing all one's friends, or being punished for leaving, continued contact with current members of their groups that keeps pulling defectors back into the group, and ideological relapses (Bubolz & Simi, 2015). These relapses can arise in the absence of a new identity, friends, or source of significance and purpose after leaving the group, which met those needs or perceived or actual societal rejection (Simi et al., 2017).

Our previous research on ISIS deradicalization and disengagement demonstrates that spontaneous deradicalization is a very real phenomenon and occurs when the individual becomes disillusioned or suffers cognitive dissonance from contradictory experiences (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020). In this sample of white supremacists, spontaneous deradicalization occurred in a significant number of cases in which the individual had doubts about group violence, was disappointed in other members lack of ideological loyalty and most importantly from unexpected positive interactions with a minority he or she had been taught to hate which in some cases powerfully broke through the ideological fusion with the group and led to questioning, deradicalizing and ultimately disengaging from the group.

Clearly, the research on white supremacy and white supremacist groups is broad, but it lacks in psychological considerations. There is a large body of work on the psychological drivers of radicalization, but very little on the specific needs of those who radicalize to white supremacist violent extremism (Kruglanski et al., 2014; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Speckhard, 2016). Most research, including that cited above, is based on open-source data, although there are a number of studies based on sociological interviews with current and former white supremacists. Many of these articles mention a number of important psychosocial aspects of radicalization to violent extremism, but they do not delve deeply into the individual needs and drives that are critical to understand if effective prevention and deradicalization programs are to be implemented.

The Present Study

This research set out to examine in-depth the psychosocial profiles of 50 current and former members of far right and white supremacist groups, taking a lifespan, human developmental, and systems approach to understanding participation in hate groups. In studying the stories of these interviewees, we find that preventing radicalization to violent extremism is not a matter of ridding barrels of bad apples, but rather of understanding the vulnerabilities, motivations, and mechanisms by which normal people with varied experiences and characteristics come to believe that participating in such groups will bring them a sense of belonging, purpose, significance, dignity, and meaning.

Method

The research method for this study was to attempt to gain access to any current or former member of a far-right violent extremist group and to then conduct a video-recorded, in-depth, semi-structured psychological interview with that person. Participants were recruited through a snowball system, though two of the interviewees who are formers who now do intervention work referred the majority of the interviewees. All interviews were conducted over Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample for this study is by necessity a convenience sample, as it is difficult to gain access to this population and to obtain their informed consent for an in-depth interview; thus, random sampling is not possible. Nonetheless, the interviewer attempted to obtain a representative sample in terms of men and women and a diverse sample of white supremacist groups. Once access was granted, the interviewees went through a video-recorded informed consent process wherein they were informed about the researchers and the research, of the risks and benefits of participating in the interview, informed that they could opt out at any time and refuse to answer any and all questions, should not incriminate themselves and could opt for whatever level of confidentiality they wished in terms of the video recording and write up of the interview. They were also invited to take part in ICSVE's *Escape Hate Counter Narrative Campaign* giving permission for parts of the video recording to later be used to construct a counter narrative video clip to counter message against extremist groups.

At the end of the interview, the participants were asked again if they were willing to appear in a counter narrative video and if so, if they would be willing to denounce their groups on video and give advice or warnings to anyone thinking about joining such an extremist group. They were told that if they agreed to do so, the relevant parts of their interview would subsequently be used to create a counter narrative video, as part of the authors' organization's *Escape Hate Counter Narrative Project*. If they agreed to

participate in that aspect of the project, the participants also indicated whether or not they were willing to reveal their faces, city and country and their names in the video. If they were not, there was an option to have their faces blurred and to use a pseudonym or not disclose their location. This discussion of the counter narrative video was held until the end of the interview in order to make clear that the interviewer would not be biased in the interview based on whether or not the participant agreed to be featured in a counter narrative and to carefully go over what level of confidentiality the participant wished to have, so that there could be no misunderstandings about anything that should be held back from the video. Moreover, we have found that participants are generally more comfortable discussing the possibility of being featured in a counter narrative video after they have already discussed their experience at length and are granted the opportunity to restrict use of any parts of the interview they wish to keep confidential.

The interview itself began with a brief history of the interviewee, focusing on early childhood and upbringing, and covering life experiences prior to becoming interested in their group or the far-right ideology more broadly. Demographic details were gleaned during this portion of the interview, as were vulnerabilities that may have impacted the individual's decision to join the group including familial conflict, violence, divorce, etc. problems with health and school, bullying, abuse, substance abuse, etc. Questions then turned to how the individual was introduced to the ideology and the group, if they were recruited or self-recruited, and how, by whom, and over what mediums they were influenced to join their groups. Questions explored the various motivations for joining and obtained a detailed recruitment history: How the individual interacted with their group prior to joining, whether recruitment took place in person or over the Internet, or both; and intake and initiation procedures for the group. Many of these questions focused on what the individual's needs were at the time and what he or she expected to gain or was actually gaining by joining. The interview then turned to the interviewee's experiences in the group, namely the roles they held, whether they attended events such as protests or rallies, and whether they ever witnessed, participated in, or were victims of violence. In regard to participation, all interviewees were warned not to self-incriminate for anything that they hadn't already confessed to authorities or that had run the statute of limitations and were stopped from disclosing if they were self-incriminating. Finally, interviewees were asked about changes in orientation toward the group, including any sources of disillusionment with the group, its violence, or its ideology.

In accordance with the American Psychological Association [APA] guidelines and United States legal standards, a strict human subjects' protocol was followed in which the researcher introduced herself and the project, as described above including the risks and benefits of participation. Participants were warned not to incriminate themselves and to refrain from speaking about crimes they had not already confessed to the authorities and that were still prosecutable, but rather to speak about what they had witnessed inside their groups. Likewise, the participants were told that they could refuse to answer any questions and to end the interview at any point. By nature of the subject matter, many of the interviews touched on highly traumatic material and sometimes required psychological expertise to support the individual to continue speaking about painful events. The interviewer is a research psychologist who has been conducting in-depth psychological interviews for decades and is highly experienced dealing with traumatic material and quickly building rapport in the interview setting. Therefore, interviews generally went smoothly, and the interviewees opened up and shared a great deal of information, sometimes with tears shed. The rapport built and the interviewer's expertise often, but not always, helped the researcher to detect if and when the interviewee was being truthful. In general, the interviewees took between an hour

and a half and two hours and while some dodged various questions it seemed that most were quite honest and extremely forthright, including for some, even about their painful circumstances growing up and about experiences of participating in violence.

Risks to the subjects included being harmed by members of their respective groups for denouncing the groups, and those who judged it a significant risk either asked for their faces to be blurred, their location withheld or for a pseudonym to be used in the counter narrative video, or they did not participate in the counter narrative at all. In one case, the interviewee was not asked to participate in the counter narrative as he could not credibly denounce his group and in another a woman admitted to still being ideologically indoctrinated but now disengaged from the group and spoke only about the downsides of being in it rather than a full denunciation.

There were also risks of becoming emotionally distraught during the interview, but this was mitigated by having the interview conducted by an experienced psychologist who slowed things down and offered support and was willing to digress when discussing emotionally fraught subjects and who also offered to be available after the interview for any need to continue the discussion. Rewards of participating for the subjects were primarily to protect others from undergoing a similarly negative experience in their respective groups and having the opportunity to sort through many of their motivations, vulnerabilities, and experiences in the group with a compassionate psychologist. Although the interviewer made clear that she was not acting as their therapist and that the interview was for research purposes, many of the interviewees nevertheless found the experience therapeutic and thanked the researcher for the interview, some even writing about subsequent and profound growth occurring from the insights they had gained during it, one renouncing for what he said was his final time, his membership in the KKK.

Statistical Analyses

The researchers used the interviews to transcribe notes and perform a comprehensive thematic analysis. The codebook was developed using thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2006). Through open coding of the semi-structured interviews, we identified six themes: Vulnerabilities, influences, motivations, roles, experiences, and sources of disillusionment. The interviews were then coded on 252 discrete variables in SPSS Version 26. Most of the individual variables fall within these six broad categories.

Vulnerabilities including life-course variables such as experiences of different types of abuse, histories of criminality and drug use, and experiences of unemployment and poverty. Influences are divided into in-person influences to join white supremacist groups (e.g., parents, extended family, friends, speakers, recruiters) and online influences (e.g., chatrooms, direct online contact with recruiters, passive viewing of videos or other content on different social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube). Motivations range from the tangible (e.g., basic needs, employment) to the existential (e.g., need for significance, need for belonging, desire to fight for a noble cause). Roles are coded dichotomously with regard to whether the individual held any number of specific roles in their group (e.g., leader, enforcer, in-person recruiter, propagandist). Experiences, too, are coded dichotomously and separated into three categories: Interviewee as victim (e.g., beaten by group members, harassed by group members), interviewee as witness (e.g., witnessed murder, witnessed rape), and interviewee as perpetrator (e.g., beat people, stabbed people). Within this theme, we also code whether the interviewee attended events as a member

of their group, what type of events they attended (e.g., rallies, concerts, marches), and whether they went to those events with the intent to fight. The “experiences” theme also codes whether or not interviewees dehumanized Jews, Black people, immigrants, or Muslims during their time in the group. Finally, sources of disillusionment include a wide range of reasons why people would eventually leave their groups, as identified in the interviews, including excessive violence by the group, positive interactions with a member of a minority group, and familial pressure to leave.

Other variables which do not fall into these six thematic categories include demographic characteristics (e.g., nationality, birth year, year that they joined their group) and ratings of radicalization on a scale from zero to three at three time points – prior to joining the group (assessed retrospectively), at their peak involvement in the group (assessed retrospectively), and at present.

Results

The present sample includes 40 cis-men, eight cis-women, one trans-woman and one person who identified as non-binary. Thirty-six of the interviewees were American, five were Canadian, five were German, three were British, and one was from New Zealand. Ages ranged from 24 to 70, and the interviewees joined their groups at drastically different ages (i.e., 5-56, or between CY 1978-2020). Only four in the sample were still relatively active in their groups at the time of the interview. A demographic description of the sample is provided in Table 1, and details regarding each of the interviewees are provided in Table 2.

Table 1. Demographic Details

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age when joined	5	56	21.80	10.001
Age when left	18	62	31.21	8.862
Age at interview	24	70	40.02	10.191
Education (in years)	7	16	13.28	1.556
SES in childhood	20.0% working class; 74.0% middle class; 4.0% upper class			
Marital status prior to joining	74.0% single, never married; 12.0% married; 12.0% divorced			
Marital status currently	34.0% single, never married; 36.0% married; 26.0% divorced; 2.0% separated			
Sexual orientation	92.0% heterosexual; 4.0% homosexual; 2.0% bisexual; 2.0% other			

Table 2. Interviewee Details

Name	Age at Interview	National Origin	Group(s)
Acacia	36	United States (Iowa)	National Socialist Movement [NSM]
Benjamin	33	United States (South Carolina)	Ku Klux Klan [KKK]

Brad	40	Canada	Volksfront
Brian	37	United States (Virginia)	Alt-Right
Chris	29	Germany	National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD)
Dickie	35	United States (Ohio)	National Socialist Movement [NSM]
Ed	48	United States (New Jersey)	Creativity Movement Alliance
Elisa	46	Canada	Heritage Front
Fred	42	United States (Pennsylvania)	National Socialist Movement [NSM]
Greg	47	United States (Iowa)	Skinheads
Henry	29	United States (Michigan)	National Socialist Movement [NSM]
Ivan	50	United Kingdom	English Defence League [EDL]
Janet Louise	30	United States (North Carolina)	National Socialist Movement [NSM]
Jared	28	United States (Mississippi)	Aryan Brotherhood
Jason	31	United States (Washington)	Skinheads
Jeff	46	United States (Minnesota)	National Socialist Movement [NSM]
JJ	39	United States (Arizona)	White Aryan Resistance, Ku Klux Klan [KKK], National Socialist Movement [NSM]
Jonathan	34	United States (Indiana)	Aryan Brotherhood
Josh	36	Canada	Proud Boys
Joshua	39	United States (North Carolina)	Proud Boys
Jvonne	46	United States (South Carolina)	Ku Klux Klan [KKK]
Keith	70	United States (New York)	National Socialist Movement [NSM]
Ken	40	United States (Illinois)	Ku Klux Klan [KKK], National Socialist Movement [NSM]
Kerry	68	United States (Texas)	Christian Identity
Klayton	26	New Zealand	Aryan Nations
Lauren	31	Canada	Hammerskins
Lukas	32	Germany	Die Rechte

Mak	24	United States (Florida)	4chan
Maik	45	East Germany	Hammerskins, NPD
Michael	43	United States (Kentucky)	Ku Klux Klan [KKK]
Phoebe Rose	32	United Kingdom	English Defence League [EDL]
Raine	39	United States (North Carolina)	National Alliance
Red	39	United States (South Dakota)	National Socialist Movement [NSM]
Rob	38	United States (New York)	Ku Klux Klan [KKK]
Romey	33	United States (California)	WAR Skinheads
Russell	52	United States (Washington)	Proud Boys
Ryan	35	United States (Michigan)	Hammerskins
Scott	61	United States (Mississippi)	Ku Klux Klan [KKK]
Scott E.	42	United States (Michigan)	Stormfront
Sean	37	United States (Washington)	Aryan Nations
Shane	31	United States (Indiana)	Ku Klux Klan [KKK]
Shaun	52	United Kingdom	West Midlands Infidels
Søren	39	United States (Illinois)	National Socialist Movement [NSM]
Timothy	57	United States (California)	White Aryan Resistance, Hammerskins
TM	45	Germany	Ku Klux Klan [KKK]
Tony	53	Canada	White Aryan Resistance
Veronica	42	U.S. Citizen born in Iceland	Nazi Punk
Viktoria	38	U.S. Citizen born in East Germany	Wotansvolk
William	29	United States (North Carolina)	National Socialist Movement [NSM]
Yonatan	37	Germany	Neo-Nazis

Demographically, the sample was middle to lower class, with many reporting being raised by single parents working in blue-collar jobs. Women comprised 18 percent of the sample, likely representative of women's lower level of involvement in these groups. Likewise, most of the respondents noted that their groups

were led by and made up primarily of men, although women were involved in mostly support roles and were venerated as “breeders” of purely white offspring. In some cases, mainly with street and prison gang-like groups, they were also reported to be treated badly and passed around between men. White supremacism, it appears, like other forms of terrorism, is a male-dominated and often highly misogynistic phenomenon which nevertheless includes women in a range of roles.

Vulnerabilities

The vulnerabilities to joining their groups were varied, but several commonalities stood out. For instance, 23 interviewees mentioned that someone in their household during their upbringing struggled with substance abuse, a vulnerability which is one of the empirically derived Adverse Childhood Experiences [ACEs] which predict a slew of mental and physical health outcomes (Felitti, 1998). Rob, a former member of the KKK, was emotionally and physically abused by his drug addicted stepfather:

[My stepfather] had a drug problem [...] He was very angry, I see now. He was a born-again Christian. If you were bad, he would spank you. Fear factor, guilt factor, being taught that, I had a lot of guilt from him. Looking back now, he wasn't a healthy guy being around. [My mother] should have never gone back to him. Eventually he went back, my mother left him for good, went back to her parents. He got himself killed by the police. I didn't know that. She said he died of smoking.

Recalls Ed, formerly of the Creativity Movement,

Both my parents were addicted. My father was a Vietnam vet, later became a plumber. [He was] an alcoholic [and had] problems from the military. [He] drank a lot and [was] fairly abusive [...] Mother I don't speak to any longer. She is alive, chose heroin over her children. My father passed away in 1996. [I'm] not sure the circumstance, cirrhosis I think, not sure, I was in prison. We didn't have a lot. We weren't poor, just above poverty. My father did work up to buying a house, in southern New Jersey [...] My mother went to prison for the first time for a drug charge after we bought the house, Dad went to [the VA]. I went to foster care. [I was] 11 years old.

For Proud Boys member Joshua, memories of his mother's overdose in front of him as a young child haunted his young life and that history led to feelings of subsequent alienation with her relatives: “I had a big family that didn't talk to me. I was the black sheep of the family. My mother died of a heroin overdose; I remind her family of her. They blacklisted me because I reminded them of my mother.”

The interviewees similarly struggled with their own substance use. Twenty-eight participants reported this vulnerability – 14 of them also had a household member with substance use challenges. Reported drugs of choice included marijuana ($n = 13$), meth ($n = 7$), cocaine ($n = 7$), unspecified other drugs ($n = 7$), unspecified pills ($n = 5$), heroin ($n = 1$), and mushrooms ($n = 1$). Additionally, 20 interviewees reported abusing alcohol. Many of those who abused substances appeared to be attempting to self-medicate as they ran from deep psychological pain and posttraumatic stressors. Said Jonathan of the Aryan Brotherhood, “[Heroin did] everything that nothing else could do. It took everything away; it took all my feelings that I ever had and put them by the wayside and let me experience a sort of calm in the midst of a storm.”

Broader family conflict and dysfunction in childhood was also widely reported ($n = 26$), which included physical abuse for 19 of the interviewees, perhaps contributing to the interviewees' quest for belonging and identity that led them to their respective groups. Explains former Volksfront leader Brad of this phenomenon, "I felt like I was kind of the outcast in the family. They painted it on me, so I going to act like, 'why should I care if they don't.' I guess the street and the people I knew became my second family." Chris, formerly of the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany, also expresses a feeling of rejection by his family. He had already become interested in neo-Nazism and had gotten in trouble at school for drawing a swastika, a crime in Germany for which he could have been charged had he been 14 instead of 13. He remembers his mother's reaction:

When my mother became aware and it was reported to the police, she got in touch with my father, and I had to move in with my father. I knew him but hadn't seen him for ten years [...] I was glad to see him and be with him after ten years. But I was gone again after one year, went to live with my sister. When I lived with him for only two months [...] he got arrested. There was a warrant for his arrest. He didn't pay child support for his other children. He was arrested and had to go to prison. That happened after just two months with him. I lived with his girlfriend. I was in touch with my mother, but she didn't know anything about what happened, and she had a new boyfriend that I couldn't deal with. We didn't get along.

Similarly, Tony, formerly of the White Aryan Resistance, recalls:

My dad is still operating out of his wounds of rejection when he was four years old. He was sent away to live with his aunt during the war, of five siblings, [he was] rejected by his mother. [It became a] triangle pattern. He'd always find another woman. He manufactured the rejection from my mother. [I had a] troubled family. A lot of it was under the surface. My issue with my dad, I know he loved us, working 60 to 80 hours a week, whole piece of rejection. How can I be angry with him for not being able to give what he didn't know? For the longest time of my life, I was angry about that. Now I can interpret his family history as well as my own, and I'm at peace with it, but [at] five years old, love for him was working, and for me it was time and attention.

Finally, 25 interviewees mentioned specific traumatic events that they believed contributed to their later membership in their groups. Timothy, formerly of the Hammerskins and White Aryan Resistance, says his dysfunctional family dynamic which was exacerbated when his older brother was shot by a Black man – triggering an outpouring of racism at home:

I don't like to blame, but looking longitudinally, no wonder. I would have gotten involved with something else if not this [violent extremism]. I got into destructive behavior in high school, a lot of drinking and drug use. My mental and physical health got to the point where they told me to lay off; if you don't, you are going to be dead really soon. [I was in my] late teens. By 21, I had hepatitis. I was drinking like a fish. I already had several DWIs. I was imploding.

Janet Louise, who describes herself as a nonactive member of the NSM, explains,

When I was a teenager, I was a straight-A student in high school. At a concert one night when I was 16, a trusted friend of mine gave me some alcohol and took me home and took advantage of me and raped me. And from there, my grades and life and depression and anger plummeted, and I became full of rage and anger and anxiety, and I think with my chronic pain as well before back surgery had a lot to do with it as well. So those two factors just plummeted my depression and as I got older, I realized my depression, anxiety, and rage were worse and I've learned to take control of it slowly but surely. And that's kind of what led me to the group I was in called the National Socialist Movement. The person who raped me was of Hispanic descent and that's prominently what the heritage was back in my hometown in Texas, so after that I just despised all Hispanic men and what they stood for and believed that's all that they stood for was rape and cheating and beating. And when I found the National Socialist Movement, no one really knew that until I got into it, and I entrusted only a couple of people with that information and upon joining wanted protection and acceptance and loyalty and respect and I received all of that. And I think I needed that to ease the pain of what I had been through in the back of my mind, subconsciously, but not consciously thinking about that.

Sean, a former member of the Aryan Nations, was also sexually assaulted in his youth, and that experience was exploited by his group's recruiters:

I was repeatedly molested [ages] seven to ten, raped, Asian male named Shaun Brett. He was Korean and babysat me. He molested kids in the community. He had us do stuff to each other [...] Asian, homosexuals, as I developed as a kid, [white supremacist] groups said Jews pervert culture, [so] it's not his fault, it's theirs. [That] exacerbated my anger. I distrusted the system, also. At age ten, I revealed it to a counselor. [The] police were called, [but there was] no follow-up. He was allowed to continue.

Romey, formerly of the WAR Skinheads, was also made vulnerable by a traumatic experience, albeit through a more circuitous route. He recalls a loss of identity, purpose, and significance after being diagnosed with cancer:

I was diagnosed with leukemia. I spent three years at St. Jude's. My mom came and lived there with me [...] It was traumatizing. I just watched my grandma die of cancer. When I got diagnosed, I told my mom I want to die on my couch, I don't want to go through what my grandma did. [The] doctor said your white blood count is so high we can't read it on our machine, you have to go to St. Jude's. We drove there. Within an hour I was getting chemo [...] I was 13 when they diagnosed me [...] I wanted to be an Air Force pilot. I would write the governor all the time with my report cards. I wanted to go to the Air Force Academy, [but] I lost all hope with [the] leukemia diagnosis. They wouldn't take me. I felt like a ghost.

Influences

Interviewees' descriptions of how they were influenced and recruited to join their groups reflect distinct cultural milieus over time, but they also shed light on longstanding biases and casual racism that may not have pushed these individuals into their groups but made their ideologies easier to swallow.

In the 1980s and 90s, skinhead music, though not exclusive to the white power movement, played a major role in bringing young men into a wider culture of white supremacy, young men who perhaps may not have been attracted to older neo-Nazi and KKK groups, but who were interested in the counterculture surrounding skinheads. Eleven interviewees were influenced in their beliefs by listening to White Power music. Tony recounts,

I was in England [when I came in] contact with skinheads [...] They became my best friends. My coping was [to] befriend the bully, become the bully, because I was not big. They had the one thing I didn't have, that people feared them. They were tough. I was with them to feel safe, attention, acceptance [...] That false sense of power, the notoriety and fear that created was intoxicating.

Brad similarly recalls,

I walked into a pub at the end of my street. A guy was having a beer, shaved head, bomber jacket. I remembered him from raves. I trusted him. We used to hang out and do things. That trust relationship was important. I knew him from before, when I was 14 or 15. I saw what he was wearing. I hung out with different races [but] I was still compelled to go and talk to him. [I] had a beer and he started telling me about his new way of life and definitely trying to recruit me into his way of life, telling me the woes of the world, Jews running the media, multiculturalism ruining Toronto. [He said] you can come to these meetings, and we'll accept you in. I was always searching for someplace to belong. This sounds good. I went to a couple of white power concerts, I was wearing [Doc Martens], adopted the skinhead subculture. The music was what I was really attracted to. Violent metal, I was already into mainstream metal. I could accept it pretty easily.

Whereas Tony and Brad were attracted to a counterculture movement, with belonging and protection important influencers for them, some of the interviewees from the American South felt that joining a white supremacist group was not out of the ordinary. Former KKK member Benjamin explains that before he delved into violent racism, he had long been exposed to the quiet, genteel racism of his hometown:

Growing up in the South, I was always a person, if you treated me good, I will treat you good no matter the color of your skin, but growing up my grandfather would say you never saw a successful Black person. That got in my mind. I was never in any white supremacy or ideology growing up [...] I would never mistreat anyone from a race, but being from the South, I had these preconceived ideas that white people are better. Just being born in the South, it made me susceptible to get involved in that stuff.

William, formerly of the NSM, similarly expresses a distinction between what he perceives as true racism and what he experienced growing up in North Carolina:

I never considered myself a racist. I never hated anyone for the color of their skin. I had that instilled into me as a kid. My mom told me not to mix races, [that] whites were better than them, but never to hate [...] My grandfather was in the Klan. I don't remember, but we lived in the South. Most people were in the Klan. I played football in high school. Football deterred the hate away

because the Blacks and Hispanics had my back on the field and off the field. I wore confederate flags to school but never hated anyone.

Former Grand Dragon of the KKK in Tennessee, Scott, was raised in Mississippi. As he explains bluntly, “I was in the state of Mississippi in 1959, born in 1959, grew up in the 60s and 70s, I was surrounded by the Klan.” Veronica was radicalized and recruited by a skinhead ex-convict when she was 14 years old. As she was taught the white supremacist ideology, Veronica explains, “My parents were Southern. It was heritage. [They had] rebel flags. My dad was racist, so it was easy for me to transition into this.” This parental influence was not exclusive to the United States, however. Shaun, a British former member of the West Midlands Infidels, recalls, “My dad was racist. He called Indians ‘wogs’ and ‘crackies’ and would point them out. It came from his father.” Later, his dad “got attacked at my mom’s grave. Some [guys] from a mosque [were] pushing him around, calling him white trash [...] They were bad kids. I shouldn’t have made the association with the color of their skin; [they] were just bad kids.” Shaun later converted to Islam, but back then, “We regarded them as bacteria, cockroaches, something that wasn’t human.”

Jvonne was influenced more formally by her parents. She recalls that her dad “had my mom sew a little Klan robe for me” when she was six, and around the same age, told her she was no longer allowed to play with a friend who was Black. She remembers being exposed to extremist violence throughout her childhood: “I did see him shooting someone’s car up like a drive-by shooting. Another time [he] threw a Molotov cocktail through a white woman’s window who had a Black baby. I saw curtains go up in flames. I was seven. I didn’t know what ultimately happened.”

Sixteen interviewees reported being drawn into their groups by face-to-face recruiters, and another three reported conversing directly with recruiters online before joining. A common thread throughout these interactions is the ability of the recruiters to meet the needs of the interviewees – before the recruiters offered their prey their hateful ideology, they first offered care and acceptance as well as a sense of dignity, significance, and purpose. Remembers former leader of the Rollingwood Skins Ryan,

Ron was very charismatic, little guy, not a lot of tattoos, was missing some of his fingers, lost from his job. [He] talked low and mysterious. [He was] charismatic, knowledgeable on history, hate knowledge. He played on my anger at the time, my father, my childhood, the Army abandoned me and did nothing for me. He was a cult leader.

Fred, formerly of the NSM, was assaulted at age 15 by “11 to 13 Black guys.” Traumatized, he went to a man who had been trying to recruit him into his skinhead gang. The recruiter said, “Don’t worry, we’ll walk you to and from school. You just have to be there for us when we need you.” As Fred recalls of the protection he was offered, “He was around 19 at the time. You didn’t feel like they wanted anything in return, just looking for white people, nothing else.” Later, when he moved to North Carolina, he recounts, “I don’t have any other camaraderie out here, then I saw NSM. They had a website. I messaged the leader and he said come to a barbeque in Georgia. Everyone was hugging me, ‘What’s up? Who are you?’ It was one of those connections. I didn’t have any identity, so I made my identity the white nationalists.”

Still others were moved to join their groups by what they say was an interest in history, sparked by white supremacist literature ($n = 13$). Jeff, who led the NSM for 25 years, recalls, “I got *Mein Kampf* at 16. It was

a hard read, it was all the politics at the time. It was something, I was underlining things, it felt very intellectual, the language felt like I had to take it in. I only read a couple of pages at a time.” Jeff regrets the rabbit hole he went down after finishing Hitler’s manifesto:

I ordered a book from another library, 88. I was reading as much as I could about the movement. [The] glossary was written by a sociologist. [There was a] list of all the different organizations that participated and were active at the time: Skinhead, Christian Identity, Klan, skinhead, Nazi, I wrote to them all. That’s actually how I connected with the movement.

The literature Søren, also formerly of the NSM, read, “offered access to esoteric knowledge.” He explains,

Whether true or not, you don’t hear these things. You feel like you are learning new truths that others don’t know. [It] gave me something to believe in, gave me purpose and meaning. If you believe you are in a revolutionary struggle, it gives you something to fight for, to live for, lots of reading and books, especially when you are lonely and isolated. I learned a lot of terrible things, and things that are probably not true, but also learned new words, new points of view, so it was an intellectual adventure in a way. It was a chance for me to have something to be good at; to excel at [...] I read *Mein Kampf*, *The Turner Diaries*, *Hunter*, George Lincoln Rockwell’s book from the 50s, certain classics.

Keith was 56 years old when he joined the NSM. He felt that his self-education made him a boon to the group, saying, “When I joined the NSM, it was not so much out of hate that I joined. Number one, I did all the reading and studying I could on Nazism. I may know more than more historians and book writers on Nazism.” He continues, “Becoming a neo-Nazi in New York, I found it was an enhancement and moved me up the ranks, [that] I knew more about it when I got in.”

Motivations

Although one could argue that the quest for significance encompasses many of the motivations articulated herein (Kruglanski et al., 2014), we nevertheless have dissected these motivations into smaller thematic categories. The most commonly expressed motivation was the desire to belong ($n = 32$) alongside a sense of dignity and positive identity that comes with belonging. As Scott, formerly of the KKK, recalls, “I went to one of their rallies in Mississippi. They put that [arm] around me, ‘We’ll take you in and take care of you. You had a bad life, we’ll take care of you,’ and they did.” Agrees former NSM member Red, “Growing up in [a] shit household, I needed a place to belong, that family aspect, to be better than what I was.” Recalls German Chris, who dealt with a deep sense of rejection by his mother. Asked what he was given by his far-right group, he answers, “Family. There was a lot of friendship and family, you could talk with them about everything, and they were going to help you.” Jonathan concurs in his answer to the same question, “That was the driving force, belonging, when I didn’t feel like I belonged in a family.” Says Jason, a former skinhead, “It was just a comfort thing. Somewhere to belong. I was always trying to try to figure out where I belong. I was always alone growing up.”

Lukas, a former member of the German group Die Rechte, similarly articulates,

The reason why I stayed so long in [the] far right after it, they give me a reason, an identity. I know where I belong. If you have an enemy, you know who are your friends. My comrades are my friends, we have the same enemy. From one day to another, you have so many friends, I like it [...] Being told I have worth, Lukas, you are worthy, you are worthy by birth. I didn't have to do something first, I'm just German.

Fred's story is especially powerful, as he now knows that he looked in the worst possible place for a community:

I was young and I was looking for an identity. I was looking for an alternative family, somewhere to fit in that accepted for who I thought was me. [...] [But] no one knows who they really are. I was told I was English and German. I'm only eight percent German. Fifteen percent Jewish. Seventeen percent English. The rest is Scottish. You know what you truly are. No one is inherently just white. Look into what you are and celebrate that. [One] reason I even feel shame is I realize how many people I hurt. Then I found out I'm Jewish. [It's] worse that I did this to my own people who I could have feeling and connection with. It brought shame, caused so much hate on the Jewish people [...] [It's] bittersweet. I could have had an identity all those years. I could have experienced what it was like to have a community.

Romey was in prison for stealing while using methamphetamine when he was approached by a recruiter for the WAR Skinheads, an Arkansas based prison gang.

White guy came up to me, "I'm so and so, I see you are new here and you have heart. I'm an Aryan. We've been watching you. Do you want to prospect?" I said, "No, I'm good, I don't want to join a gang." He said, "We're not a gang. We're a family. We fight together, we eat together. It's for the kids, the white race."



[WATCH: DON'T BE A RACE TRAITOR](#)

Jared also joined the Aryan Brotherhood in prison, and after he got out, the local community branch “singled me out and let me hang with them, brought me into the little group, helped me out with a place to live.” But the support they offered him was,

Not the right kind. They supported me for drugs, robbing people, violence, fighting, any twisted ideas I had [...] At that time, there was no other life for me. Any time I needed help, any time I found a place to rob, they were all in. Later, I basically became a hired hand. If there was a job to do, they called me. Kicking in doors, putting people on the ground, running up to a house, anything with guns, jewelry and medicine cabinets. We could run through a house in four minutes and clean it out.



[WATCH: THE WHITE RACE IS SUPREME](#)

Equally as common as the desire to belong was the desire to feel important and to matter, reported by 32 interviewees. As Benjamin states clearly, “To me, it was a sense of royalty, being a white man and proud.” Says Henry, formerly of the NSM, “You go to these rallies; you feel pretty important. They have a police escort. You see all the commotion, and it’s just for you to spread the message that you believe. You go out there under the impression that this is a big deal.” Red agrees: “I like that [the NSM] gave me that feeling of power that I never had, confidence, holy shit.” Acacia, a former NSM propagandist, says that her role running the NSM’s social media gave her “a sense of purpose, doing something good, using the skill sets that I had. I was running and doing a lot of things. I looked at it as a challenge. Nobody could do it, and I’d say, ‘look what I can do.’” Similarly, Janet Louise, whose academic trajectory was derailed by her high school rape was proud of becoming an NSM radio host:

I think doing all the work for them and for myself, and the radio show, and being a coordinator, planner, organizer, and everything, and almost a sergeant at this point, I felt pretty good. Pretty responsible, and like I could be entrusted with all these kinds of responsibilities. So, I kind of left my past behind and started looking into the future at this point.

Rob describes his initial attraction to the KKK as a bullied middle-schooler:

Being that I was afraid of the bullies, I guess to me it was a sense of power, hoods on and fires. For kids, it comes off, like, powerful. Maybe it was just me compensating for my own fears. I hadn't contacted any groups. I printed out posters of them. I wasn't a hateful person. Coming from a kid who is insecure and very afraid and gangster rap was popular, white kids were acting like that. [The] Klan was a counterbalance to that. I was [looking for] anything powerful.

Søren similarly was attracted to the feeling of power he was granted by his NSM membership:

In that movement, it has that aspect, we wore those crazy uniforms. It was actual brownshirts, like Germany. Now I see they switched to black uniforms. Something about that appealed to me [...] power and purpose, definitely power. Like many extremists, we painted ourselves as the victims, 'We are just fighting back against oppressive forces. We are just fighting back. We're the good guys.'



[WATCH: THE JEWS CONTROL HOLLYWOOD](#)

Greg was primed as a child to believe that violent action was significance-granting. He remembers playing "football in the backyard. One of [my dad's] big friends [was] kind of throwing me around. I got angry. I was a little skinny kid. I went after him with a rake. My dad turned to him [and said], 'I told you, he's not afraid of anybody, don't mess with him.' That stuck in my mind." Raine, meanwhile, felt a sense of power as a member of a violent skinhead gang, but she also adhered to the Christian Identity ideology. She explains the threat to her significance that kept her committed to her group:

I thought there was this big threat. I thought that it was like we were put here. We are God's people [...] They are going to try to get rid of us so we can't survive. They are going to prevent us from being with each other. They are going to bring so many immigrants and Blacks into these areas. Even if you have kids, your kids will have to marry [people of color] because there's no one else [...] It was how I was always told how things were.



[WATCH: THE RACE WAR IS COMING](#)

Recall that Janet Louise felt traumatized and powerless after being raped at 16 by someone she thought was a friend. She was inspired by Jeff, also featured in this study, who led the NSM. Through emulating him, she felt able to regain her power:

I became drunk on the power and the glory, and I held my head so high. It was like, this is how Jeff did it. He'd walk, and he'd hold his shoulders back, and he'd put his head high because that states dominance and power. And when people see that in a leader, they think, "That's who I want to be following. That's who I want." So, that's what I did, and I followed him too, and I got so caught up in that.

Keith moved up in the NSM largely due to his knowledge of Nazism. He eventually became Jeff's bodyguard. He describes his feeling at the top of the group as "a euphoria. I was on a very silent and very reserved power trip. I had full control of something becoming very vital. When the movement proclaimed me as a potential presidential candidate, [I felt like] I'm on top of the world looking down on creation."

The third most commonly reported motivation also relates to a feeling of significance, but the significance of the movement, rather than of the individual. Seventeen interviewees were motivated by "a noble cause." These individuals did not join their groups to serve their own sense of purpose, but to serve a higher power, be it their country, their heritage, or even God. Says Canadian Proud Boy Josh,

I started to align with [the Proud Boys]. I liked the whole freedom of speech aspect. I connected with them a lot more. They were pro-Canadian, Canadian culture and values. I felt proud [of the] Canadian flag being flown. Antifa had hammer and sickle flags, [like the] USSR. I felt like I was standing up for Canada.



[WATCH: A PROUD BOY IN CANADA](#)

Jeff, too, believed that he was working toward a higher goal, a goal exemplified by the so-called “14 words”: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” As Jeff remembers, “I let go of my dreams from the beginning to do this. We all knew that; it’s a nonstop road. When people would join [and ask] ‘What do I get if I join?’ You get blood, sweat, and tears! That would make me really mad. You’ve done something good and noble for your people.”

Benjamin was a member of the KKK and adhered to the Christian Identity ideology. He explains, “When I started studying the Christian Identity, I really believed that God wanted me to go out and hurt these people just for him. I thought God was telling me to do this [...] To be a warrior, a hero to save the world, get the other races off the planet.”

Recalls JJ of his journey up the ranks of the White Aryan Resistance,

[They] provide brotherhood, structure, people who understand. They don’t attract extremists, but normal people who become extremists without even realizing it. I don’t think I was an extremist going in when I first got with the skinheads. [I thought,] I’m not defending myself and my friends, it’s my race, because this is a bigger problem. While I was in, I didn’t think of it as extremism. To me, it was a noble cause.



[WATCH: THE WHITE RACE IS UNDER ATTACK](#)

Clearly, there is a great deal of overlap between these categories. Immediately after describing the power that he felt personally as an NSM member, Red says, “You felt you were part of something bigger than yourself, part of a revolution.” Joshua, however, did not explicitly state that he wanted to feel personally important or powerful. Rather, he gained his sense of significance through fighting for his cause. Josh has been charged for his involvement in the January 6th Capitol Hill riot and explains of the Proud Boys,

They are on the right, not even far, definitely Trump supporters. A lot are ex-military and just don’t want our country taken over, don’t believe in a stolen election, which is what we think. If there had been no concerns over voter fraud, I could give two fucks who the president is. As a bartender, [the election] made no difference in my life. If legit Biden won, I’d have beers at the inauguration.



[WATCH: FIGHTING FOR THE PROUD BOYS](#)

Acacia describes what she felt were legitimate grievances that were used to “dehumanize” people who agreed with her politically, even though she now regrets propagandizing for the NSM:

This kid on a college campus is drunk, saying, “I’m proud to be white,” wasn’t racist, and then you have an entire crowd of people around him, taunting him. He lost everything. [The NSM doesn’t] have to recruit. The media is doing it for them. They take extreme examples. ‘This person wasn’t racist, but they are being called racist. We are not saying we hate anyone; we are just trying to stick up for our own people. It’s very easy to get twisted into a noble and good thing, when it’s all around you, you get indoctrinated without knowing.



[WATCH: IT'S THE JEWS FAULT](#)

Dehumanization and Bigotry

Very few of the interviewees, as is apparent from the previous quotations, were motivated to join their groups because of an explicitly hateful ideology. Six individuals admitted being motivated by racism against Black people before joining. Five were motivated by antisemitism, eight were motivated by hatred of immigrants or people of immigrant descent, namely Hispanic and Turkish people, and seven admitted to being Islamophobic prior to joining their groups. Once they joined, however, ideological indoctrination led those who were already bigoted to solidify their beliefs and those who were not to adopt those beliefs.

Dehumanization of Muslims and immigrants was reported by minorities of the sample (13 and 20, respectively), but dehumanization of Black people was reported by 33 interviewees. Lukas admits, “[The] racist part, I hundred percent believed [that] white people [are] more worthy than Black people. I didn’t even think about it.” Ken also admits how little rumination went into his ideology: “I thought Blacks were a subspecies of humans. [The] Founding Fathers say they stink [and] need to be educated, I thought just like that.” He describes part of Christian Identity’s ideology: “Adam means ability to show color in the face, [therefore] Adam [was] a white man created in God’s image.” Sean learned the same ideology which he explains relegated nonwhites to the status of animals: “Adam means to show blood in the face, that’s why he’s white. Other races were here first; white man [was] given dominion over them.” About Black people, Tony recalls, “[We] referred to them as mud people.”

But, as Tony explains the ideologies cutting across all of these groups blamed Jews for the eventual fall of white dominance, “It was less about Blacks and Hispanics; it was Jews.” He describes his former ideology: “Jews were the ones who were engineering the downfall of the white race – all these other races were a threat to that. UN endangered species, it’s us.” As such, their belief was that “if you take care of the Jewish question, everything will be OK.”

TM Garret, a German man and formerly a leader in the KKK but who now works for ICSVE as a violent extremism expert, agrees, saying, “It started with unintentional jokes against minorities. Then as an early Skinhead, I thought the enemy were Turkish street gangs, but as I got deeper indoctrinated and became a nationalist, it was the communists who wanted to swap out the Germans and replace them with immigrants. But at the end it became a world-wide problem, where the white race was under attack and I was presented with the ultimate villain, like the ‘final boss’ in a video-game. The Jews who want to take over the world. And we could be the heroes. Noble warriors fighting against evil, saving everybody.”

In fact, 35 interviewees mentioned dehumanizing Jews and most stated that Jews were blamed for the world’s problems including empowering minorities to the detriment of white people. Jeff explains how he learned about antisemitism while studying white supremacy before joining his group:

Studying made me hate the Jews. It was so bad in the movement, you could [say] “Oh, that’s the Jews” for everything. Jews were behind everything, absolute bogeyman. Looking into some of the things of the Holocaust and the numbers, revisionist things, American Red Cross said one thing. There was some documentary when I was a teen on PBS, two hours. They said six million, later it was ten to 16 and I thought it was weird. I don’t know if I heard it wrong. You do hear different figures, that supported Holocaust denial.



[WATCH: LEADING THE NATIONAL SOCIALIST MOVEMENT](#)

It behooves us to note here that differing numbers regarding the scope of the Holocaust are based on estimates for different groups of people who were murdered by the Nazis. Approximately six million Jews

were killed in the Holocaust. Larger numbers include other targeted groups, including LGBTQ people, Roma, handicapped people, and others.

Those who adhered to the Christian Identity ideology were indoctrinated with biblical justifications for their hatred of Jews. Explains Kerry, “Christian Identity [preached that] Jews were the literal seed of the devil [and that] it’s the Jews who wanted to kill Jesus.” Sean notes that he learned two different biblical theories of the Jews. For reference, the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis holds that the pair had two children: Cain and Abel. God favored Abel, who was eventually killed by Cain – the origin of the quote, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Sean explains the two seed theories: “One seed, Cain, was cursed; that’s where the Jews came from. [Or] Eve slept with the serpent. Cain was not Adam’s child, but the serpent’s child.”

Ideological indoctrination resulted in the interviewees directing their anger and hatred toward Jews over all others, despite the fact that very few were prejudiced against Jewish people prior to joining their groups. We have labeled this process Directed Hate (Speckhard, Ellenberg, & Garret, 2022). In essence, after joining their groups in order to meet existential needs for belonging and significance, a sense of specialness was conveyed to them as they gained membership in an elite, superior, exclusively white, club. They were told that this significance was threatened by those who sought to upend the world order and depose white people from their position of dominance in the West, and that this malicious effort was directed by the Jews. As such, the interviewees came to believe that if they did not staunchly adhere to the white supremacist ideology, they would lose their newfound sense of superiority, with some even going so far as to commit violence on behalf of that ideology.

Recruitment – Targeting and Means of Recruitment

Recruitment to white supremacy occurred in multiple ways. As some of the interviewees were older and had joined in decades past, they referenced online recruitment that they engaged in including message boards and telephone banks which are now replaced with social media and website recruitment. Some found white supremacist groups by searching on the Internet, where they encountered groups and recruiters. Others were found by recruiters who were specifically targeting them through leaflets, and personal offers to join. While leafleting may seem old-fashioned in the days of social media, many explained that the provocative leaflets left in primarily Jewish neighborhoods often got nationally televised press, including showing the leaflets with the group’s insignia and contact details shown on camera, resulting in many new recruits reaching out. Likewise, putting leaflets in mixed race areas with racial tension also appealed to whites living in these areas and gained responses.

Recruiters and leaders who were well represented in this sample reported specifically targeting active-duty and veteran members of the military and police forces. These individuals were considered desirable to recruit because of their already trained discipline, their weapons training, and knowledge which was put to use for trainings for other group members as they prepared for potential race war. Military members were also valued for their potential access to obtaining weaponry for the group. When active-duty military members were recruited, they were instructed to keep a low profile but also to quietly reach out to others to join and were queried about weapons supply. Veterans, in contrast, were put on display for recruiting purposes, lending an air of legitimacy and sense of patriotism to the groups. Military and police veterans were also said to make good recruiters after they joined. The head of the NSM’s “Storm Troopers”

reported that over 50 percent of the NSM's security forces were recruited from the military. Jeff, the former leader of the NSM, stated that over his twenty-two-year tenure as the leader, they increasingly focused on recruiting veterans and active-duty military, increasing the general membership at some points in time to around half coming from the military.

While the NSM states that they refused members under 18, many other groups actively preyed upon minors. Many of the sample respondents spoke about targeted youth recruitment, with older members reaching out to and offering substitute "father" relationships as a means of bringing a youth from a broken home into the movement. Likewise, those recruited as youths recalled how powerful the sense of family and belonging offered by the group was in their decision to join these groups.

Roles

In their groups, the interviewees held varied roles, but it is notable that the present sample includes a disproportionately large number of group leaders ($n = 22$). Twenty interviewees said that they held rank-and-file roles. As Søren describes, "I'd meet up with people in the area. They'd throw flyers in people's driveways to recruit and to make a news story. I think I helped roll up a bunch of those, but I never got in a car and actually [distributed them]." Those who were speakers and ideologues ($n = 9$) were candid about their tactics. Ed, formerly of the Creativity Movement Alliance, recalls,

I indoctrinated at least 15 to 20 people; that's just the ones I can remember. Some of the people, we would sit in small groups, I'd talk to one person and two to three others would listen [...] [I would say], "Here I am in prison, working for our cause. We are building our strength. Someday we'll take our country back from everyone that stole it from us."

Brian, an alt-right leader, remembers of an event he organized,

There were speakers and microphones [...] My themes at the time [were] that white people were being discriminated [against], culture, tearing down our history, blaming us for slavery, which all people throughout history did. You wouldn't tear down the Mayan pyramids because of human sacrifice and slavery.

Others who were not ideological leaders in their groups nevertheless contributed to recruitment efforts. Says William of the NSM, still partially proud of his work, "I got a recruitment award. I recruited 15 that year, more than anyone else. Out of all the recruits that I recruited, one to two percent were full dead-on racist, 'I hate these people.' The majority are not 'I hate Blacks and Mexicans.' Klan, that's what the Klan is." Fourteen others also recruited new members face-to-face.

Fifteen interviewees reported acting as propagandists, in a variety of manners. Acacia remembers her role: "[...] I did social media, graphic design, video. I never intended to be in the propaganda role, and I ended up take[ing] over for the media director who had quit. For me, it just added for the compartmentalization. You subscribed to a certain portion, but I was spreading a message, a whole message." TM, a German man who joined the KKK prior to the proliferation of the Internet, "translated the KKK group's literature into German," though he found it difficult to convince his fellow German neo-Nazi skinheads, many of whom

Odinists, of the KKK's distorted Christian ideology. Another German, Lukas, organized free propaganda: large events that would garner news coverage and attract new members. He recalls,

I organized many things, demonstrations, spoke at demonstrations. To bring action into the movement. We call it the national movement. When you don't do concerts and demonstrations, the people become bored. You have to do these things, provocation, and have something to offer to the people in the far right, that they can do something on the weekend.

Recall from the section on influences that some in our sample were influenced by the white power music scene. Sean helped amplify that scene to recruit for Aryan Nations: "I burned CDs and handed them out at high schools. It was violent skinhead music, Skrewdriver, Midtown Boot Boys, very violent messages like, 'Destroy everyone that is not white.' They have songs like, 'Six Million More,' 'Coon Hunt.'"

Experiences

Discussion about the interviewees' experiences in the group included questions about which activities in the group were emotionally and socially rewarding as well as experiences and violent activities that could be traumatic such as being victimized in fights within the group and with other groups or in protests and demonstrations, being disappointed with leadership or other members lack of loyalty to the ideology and threats of punishments when trying to exit the group.

In a previous article summarizing ICSVE's 220 ISIS interviews (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020), the authors also delved deeply into the interviewees' traumatic experiences within the group. For a number of reasons, those experiences for ISIS members were far more numerous and varied than they are for the present sample. First, most of the ISIS interviewees lived under ISIS's Caliphate – in a warzone. For that reason, the likelihood of experiencing bombings, being wounded in bombings, being wounded in battle, and witnessing the deaths of friends and families, were quite common. In contrast, the interviewees in the present sample, did not see active combat in the traditional sense, as members of extremist groups in the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, and Germany. Moreover, many of the ISIS participants had either already been charged for their crimes or were eager to be repatriated from SDF territory to their home countries, even if that meant being prosecuted and convicted. As such, they were perhaps more open than the interviewees in this sample about their past violent behavior with their groups, even though all interviewees, in both samples, were warned not to incriminate themselves.

Still, the interviewees in the present sample did recount significant experiences which could be traumatic to them or to others. Some of the most commonly reported experiences were participating in fights, attacking others, or being attacked by those who opposed them ($n = 24$). These fights were with a variety of individuals, often rival gangs whose membership comprised members of minority groups. As TM recalls, "We got in violent clashes, street fights with Turkish gangs. We would go into a part of town more populated by immigrants to get attacked, but we wanted to blame them for attacking us." He continues, "One time a girl got hit over the head with a beer mug. One got stabbed one time. I got shot. [We'd say] 'Look how uncivilized, savage they are.' It justified what we believe in." Ed similarly used these fights with members of minority groups in prison for strategic purposes: "We had a system. I would purposely get in a fight, stab, with Black Hebrew [Israelites] or Nation of Islam, get in a fight to be put in administrative

segregation to get communication with other Creators in there, to keep communication going.” He reflects, “That’s how extreme I was. I would give up my time in the general population to transfer information and training to those locked up in the hole.”

Incidents of violence were reported most often with those recruited to white supremacy in prisons and in gangs. In prison environments, some said that their very survival seemed to be predicated on joining a white supremacist gang and that once in they were violently punished by their own group if they failed to adhere to it or tried to quit. Those who joined gangs were often facing bullying in their communities and joined the gang for a sense of protection, but then also engaged in violence once in the gang. Street fights among gangs was commonly reported.

For Brad, one such fight resulted in an encounter with another member of a minority group that would later impact his decision to leave and haunt his memory as an act of compassion he didn’t feel he deserved at the time:

I stuck around the Toronto group. [There was] opportunistic violence, drinking, concerts. [It was] gang-like, street violence, chaotic. [I] got into a fight with a Vietnamese gang, ended in [the hospital]. I was in all the gear. Orthodox Jewish doctor walks in. He didn’t even bat an eye. Swastika on my shirt, jacket, and boots. He didn’t mention anything. This guy shouldn’t even help me. I knew where I was at; I knew all the bad things we were doing, but it didn’t sway me. When I got out of the hospital, I shed blood for the cause, 20-year-old kid, all these guys pumping me up. [It was] hard to say this is the time to leave this group, even though this Jewish guy helped me.

Six individuals also mentioned getting into fights with people they identified as Antifa. Antifa is a far-left loosely organized movement whose adherents often engage in what they view as preventative violence against members of far-right groups, but also occasionally against police officers, following the slogan, “Punch a Nazi in the face” (Bray, 2017). Given the potential reciprocal radicalization occurring between far left and far right violent actors, all of the participants were asked if they had experiences with Antifa and if so to explain how they knew the others were members of Antifa. As Joshua recounts,

[I saw Antifa] spray bottles of piss at the cops. I was infuriated. I can do what you [the cops] are not allowed to do. I wanted to protect the cops [...] Three fights. They all swung at me first. I am a trained fighter. One swung a knife at me. Another one stabbed right in front of me. None of us [Proud Boys] to my knowledge had weapons. No one was able to hit me. I had a knife swung at me, I moved his arm and knocked him out after.

Fred describes similar methods used by Antifa but elaborates on the effect that fights with Antifa had on the NSM membership:

Worrying about Antifa always brought us closer; two extreme groups pushing against each other [...] Tires slashed, windows broken. They’d find out where our cars were parked. They’d start throw[ing] bottles of urine at us, try to attack us. Cops hold us back. They’d find knives and guns on the Antifa guys, you’d see it in the news afterwards.

Fred admits, however, that his fights with Antifa, like those TM describes with Turkish gangs, were not as defensive as their groups claimed as his clothing and actions were intended to provoke a response: “When I was in NSM, I was in fights only when attacked, which would be often, if you wore [a] swastika at rallies and meetings.”

TM Garret remembers an incident from the very first rally he attended in 1990 in Germany. “It was a neo-Nazi march commemorating Hitler’s co-chancellor Rudolf Hess. We were 6,000 in Bayreuth, and I remember seeing some of our guys walking around with bloody bandages, thick like turbans around their heads. Antifa had thrown bricks at them.”

Klayton, in contrast, was attacked by members of his own Aryan Nations prison gang, an experience which was highly traumatic and disillusioning for him: “I had more worry about being punched over by the skins than anyone else. They’d embarrass me in trainings, beat the shit out of me. If they had gotten me on with love instead of intimidation, I’d still be there for them.”

Other attacks perpetrated by the interviewees include assaults on a Black man, a gay man, a female politician, and prison guards including stabbings. The most commonly reported experience, however, was unlikely to be traumatic to the individual, but very likely traumatic to some onlookers. Thirty-eight interviewees reported attending events including rallies, concerts, demonstrations, festivals, protests, and cross burnings. TM recalls performing at those concerts: “At age 19, I was a neo-Nazi singer-songwriter. [In] ’98 I sold tens of thousands of records [...] I was climbing up the leadership ladder. I played skinhead concerts every Friday and for neo-Nazi parties on Saturday and Sunday.” It was later on that his fame led him to his participation in the KKK:

I played at a barbeque and the KKK group was there too. They followed me around and they were guests at the concert. One asked me over beers, “Do you want to become a member?” I didn’t know much about it and if he was drunk, but it also felt very exclusive, that you have to apply and prove you are white. I felt special. They wanted me; they were asking me. I said yes.

Jeff describes his rules precluding engaging in violence for NSM members at rallies, relating back to the interviewees’ descriptions of their so-called “defensive” fights:

We had very strict regulations on violence. I was in 27 years total. In 27 years of rallies, not once, in Charlottesville including, was anyone from NSM arrested for violence. They were arrested on their own stupidities over the years, but at events, our rules were so strict, not one was arrested. We would fight only in self-defense. Antifa would attack us. It would depend, typically they like to throw rocks and bottles and bricks, sometimes weapons. We got into, in 2011 I think, or 2009, we were in New Jersey and the Antifa attacked us with knives and hammers. I hit someone with a chair out there in self-defense. The guys wanted to fight, but [they were] not allowed to start it.

It should be noted that despite his earlier statement, Jeff was found in 2022 to have engaged in a conspiracy to commit violence in Charlottesville and ordered to pay \$500,000 in punitive damages (*Sines v. Kessler*, 2019).

Benjamin describes another purpose of the rallies: not to fight, but to foster a sense of belonging:

I got with this guy who said he was going to a Klan rally of United Klans of Alabama. I told him I might be interested in going. He came and picked me up. We drove to Alabama, 200 people met on a field. Everyone was partying and getting to know one another. Saturday come, being a person born in the South, and not having hatred for others, but a little bit in me, I done went to a Klan rally. I went from all that to Saturday night I actually joined the Klan. I went through the whole ceremony with lighting the cross. That night really changed me. Having all these people with lacking support. Later on, I found out it was negative, and they didn't have my best intentions in heart. [But that night] I felt like this is where I belong. It blew me away. I never had those feelings. It was a negative light, destructive and unhealthy, but I felt like I was loved, and belonged. It felt beautiful, it felt great, like where I belonged.



[WATCH: WARRIOR FOR THE WHITE RACE](#)

Sources of Disillusionment

In addressing all types of violent extremism, it is critical to understand not only the processes by which individuals become radicalized, but also the reasons why and the mechanisms by which these individuals leave their groups. The individuals in this sample were at various stages of disengagement and deradicalization. Some also remained committed at some level to their groups and ideologies. Some had left their groups for various reasons but continued to adhere to all or parts of their dangerous ideologies. Still others had renounced their groups and acknowledged their difficulties in finding their new beliefs and purpose in life. Many others had completely deradicalized by any measure including feeling deep remorse for their hateful and violent actions and even trying to make amends where possible. Regardless of their current beliefs or group membership, the interviewees each reported certain experiences inside or out of their groups that caused them to begin to question whether they wanted to belong to such an organization.

Twenty-eight interviewees reported processes by which they became disillusioned with the ideology itself. Recounts Ryan,

When I was in jail, I had a bunch of these guys staring at me. Others in there were part of hate groups. Some were waiting to go back up for another trial. I started seeing Black guys. Next thing I know I get jumped. I'm getting hit from everywhere. I got one guy in a submission hold. I remember looking over at the guys in the hate groups. [They] didn't come to help, but [the] one guy who did was my cellmate. He was Black. He was swinging on them. He went down in the hole. I went to medical. We were still in the same cell, [and] from there we started to build a relationship. He called himself a radical Christian. He was all about the bible, he was [a] leftist. He said, "You don't seem like the guy that would be part of a hate group." He talked to me about certain bible verses. He had a strict workout routine that we did. He taught me how to "jail," wash my socks and hang [them] under the lights. He talked to me about [my] kids. He gave me a list, He read books all the time. He told me, "I'm going to give you a list of people, you need to read their books." [...] I self-educated like crazy. I filled myself with books [...] I started to listen to [Dr. Cornel West], Angela Davis, Malcolm X, JFK, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy.



[WATCH: BLACK PEOPLE ARE NOT OUR FRIENDS](#)

Ryan's change occurred in prison with his Black cellmate after having been abandoned by his fellow white supremacists. Jared's change similarly occurred while physically separated from his group, participating in a court-ordered religiously infused rehabilitation program:

I went through a radical change. I don't think everyone is out to get me, everyone out for their own [as I used to believe]. I believe in unity and love. Jesus Christ came for the single [human] race, not for the white race. I'm called to love my neighbor as myself and love my God. No room for hate in any of that. You can't operate in hate and love.

The second most commonly reported source of disillusionment was individual interactions with Black people ($n = 11$). For Jeff, this interaction was with emotionally moving interactions with Deeyah Khan, a filmmaker of Punjabi/Pashtun descent, and Daryl Davis, a Black musician who has made it his life's mission to meet one-on-one with white supremacists. Jeff recalls of his meeting with Daryl, "[He told a story] when

he was in the Cub Scouts and they were throwing rocks at him, but he didn't know why. He's Black. This happened to thousands of people [...] The garbage I was spewing did an incredible amount of damage."

Jeff's experience was incredibly moving, and Daryl has had a profound impact on many white supremacists. However, it appears far more common that spontaneous, everyday interactions can have just as meaningful an effect as those planned interactions. As Ed recalls,

I started having dialogue with an old Army buddy of my father, a Black man, I knew him my whole life. We started talking. I told him in prison I became a skinhead, and he was like, "Why?" I couldn't give him an honest answer. I honestly don't know. That's when I knew I can't do this anymore. I'm not being honest to myself. This is pointless. Talking with him, dialogue back and forth everyday was the catalyst. That was the biggest one.

For some, the interaction need not have been two-sided. As Red recounts,

I was working at a funeral home at the time, [as an] apprentice funeral director. A case, [a] young Black man my age, I was in my mid-twenties. Here's this young man on my slab, could have easily been me [...] That was my first solo case; I am the one who had to contact the family. I didn't know my boss had told them a little about my past. It was eye-opening. Why was I hating on people that could have been me? It hit a lot harder. As I was embalming this young man, you tap into the carotid and jugular veins and artery, it drains the blood out. Blood. He bled the same color I bled. Who the hell was I to be better than him?

Others were disillusioned through similar interactions with people of other minority groups. Ivan, who had been a member of the violently Islamophobic English Defence League, recalls a conversation he had with a Muslim community leader: "He said, 'I'll give you a chance to say what you want, and I'll listen.' I ranted for an hour, tried to provoke him. After about an hour, he said, 'have you finished now?' We sniggered. One hundred barriers fell down [...] Mamar was prepared to listen to me and treat me as a human being."

Finally, seven people reported that interventions, pressures, and ultimatums from their families played a role in their decisions to leave. Brad remembers,

A lot of guys were getting killed either by other movement guys or people outside. That was becoming a big issue also; I wanted to get out alive. I wanted to marry my wife. We got married in 2008, for each year [until] I left in 2011, I tried to distance. Some guys came to my door to collect my patches, they were from another group [...] That was kind of it for us. First child at 2009, violence had come right to my house. I got out of it because it was broad daylight. They were not too intelligent. It was a horrible experience for me and my wife. We talked about this needs to end. How does it end sooner and safely? We moved to get out of there, then we had another kid, another reason to get farther away from this thing, we moved a couple of times. Then ultimatum day. My wife had enough, 2011, movement or us. I chose the us part.

Søren had a similar experience. He was already becoming disillusioned, but it was his girlfriend who gave him the final push he needed:

[When I was] protesting, you could see hurt on people's faces for a few seconds. That would get to me and bother me. Then I'd snap back into my normal mindset. [The] look on their face. They are witnessing something horrible and awful. It was hard to deny that it was just a huge negative force in the world. In many ways I was a true believer and thought it would make the world a better place, but there are certain things you can't deny anymore. I had a girlfriend I lived with. She tried to ignore it, look past it, but she hated it. I was already disillusioned. She gave me an ultimatum.

Lauren, a former Hammerskin, felt family pressure, albeit not explicitly or directly. Her father had passed away before she joined her white supremacist group, and when the male group members told her that her role was not to fight, but to have children, she felt his presence: "My dad was a pretty strong dude [and he] raised me the same way. Near the end of my involvement, I thought, if my dad would come back from the dead, [he] would come back to beat my ass for putting up with this."

For Chris, the ultimatum came more formally:

It was in 2014. I had a girlfriend. We separated. There was also a child. Then there was a court case on custody. [That] had a lot to do with it. The judge said due to my political opinions, because I'm in the movement, the child can't come live with me. I had a new girlfriend [and] she made me think of everything. Then I started to think of getting out.

In this sample, only a few had the opportunity of participating in a formal exit, disengagement, or deradicalization program or in psychotherapy. Thus, most of those who had disengaged did so out of their own sense of disillusionment which was self-driven, and most could be said to have spontaneously deradicalized, although in some cases not entirely. Disengagement without any real deradicalization was present in at least two cases and varying levels of lingering fear and hatred toward minorities continued in some as well as many still not taking complete responsibility or engaging in any repentance and reconciliatory acts.

Those who were exposed to specific challenges carried out by Deeyah Khan and Daryl Davis recalled them having a powerful deradicalizing effect, albeit one that was not immediate in nature and still required additional painful work to fully disengage and deradicalize. Some had to cut off all ties with former group members, breaking friendships and losing livelihoods in order to really detach from white supremacy and some had partners leave them before they woke up to the destructive nature of what they were involved with. Many regretted years lost in the movement and how they had neglected partners and children while they were involved. Many were plagued by guilt and trauma from their own actions and their experiences in the group. Some had made efforts to make amends to their victims, in some cases with positive outcomes, in other cases they faced rejection and were unable to make amends. Those who attempted to engage in psychotherapy had mixed results, with some reporting therapists who were ill-equipped and uninformed about white supremacy and who feared them. Similarly, a recent report from the RAND Corporation found through a series of interviews with former extremists and their family members that difficulty accessing mental health care was a barrier to deradicalization (Brown et al., 2021). Others report significant growth from psychotherapy, working through their previous childhood traumas, particularly abuse, as well as traumatic experiences in the group, anger management and

reported a slow expanding of their ability to see all minorities as fully human and all of humanity as related in positive ways. Clearly, more work is needed in this area both for prevention and interventions.

Discussion

The individuals in this study make clear that we cannot simply pull violent extremists from our society like weeds and expect no reappearances. White supremacist recruitment in large part relies on the unmet needs of those who join, and to do away with this type of violent extremism we must address the societal problems that made them vulnerable initially. Drug abuse, poverty, family dysfunction, and child maltreatment all contributed to serious vulnerabilities that left the interviewees with deep unmet needs for a sense of meaning, significance, dignity, and purpose in their lives; effects of adverse childhood experiences that have also been found in another sample of former white supremacists interviewed by Windisch and colleagues (2020). They felt desperate to belong, to be accepted, to be valued, to have their dignity established and to be given a sense of purpose. We also must address the context that made these individuals susceptible to the white supremacist ideology – systemic and casual racism that makes a more violent racist belief system easier to adopt. We can see how many of these people were easily drawn into adopting deeply hateful racist beliefs in exchange for a sense of purpose, significance, dignity and belonging, as well as how quickly the same people’s minds were changed by simple interactions in which they were granted kindness and compassion by members of minority groups.

Scholars, practitioners, and law enforcement have made clear that white supremacist violent extremism is one of the greatest threats to American national security, far more so than any other type of violent extremism (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2020). We cannot make the same mistakes that were made in efforts to counter militant jihadist terror – efforts that pathologized terrorists and securitized and alienated entire communities (Barbari, 2018). Just as experts pushed for efforts that addressed the individual vulnerabilities that made people vulnerable to militant jihadist radicalization and recruitment, so should they push for broad, community-based preventing and countering white supremacist violent extremism efforts that provide young people with real opportunities to gain a sense of significance, belonging, dignity and purpose in prosocial ways and to be exposed to racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. These efforts must be rooted in an understanding that racism and taking part in white supremacism is a natural outgrowth of a confluence of factors, as articulated in this article. As is made clear by the interviewees, bigotry can truly feel like pride and patriotism, and deliver a sense of belonging and purpose as one believes their actions are in support of one’s own people.

Similarly, given that the groups specifically target active duty and veteran members of military and police, as was also reported by Brown and colleagues (2021), it is important to assist them with prevention and intervention efforts to thwart these members from joining white supremacism (Speckhard, Ellenberg, & Garret, 2021). The groups themselves see military and police joiners as potential weapons trainers and suppliers of weapons and value them for their already trained sense of discipline. Likewise, military and police members confer an air of legitimacy and patriotism to the group and are also valued for their potential of recruiting others to the group.

Likewise, this research, if the sample is representative of the larger groups which were described by the respondents, makes clear that men are more involved in these groups than women, but that women are

also involved and also at times just as violent as the men. As with most violent extremists and terrorist groups, females self-reported and were reported as generally playing support roles, were venerated as “breeders” and did not hold leadership positions, with some exceptions occurring in the NSM, and there were far fewer women reported upon than men among the ranks of all the groups studied. Thus, a gendered approach is necessary and, in some cases, needs to address assaults to young boys’ sense of masculinity and the whole concept of being drawn into toxic masculinity. For instance, one respondent in this sample who had been sexually abused by a male was very committed to the positive sense of identity conferred upon him by being a member of the KKK, a group that makes its members pledge that they are not gay. This same pledge and rampant homophobia also appeared as projection for some of the interviewees who came out as LGBTQ after leaving their groups. In apparent cases of splitting (Redman, 2000), these interviewees channeled their own internalized prejudice and self-hatred toward attacking gay men and participating in overtly, violently misogynistic and homophobic groups.

Furthermore, prevention for youth should be specifically addressed, as those who were recruited as youth and those who acted as recruiters highlighted that the need for belonging was easily manipulated by white supremacists. In this regard, it is clear that any prevention measures aimed at reducing adverse childhood experiences are likely to also reduce the effectiveness of white supremacists being able to recruit youth.

Additionally, many respondents in this sample referenced the extreme polarization currently present in Western society and the role of reciprocal radicalization in further radicalizing white supremacists and keeping them involved in their groups. Many referenced violent interactions with Antifa as further radicalizing events that influenced them. While doxxing and even being attacked by groups like Antifa was referenced as having a very negative effect on those who experienced it, causing some to leave their groups for fear of losing jobs, being arrested, or being publicly shamed, it was also referenced as a warning and reason by those who spoke of it as a reason not to join white supremacism. Sometimes doxxing that occurred when a person was already leaving or had left white supremacism behind was cruel and harmful, isolating the individual who was trying to make his way back into society. Likewise, the effect of significant others threatening to or actually leaving their white supremacists partners caused some to reevaluate the worth of staying with their group. Thus, systems-based approaches to promoting exits can be both creative and useful, although kinder more creative approaches than doxxing are likely more effective and do not have the side effects of further radicalizing others.

While doxxing causes some to leave their groups, it has the opposite effect on others. TM worked on cases where members of hate groups and those who committed non-violent crimes were doxxed and exposed, and therefore lost their jobs and in some cases even their homes. “In these cases, I’ve lost every chance to talk to them in form of an intervention. All the sudden it changed from where I could have been a person who would understand where they are coming from and thus gaining trust to a situation, where I am just ‘like the other libtards that made them lose their jobs.’ Doxxing just helped them radicalize a little further.” says TM.

The same happens with violent encounters with groups like Antifa. While some former White Supremacists say that “Antifa fighting them, keeps the Nazis busy and they can’t do other harm,” others say that it just hardened their beliefs and used it as a justification of violence and that it would prove their point, that “they are law abiding and rejecting violence unless it’s used for self-

defense. It is like fuel in their fires. They can't function without this threat, giving them a way to see themselves as the victims," explains TM.

Like cults, white supremacist groups demand ideological and behavioral loyalty from their members and begin to isolate them from dissenting opinions as well as from members of the hated minority groups making it hard for them to have any positive exposures. As isolation and the echo chambers of hate increase, fusion with the ideology and buy-in to conspiracy theories sets in. This underlies the usefulness of intervention and even prevention measures designed to create positive interactions and dialogue across racial, ethnic, and religious divides.

For those who left white supremacy and deradicalized, spontaneously or with the help of a program or some kind of professional help, it was clear that there are ebbs and flows of involvement and that leaving white supremacy is not easily accomplished. In some cases, disillusionment with the group and disappointment with members not remaining loyal to each other or to the ideology served as the opening for beginning to leave. For others, positive interactions with the despised minority groups broke through the echo chamber in which they were living and provided opportunities for reevaluating the group and its ideology through a clearer lens. However, exiting white supremacy involved deep personal losses and reckoning with that one had been wrong, and perhaps unjustly violent and harmful to others. Some had indelibly marked their bodies with marks of hate and needed help with tattoo cover up or removal to be able to engage with those outside their group without suffering rejection or fear from general society. While some in this sample reported serious growth accomplished in traditional psychotherapy, others referenced reaching out to formers, and the need for different and perhaps much more support for exiting than would be available in traditional psychotherapy offered on a once or twice weekly schedule. Indeed, European EXIT programs inspired by Tore Bjørgo's pioneering work in Norway offer multiple services including individual and group counseling, relocation and employment support, and support to parents as well.

Recognizing the underlying and unmet needs that lead to radicalization which often have nothing to do with actual experiences with minority groups is important to understand to address white supremacists. While the respondents in this sample were taught to hate Jews and blame them for most of society's problems, hardly any had ever met a Jewish person before joining white supremacy. Thus, our conclusions do not support some theorists' views that grievances based on negative interactions with minority groups form the seed of discontent leading to white supremacist radicalization. Rather the vulnerabilities existing in these respondents' lives identified in this research, vulnerabilities coming in many cases from adverse childhood experiences in their families and communities, and their unmet needs which were initially met by white supremacy are vulnerabilities and needs that must be redirected to better answers than provided by violent extremist groups. Understanding this and designing programs based on this knowledge will make efforts at prevention, disengagement, and deradicalization more understanding, compassionate, and, ultimately, more effective.

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About the Authors:

Dr. Anne Speckhard is Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism ([ICSVE](#)) and serves as an Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University School of Medicine. She has interviewed over 700 terrorists, their family members and supporters in various parts of the world including in Western Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, the Former Soviet Union and the Middle East. In the past five years years, she has in-depth psychologically interviewed over 250 ISIS defectors, returnees and prisoners as well as 16 al Shabaab cadres (and also interviewed their family members as well as ideologues) studying their trajectories into and out of terrorism, their experiences inside ISIS (and al Shabaab), as well as developing the *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project* materials from these interviews which includes over 250 short counter narrative videos of terrorists denouncing their groups as un-Islamic, corrupt and brutal which have been used in over 150 Facebook and Instagram campaigns globally. Since 2020 she has also launched the *ICSVE Escape Hate Counter Narrative Project* interviewing 25 white supremacists and members of hate groups developing counternarratives from their interviews as well. She has also been training key stakeholders in law enforcement, intelligence, educators, and other countering violent extremism professionals, both locally and internationally, on the psychology of terrorism, the use of counter-narrative messaging materials produced by ICSVE as well as studying the use of children as violent actors by groups such as ISIS. Dr. Speckhard has given consultations and police trainings to U.S., German, UK, Dutch, Austrian, Swiss, Belgian, Danish, Iraqi, Jordanian and Thai national police and security officials, among others, as well as trainings to elite hostage negotiation teams. She also consults to foreign governments on issues of terrorist prevention and interventions and repatriation and rehabilitation of ISIS foreign fighters, wives and children. In 2007, she was responsible for designing the psychological and Islamic challenge aspects of the Detainee Rehabilitation Program in Iraq to be applied to 20,000 + detainees and 800 juveniles. She is a sought after counterterrorism expert and has consulted to NATO, OSCE, the EU Commission and EU Parliament, European and other foreign governments and to the U.S. Senate & House, Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Homeland Security, Health & Human Services, CIA, and FBI and appeared on CNN, BBC, NPR, Fox News, MSNBC, CTV, CBC and in Time, The New York Times, The Washington Post, London Times, Voice of America, and many other publications. She regularly writes a column for Homeland Security Today and speaks and publishes on the topics of the psychology of radicalization and terrorism and is the author of several books, including *Talking to Terrorists*, *Bride of ISIS*, *Undercover Jihadi* and *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*. Her research has also been published in *Global Security: Health, Science and Policy*, *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, *Journal of African Security*, *Journal of Strategic Security*, the *Journal of Human Security*, *Bidhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, *Journal for Deradicalization*, *Perspectives on Terrorism* and the *International Studies Journal* to name a few. Her academic publications are found here: <https://georgetown.academia.edu/AnneSpeckhardWebsite>: and on the ICSVE website <http://www.icsve.org> Follow [@AnneSpeckhard](#)

Molly Ellenberg is a research fellow at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism [ICSVE]. Molly is a doctoral student in social psychology at the University of Maryland. She holds an M.A. in Forensic Psychology from The George Washington University and a B.S. in Psychology with a Specialization in Clinical Psychology from UC San Diego. Her research focuses on radicalization to and deradicalization from militant jihadist and white supremacist violent extremism, the quest for significance, and intolerance of uncertainty. Molly has presented original research at NATO Advanced Research Workshops and Advanced Training Courses, the International Summit on Violence, Abuse, and Trauma, the GCTC International Counter Terrorism Conference, UC San Diego Research Conferences, and for security professionals in the European Union. She is also an inaugural member of the UNAOC's first youth consultation for preventing violent extremism through sport. Her research has been cited over 100 times and has been published in *Psychological Inquiry*, *Global Security: Health, Science and Policy*, *AJOB Neuroscience*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, *Motivation and Emotion*, *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, *Women & Criminal Justice*, the *Journal of Strategic Security*, the *Journal of Human Security*, *Bidhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, and the *International Studies Journal*. Her previous research experiences include positions at Stanford University, UC San Diego, and the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland.

TM Garret Schmid (born Achim Schmid) and publicly known as TM Garret is an Extremism Researcher and Analyst at ICSVE. He is a German-American Public Speaker, Human Rights Activist, Consultant, Author, Extremism Researcher, Interfaith Activist and founder of C.H.A.N.G.E, a non-profit organization which engages in anti-racism and anti-violence campaigns, food drives, inter-faith work as well as an EXIT program which helps individuals leave extremist groups and ERASING THE HATE, a nationwide tattoo campaign and movement that covers up racist and hate tattoos for free. He is also the organizer of the Memphis Peace Conference in 2018 and founder of "Share a Meal Pledge." Before he started engaging in Civil Rights work, TM Garret was a White Supremacist in leading roles in Europe and the USA. He left this lifestyle and ideology for good in 2003. Garret works closely with the Jewish as well as the Black Community. He is a campus speaker against antisemitism for the Simon Wiesenthal Center and a member of the NAACP. He is also a US ambassador for EXIT Germany and an honorary board member of "We Are Many-United Against Hate." TM Garret has lectured at Harvard, Cornell, Dartmouth, Boston Law School, Vanderbilt, Hotchkiss, Pomona and many other schools and universities. In 2019 he spoke at the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield on behalf of the Simon Wiesenthal Center as well as the City Hall in New York City. He was featured on ABC, NBC, CNN, Fox, C-SPAN's Washington Journal, VICE and VOX as well as the New York Magazine, The Guardian, Huffington Post, Haaretz, the Jerusalem Post and many other international major TV stations and outlets. He is a radio personality and currently hosts ERASING THE HATE, a talk show on WKRA 92.7 FM The Change in Holly Springs, MS together with Pastor Ray Johnson. The show is syndicated on iHeart Radio, iTunes, Spotify, PlayerFM and many other platforms. For more information, please visit www.tmgarret.com or his Wikipedia page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TM_Garret.

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