Converging Patterns in Pathways in and out of Violent Extremism: Insights from Former Canadian Right-Wing Extremists

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Abstract

In recent years, research on pathways in and out of violent extremism has grown at a staggering rate. Yet much of what is known about these oftentimes "mysterious" processes does not necessarily shed light on the specific aspects of right-wing extremism, and especially not from a Canadian perspective. In an effort to bridge this gap, we use a life-course criminology approach to draw from the voices of former extremists to gain insights into their respective trajectories in and out of violent extremism. A total of 10 life course interviews were conducted with former Canadian members of violent right-wing extremist groups. Analyses of these data suggest that even if there is no single trajectory in and out of violent extremism, there are still converging patterns such as the attraction for common pull factors and a profound dedication to the right-wing cause. Our analyses also demonstrate that the emotional toll of leaving the movement is often characterized by exhaustion, isolation and regrets.

Keywords: Violent extremism; right-wing extremism; pathways; life-course criminology; qualitative research.

Introduction

A lack of access to individuals who adopt right-wing extremist (RWE) ideologies has meant that the literature dealing with pathways in and out of violent right-wing extremism, in addition to other literature in terrorism and extremism studies, has long been criticized for its lack of studies based on primary data.[1] Although the situation has decreased in recent years, Schuurman's recent review shows that just over half of the studies on terrorism published between 2007 and 2016 rely on first-hand data, the rest still being based on secondary data, such as court records, books, media reports and other open sources.[2] [3] Furthermore, as Simi, Sporer and Bubolz noted, criminology has shied away from researching violent extremism due to the political commitments of the actors who adopt these ideologies, which normally falls outside of the purview of criminologists.[4] However, several recent studies have shown that a life-course criminology approach may be particularly relevant to the study of violent extremism.[5] Accordingly, this article portrays the life course of violent extremists to uncover converging patterns in their pathways that can help to better understand changes in their behaviors and belief systems over time. More specifically, our study relies exclusively on primary data obtained by interviewing former members of Canadian violent RWE groups.

Studying the Pathways in and out of Violent Extremism

The process by which an individual comes to use violence in the name of a radical ideological, religious or political cause is generally referred to as "radicalization".[6] This process tends to be described as a gradual adherence to extremist beliefs, feelings and behaviors that drive an individual—through various mechanisms—to legitimize the use of violence.[7] McCauley and Moskalenko aptly noted that "there are multiple and diverse pathways leading individuals and groups to radicalization".[8] As is generally the case for most criminal behaviors, [9] one's past history, early life, and events both across the life course and social relationships can influence pathways towards violent extremism.[10] Since the early 1990s, Sampson and Laub acknowledge the importance of childhood behavior, but also argue that several elements of informal social control (i.e., peers, family, siblings, employer, etc.) can have a significant impact on a deviant trajectory

in adulthood as well as on desistance.[11] They also consider delinquency as the result of a combination of individual actions and influences from situational contexts and social interactions. In this vein, it seems appropriate to consider radicalization as a deviant behavioral change and to think of how these contributions to the understanding of the criminal phenomenon can help us understand the factors that influence a person's trajectory towards violent extremism.

Several push and pull factors seem to contribute to the process of radicalization towards violent extremism. Push factors are underlying vulnerabilities that could explain an interest in extremist ideology, such as socio-economic factors, negative experiences, or experienced/perceived grievances.[12] In contrast, pull factors relate to other aspects of this commitment that have proved to be appealing to the individual. They are, for example, motivations related to the need for meaning, identity, belonging or justice, as well as to utopian promises and religious-based arguments.[13] Worth noting, however, is that there is no consensus on which factors deserve the most attention. Further, their relative effects are very difficult to assess and to distinguish. Bokhari and colleagues, for example, found that engagement in violent extremism "occurs both in a top-down and a bottom-up pattern—that is, there have been both push and pull factors, often operating at the same time: the people interviewed claim their personal conviction, but emphasize the importance of someone introducing them to the 'possibilities.'" [14]

Several studies based on primary data have highlighted the relevance of these push and pull factors for RWEs. For instance, Hamm's extensive work on American Skinheads have shown the more than powerful influence of a delinquent sub-culture that characterizes this movement.[15] The role of such subculture in a radicalization process reflects, as other researchers have also shown, the internalization of political ideologies based on "non-politicized ideals"—e. g. justice and freedom—and the integration of an identity associated with an interest in the emblematic figures of white supremacism, the influential racist Skinhead bands— such as Skrewdriver—and the racist literature and propaganda.[16] Other important studies are worth highlighting here, especially those that draw from the unusually large set of 47 interviews conducted by Blee, DeMichele and Simi with RWEs from the U.S.[17] These studies have, among other things, focused on some crucial elements relating to involvement in, and disassociation from, violent extremism. For instance, the authors suggest that entry into white supremacist groups involves rituals that enable emotional and identity constituencies, as well as the creation of social ties, brotherhood and collective identity.[18] Once engaged, they highlight the addictive nature that characterizes many trajectories in right-wing extremism, and which can pose an important challenge in the process of leaving.[19] Regarding the latter more specifically, the authors emphasize several factors that seem to favor disengagement. The most common of these is a process of disillusionment based on a dissonance between "(positive) earlier life or expectations and their subsequent (negative) experiences".[20][21] They also found that changes in social relationships, exposure to diversity and bad experiences arising from their involvement in the movement, such as violence and incarceration, could push them to leave.

With respect to the process of leaving violent extremism, two distinct constructs are also important to understand: deradicalization and disengagement. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, they do not have the same meaning. The term "deradicalization" refers to the process by which individuals are diverted from an extremist ideology, wherein they eventually reject the extremist ideology and adopt the values of the law-abiding majority.[22] On the other hand, "disengagement" refers to the process of individuals leaving the extremist group or movement with which they are associated in order to reintegrate into society.[23] This process of disengagement, in the case of violent groups in particular, is often hard to undertake because of constant in-group social pressure and the possible use of retaliatory violence against defectors.[24] As Windisch and colleagues explained, "deradicalization involves a change in belief; whereas, disengagement is characterized by a change in behavior." [25] These two processes can therefore occur separately or simultaneously, depending on the context in which they take place. However, several studies have found that deradicalization can have a significant impact on disengagement, where being disillusioned

by the group or the ideology may be a first step towards leaving a violent group.[26] One important model that could be applied here to understand how leaving extremism generally occurs (both from deradicalization and disengagement perspectives) is Barrelle's "Pro-Integration Model." [27] This model argues that five key domains are crucial to the process of leaving extremism: a fundamental change in the social relations and an openness to the "other," a disillusionment from radical ideas, a process of identity rebuilding, a need for physical and/or psychological support, and a pro-social engagement. In order to further develop the knowledge regarding pathways in and out of violent extremism, this article will explore the narratives of former members of violent RWE groups, drawing on a life-course criminology perspective.

Current Study

This study is part of a larger project that draws from the voices of Canadian former right-wing extremists. These shared their experiences and thoughts on how to build resilience towards radicalization leading to violence based on their pathways in and out of violent extremism. Also included in the project are the voices of key stakeholders: law enforcement and community activists. Both were asked to develop a series of interview questions that they would ask former extremists, and a refined version of these were put to former extremists during the interview process. The purpose of this approach was simple: to develop a multidimensional interview guide rather than a uniquely academic perspective. The following is an overview of the data collection and analysis process.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to conducting the interviews with former extremists, Canadian law enforcement officials and community activists were asked to generate lists of questions that they would ask formers if they were given the opportunity. Including interview questions from these stakeholders—rather than solely generating a list of questions derived from literature reviews of academic and public policy documents—provided a triangulated, multidimensional framework to guide the interviews. The questions concerned the life course before, during and after their time in violent extremism, including their identities, roles, goals and activities. Duplicate questions were removed, and organized into the following categories:

- Before the radicalization process

- Radicalization process

- Experiences in the violent extremist movement

- Leaving violent extremism

- Reflections after leaving violent extremism.

Once the list of interview questions was finalized, the next step was to recruit former extremists to participate in the study. Initially, we relied on our contacts with former extremists from our previous research on right-wing extremism in Canada to gain access to this hidden population.[28] Over time, we developed a level of trust with a few members of this community, and they eventually referred us to other Canadian former extremists who would potentially participate in the study. Overall, a total of 10 former right-wing extremists participated in the current study and were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. Interviews were conducted either in person or via telephone or Skype between March and September of 2018, ranging from approximately 1.5 to 7 hours in length, with an average of 4 hours. All interviews were semi-structured, using approximately 275 open-ended questions from the lists submitted by law enforcement and community activists. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. All names were de-identified for the purpose of ensuring participant confidentiality.

A thematic coding scheme based on the interview grid guided the analysis. Using NVivo 13, we coded and analyzed every interview independently, identifying themes and patterns with respect to the questions that were asked. We then cross-analyzed themes across the 10 interviews in order to uncover the main converging patterns in the pathways in and out of their trajectories.

Sample Characteristics

The sample included 8 males and 2 females, ranging from 27 to 44 years old (average age: 38). Each identified themselves as a former extremist, meaning that they no longer shared an affiliation with a "white power" group. More specifically, the study participants have not been involved in the right-wing extremist movement for an average of 6.5 years. Most were born in urban or suburban cities in Canada, but all were involved in violent extremist groups located in major Canadian urban centres. The amount of time that each participant spent in the right-wing extremist movement ranged from 4 to 22 years with an average of 13 years. Their roles in these mostly racist Skinhead groups ranged from presidents and sergeants to enforcers, musicians, and spokespersons. Roughly half of the participants, however, were deemed to be in the "upper echelon" of the Canadian movement; in other words, many were leaders in the particular group(s) that they were associated with. A small portion of the participants described themselves as violent extremists while most claimed to be part of violent extremist groups without being violent themselves. Most of these participants, however, identified as being "off the grid", meaning that they did not make it publicly known, either through media or public events, that they were previously part of an extremist movement. Similarly, the majority of these participants noted that they had never participated in a research study. It is worth noting that most of this information on our participants comes from their own words. It is therefore possible that this representation may differ from reality because of social desirability bias, or to avoid criminal justice procedures after all. However, our focus on "off the grid" formers is a way to avoid the delivery of pre-scripted streamlined narratives.

In terms of their upbringing and early life, most of the participants were born into middle or upper-middle-class families with married parents, grew up in urban/suburban areas, and had a diverse group of friends. Although they rarely had strong relationships with their families, most were not generally neglected or abused during childhood. However, the participants' accounts of their upbringing and early life differed in many respects. To illustrate, most of them felt different and/or disconnected from their family and peers. Additionally, a number of participants had experienced bullying, at times by people from another ethnic background. According to one of the interviewees, that might explain a subsequent desire to bully back:

> *I think about it now too. It's like, maybe that's why I got into bullying others, right. Or racism. Or behavior that, you know … and othering, you know, just all that kind of stuff. Because I experienced it, maybe I thought, well, shit I'm not going to be that guy getting bullied. I rather be the bully, right. (Participant 2)*

While half of the participants had no problem with the law before becoming involved in the movement, the other half had committed petty crimes and violence during adolescence. For most of them, their parents did not support their beliefs and noticed changes in their behavior and attitude. As the study participants reported, there were clear signs of their interest in RWE ideologies. For example, some became angrier and more aggressive, openly dropped racial slurs, became more anti-social and pulled away from family and friends. Obsessed by RWE literature, they began dressing as white power Skinheads, wearing white power patches and swastika signs including tattoos, and listening to white power music. They also claim that although their parents may not have understood their degree of involvement in violent extremist groups, the latter were aware they were heading down this path and did nothing to stop them.

Likewise, they were all introduced to different aspects of right-wing ideologies at a young age. For instance,

many were exposed to such ideologies through relatives or friends and only a few were directly recruited by people from the RWE movement. Not all of them really believed in the cause in the early stages of their involvement process, as they were sometimes more interested in the brotherhood and camaraderie aspects. As a result, most of them searched for like-minded people to surround themselves with, mostly offline but sometimes online following their exposure. Others saw the movement as a solution to the problems they had at the time, such as being bullied, feeling isolated, and performing poorly in school. According to the literature, "much of the research on Skinheads suggests that there is a large degree of variation in home-life characteristics of Skinheads,"[29] and it is still the case here as our participants followed very different paths. Nonetheless throughout these interviews, we were still able to uncover key patterns in the pathways they have taken since childhood and that led them to violent extremism, as other researchers have uncovered.[30]

Converging Entry Patterns

While participants' pathways into violent extremism were diverse, they shared similar influential drivers. Among these similarities, in what follows, we highlight their need for identity and belonging, as well as power and invincibility. The results of our analyses of the data reveal how participants' dedication to the cause becomes a major factor in their lives.

Similar Sources of Influence

The ten former violent RWEs that were interviewed mentioned several sources of influence that impacted their radicalization process. In an effort to learn about various extreme right belief systems, several participants in the study described how they spent countless hours watching war movies, television shows and documentaries about the Nazi regime, fascism, immigration, and races and culture, as well as countless hours reading extreme right-wing literature, either online or offline. Worth highlighting, though, was that their exposure to extreme right-wing material did not happen in isolation. Rather, "hanging out" and spending time with other RWEs allowed them to "discover" specialized hate material—especially material that was inaccessible prior to their involvement in the movement, such as mail-order books and magazines. As one participant explained:

> It just started slowly forming in my mind and then he had mail-order books and everything and he was always like, "Here, read this!" And everything was so well written and so intelligent, I could read a novel in an evening. I just burned through the book. (Participant 7)

Similarly, participants stressed the importance of spending time with like-minded peers, as doing so served as an influential source of approval, reinforcing and amplifying the radical viewpoints and belief systems expressed in the material they were reading. As one participant explained it:

> I was reading a lot … you know, and I'd get the magazines. I'd sit and devour them. I was hanging out with [a friend] and his friends sometimes. I was spending a lot of time with [other group members]. And, I mean, honestly there was a lot of, you know, just … armchair activism. You know, sitting in coffee shops and talking about how we want the world to change. (Participant 3)

Participants also expressed that, although they isolated themselves from their former social networks and families while on a pathway into violent extremism, they maintained tight-knit relationships with a small network of individuals who facilitated the development of their radical beliefs.[31]

It is worth highlighting that very few of the participants turned to the Internet to find peer support from other RWEs, and most participants in the study noted that the offline interactions were influential during their pathway into violent extremism.[32] However, those who used the Internet to access RWE materials or communicate with peers noted that the Internet was merely a facilitator, as has been found in other

research.[33] Participants, for example, noted that they used the Internet to connect and communicate with international affiliates and to share white power music, but most feared that their online activity was being monitored by law enforcement and anti-racist activists. As one participant in our study noted:

> *I did have a Stormfront account. It's just…I remember my recruiter had warned me not to post on it because apparently, they will trace your IP address and then come and get you. (Participant 6)*

As a result, many participants were fearful about maintaining online relationships during their pathway into violent extremism. After all, the extremist groups that most of these formers were associated with engaged in high levels of violence and criminality. Participants also noted that attending RWE events where they could interact with their peers, was among the most influential pull factor into violent extremism. Several participants noted that white power concerts in particular were not only a central component of the movement but an important catalyst for their own pathway into violent extremism. While several participants discussed attending organized talks in which influential figures from the RWE movement gave speeches about immigration for instance, the majority described how white power concerts and music were a way to further explore RWE views and feel like being a part of "the brotherhood," as has been found by other researchers.[34] One participant, for example, noted that:

> *Well, I mean, first of all, that's [music] a way to get your message across. Because instead of listening, a lot of people, especially young people, don't wanna listen to long-ass speeches […], they just want to listen to loud music. They wanna hear, you know, loud guitars and punk or metal or music they can mosh to and be angry to. And then hear messages that will be angled towards those ideas. (Participant 1)*

Being Pulled Towards Violent Extremism

For many of the study participants, it was clear that their identities were intricately linked to the Skinhead subculture or the group to which they belonged. For instance, participants oftentimes described how the collective identity of the group replaced their own identity and discussed how engaging in this type of movement gave them a sense of purpose. It gave them the feeling of being part of something that is bigger than themselves, and that they were doing something good for their society:

> *I felt … and, you know; again this is another point I feel deeply embarrassed about now, but I felt at that time that what I was doing was making the world a better place … that I was creating positive change for Canada. That I was doing something, not just for me, not just for my community, but for the country. That I was saving—that I was helping to save Canada. And … so, you know, it was completely warped from the truth of what [the group] was about and what I was about too. Like it was, you know, I was a very hateful person. But I really like kind of bought the thing that people say, "Well, you know, it's not about hate. It's about loving your own people." And I felt that I was making sacrifices and I was standing up for my beliefs in order to make Canada a better place. (Participant 3)*

Participants noted that the extremist groups with whom they associated consisted largely of hyper-masculine, violent individuals who were at constant odds with each other and jockeying for a leadership role in the movement. Yet, while participants often described the frequent infighting both within and between RWE groups, the consensus was that the groups served as "a second family," especially because most participants noted that they did not have strong relationships with their own families. In addition, participants frequently noted that the sense of belonging they felt in the violent extremist groups was enhanced because they felt like they shared common interests with group members. This "second family" narrative, according to a few participants, was often used to recruit new members. As one participant explained it:

> *[…] the main thing he [a recruiter] did was belonging. He promised me, "hey, if you come and hang out*

and I'll introduce you to these more guys." And I always wanted to belong to something….Because I had failed at sports. I had failed at joining gangs. I had failed at, you know, many different groups of friends too. So, it was like … yeah. He just had—he offered that, he offered that availability too—"hey, look at this group. All you need to do is be white." You know? (Participant 2)

In describing this collective identity, participants frequently discussed feelings of power—an emotion that many had not felt until they joined the violent extremist group. Being a member of a RWE group gave our interviewees a sense of belonging, protection, and as one participant put it, "invincibility." As two study participants further explained it:

I think that respect, the fear, the—all that stuff, that was a big part for me. You know, you're walking around, and people know you're—you know, you got a shaved head, the boots, the whatever. You may not be wearing your gang colors, but—You can still tell who's a Skinhead, right. So, you know, walk into a bar, you know, nine times out of ten you're not, you know, maybe you're not getting respect from the regular people, but people are afraid of you, right. (Participant 2)

But nothing … at all, could match the feeling of … intoxicating power and invincibility that I felt. (Participant 3)

This sense of power, which comes from commiserating with violent and/or criminal acolytes, has long been studied in gang environments and can also apply to other social movements.[35] For most of the participants in our study, the sense of belonging and subsequent brotherhood was the initial appeal to violent extremist groups while an adherence to a radical and extremist ideology came only after joining the movement. Radical ideologies serve as a tool to legitimize hate and violent behavior. However, once the process of radicalization had begun, adherence to the ideology occupied the most important place in the study participants' daily lives.

Being Committed to the Cause

When describing their pathway into violent extremism, participants commonly discussed being "all-in"; in other words, they would not be considered a formal group member unless they immersed themselves in the radical beliefs, proving to the others that they were completely part of the group and "the family." This required that they show their dedication to radical beliefs, in part out of fear that others might perceive them as "race traitors," as several participants explained, which other researchers have also found.[36] As we have said earlier, there is no single ideology behind right-wing extremism, but for these Skinheads and their associates, the main concern was the rise of a white marginalization phenomenon in Canada and engaging in a "RAHOWA" (RAcial HOly WAr) was the preferred solution. They saw themselves as victims to the point of comparing themselves to refugees who have lost their property, family members, and had to leave their country of origin:

I can't believe that I thought these people had it better than me. Like a Syrian refugee has it better than me. Really? So—But that's how they'll—that the mind-set you have to live in when you're in that movement. You have to live like everything's been taken away from you. Which, in all fairness, is delusional. (Participant 2)

For them, immigration in Canada is problematic because they foresee "whites" becoming a minority, losing control of the country and eventually being expelled from it. It is a problem that, in their opinion, the Canadian public is not sufficiently aware of. To this end, the distribution of flyers and online activism act as a means to raise awareness among the general public. As these RWE groups consider that a race war is imminent, the use of violence becomes a necessity. However, the degree of violence varies, as detailed by one of the study participants:

There's always going to be violence in the far-right extremist movement. But the level of violence is really dependent on individuals and which types of groups you're dealing with. You mentioned [a specific hate group] earlier, right. They are significantly known around the far right to be one of the most—if not the most, violent white power Skinhead group. And they're feared. Even by far-right guys. So, it's, you know, yeah … for them it's not about … I think that group it's not about belonging. That group is about, you know, maybe not race war, but definitely violent acts that support white supremacy. (Participant 2)

As we have also pointed out, most of them saw themselves as soldiers, warriors and saviors of the "white race." Violence, in this context, was aimed at protecting the "white race" they perceive as marginalized and persecuted. Members of the groups must be able to rationalize the use of violence in the name of a cause or the belief in a forthcoming race war. In relation to our interviewees, about half of them were already familiar with crimes and violence prior to joining a violent RWE group, but the other half had to accept it throughout their radicalization process:

I think once you kinda jump right in, and you're immersed in it, you don't know any better, and you just kind of ... you just like … I wouldn't say the violence was like an everyday thing, but it was definitely a part of the culture ... and the more you're in it, the more you just accept it. That's just ... that's just the norm. (Participant 1)

Violence, hatred and anger were an integral element of these RWE groups, and its members managed to rationalize these behaviors through different mechanisms. Several participants referred to the normalization of the violent ideology following repeated exposure, [37] as well as how they frequently blamed others for their acts:

I thought it was fully justified. Because apparently everybody else was a threat to us. Therefore, we needed to respond like that. (Participant 6)

Our analyses show that the participants were uniformly committed to the battle to save their white race and had bought into the ideology with a certainty that created an ironclad rationale:

It's just saturating yourself in ideology where, you know, you're so ... you're so certain that you're right. That everything else is wrong. You don't, you won't look at opposing opinions and if you look at them, you'll shoot them down, you say, "Well, no, that's wrong." […] You know, and that [the immersion] could be, that can take many forms. You know, whether it's losing your job, or choosing where you live, always looking at the people you surround yourself. The types of things and activities that you do. And it becomes more and more ... for me, it just became more and more about the movement ideology. I never really cared about anything else. I didn't care about anybody else. Because like, this is what's important. It's bigger than me. That you know, I didn't want to do sports. I didn't wanna do, you know, things that didn't involve the movement. (Participant 1)

As illustrated above, the RWE movement became a complete obsession affecting virtually every aspect of the participants' lives. Among other things, involvement in the movement had an impact on their profession, social network, recreational activities and, of course, their values and political considerations. Yet, despite all of this, they were able to make their way out of it, and although they were fully immersed in the ideology, about half of them had, at one time or another, questioned their beliefs, as well as the relevance of their engagement to the group. The forthcoming section details the reasons behind those second thoughts and the fact that they eventually changed their belief system, attitudes and behaviors.

Converging Exit Patterns

Even though study participants experienced unique pathways out of violent extremism, we were able to identify some converging patterns. We note that fatigue and exhaustion of hatred appear over time, and that participants rely on developing normative social interactions such as building relationships with family and friends. Participants also perceived that leaving RWE groups was not an easy task; the violent and criminal nature of these groups creates additional layers of barriers to disengagement, such as greater in-group social pressure and retaliatory violence against defectors.[38] Once having successfully left, most of the study participants noted that they felt remorse and suggested that pro-social engagement helped them in many ways.

Exhaustion of Hatred, Aging Out, and Family Building

Among the common patterns between the former violent RWEs we interviewed, there was a general feeling of exhaustion towards hate, anger and negativity. Many of them told us that once their lifestyle changed, they really understood how hate could be heavy to bear and mentally draining. In other words, they were simply tired of hating, or as one study participant put it:

> *I just got tired of it. Got tired of the negativity. Got tired of the … bullshit. I went back to school to do another degree. Started meeting other people. Realizing, you know, I was limiting myself with the people that I know… Just basically said that enough is enough.[…] it's just a very negative movement. It's just constant pissing and moaning about how shit people's lives are. How crappy the world is and, you know … how crappy the world is perceived for white people and you know … just it's a very negative, it's very narrow … narrow-minded … just got tired of that.[…] Just tired of the stupid idiots, tired of the ideology … tired of uneducated morons, tired of people with mental health issues. Tired of … the constant drinking, the infighting between the groups. Just tired of … just, you know after two decades or so, just tired of everything in general … just a bunch of people going nowhere … talking in circles. (Participant 5)*

As one can see from this last quote, after spending some time in the movement, participants grew out of their commitment and began to feel uninspired by it. If one of the push factors that may have led most of them towards violent extremism was feeling isolated and disconnected from their entourage, the above quote shows that similar feelings can also be symptomatic of a pathway out of violent extremism. In the same vein, study participants began to focus on life events of a pro-social and normative variety, including meeting a life partner and the birth of children. These well documented and researched turning points in life influenced many of the study participants to reconsider their commitment to violence.[39] As one participant explained it:

> *Namely … the birth of my first child and wife continually just telling me, "what are you doing? You're going to end up dead. You're going to end up in prison. These people are a joke. These people are—don't even believe in this shit," you know. But, you know, the big part here for me was my daughter, right. Like … how could I teach her to hate those other people ... because of their race, or their religion, or their whatever, right. Like I couldn't. And also, the danger that would put my family in, right. It was one thing to be a single guy and be in this, 'cause I'm only putting me at risk. But, putting my own children at risk just because of, you know, I feel like I want to be in … a cool group of guys. That's kind of stupid, isn't it? (Participant 2)*

Thus, these participants reached a point where they became disillusioned by either the group or the ideology to which they had subscribed; many of them had second thoughts long before they opted to change their lives and leave the group. It is worth noting that a quick intervention is key, since, as is well known in the literature, the deeper the deviant engagement, the more difficult it is to leave such movements.[40]

Identity (Re-) Building

Another point of convergence in the study of participants' pathways out of violent RWE groups relates to the many challenges they faced when leaving their respective groups and abandoning their respective ideological affiliations. Tony McAleer, former white supremacist and co-founder of 'Life After Hate,' [41] calls one of the most important of these challenges the "void." [42] More specifically, this expression refers to the moment when a disengaging extremist finds himself devoid of a social circle on which to rely. Based on what we have seen from their pathways into violent extremism, study participants were indoctrinated into ideologies of violence that were reinforced by the social networks afforded to them by the RWE groups. In the process, they abandoned their old friends and sometimes their families. When these extremists chose to leave their respective groups, they acknowledged that after severing ties with the social network of RWEs, they found themselves isolated until they managed to rebuild a new group of peers. During the time that the majority of the study participants left extremism, EXIT or deradicalization/disengagement programs were essentially non-existent in Canada. And for those who recently left extremism, they noted that they were not approached by such programs. Therefore, they built their new social networks by themselves or they reconnected with their former peer groups they had prior to joining these movements.

According to study participants, this period of isolation involved two specific challenges. First, as is the case with drugs or alcohol addicts, they feared that maintaining a relationship with RWEs might cause them to be drawn back into the movement. This particular observation confirms what Simi and his colleagues proposed, namely that "the addictive qualities of [white supremacist] identity has substantial theoretical implications. Identities may be constructed and performed through situational occasions, but when these situations are routinized, insular, and involve extreme hatred, the persistence of these identities may be much greater than previously thought." [43] As one participant noted:

> No, it's like a junkie. You don't want to go hang out in a heroin den after you get yourself straight. I can't hang out with these guys. How can I hang out with these guys, when I can't take anything that they say seriously? How can I hang out with them when they're so close-minded and so closed off? I don't want to hear those ideas anymore. I don't want that in my life, around my life. (Participant 7)

Secondly, the groups in which most study participants were involved did not tolerate defectors. Fearing retaliation from their former RWE group members—aimed either at themselves or their families— interviewees withdrew quietly and inconspicuously:

> I didn't want to make a big scene. I was worried about having a big incident. So, I just kind of wanted to just kind of fade out, as opposed to being like, "Am I leaving! You know, this is over." I didn't want to do that, I just wanted to kind of like disappear. (Participant 1)

> After I left I was … you know, not—because I didn't—have an opportunity to testify or do anything of the nature that would give me, you know, access to witness protection or anything like that, I really had no option but to return to my parents' house. And all the Nazis knew that address. There was another Skinhead living in full view of my parents' house who could track my comings and goings as well as theirs. And there were certainly some instances of intimidation that occurred that, you know, I was worried. And in fact, I've been more worried in recent years where I've been harassed by somebody who was a [group] member and they doxed my parents. My elderly, frail, sick parents got fucking doxed. And I was really scared that something was going to happen to them. And I'm really grateful that nothing did, and they don't live at that address anymore but… (Participant 3)

In order to facilitate their disengagement process, as well as to evade possible retaliation, many of these participants decided to move to other cities. Isolating themselves was a catalyst for personal change,

especially as they began adopting new lives based on pro-social values.

For many of the study participants, rebuilding their identity to reflect normative societal standards was and continues to remain a key challenge. They had to reframe themselves as non-hateful and build a new social network. In fact, the importance of their commitment to the RWE movement and the prescriptive ideological framework imposed within, often leaves extremists directionless when they choose to exit:

> *Like by the time I left, everything—like my entire world was seen through a racist lens. And it was … to the point that when left, I didn't know what I wanted to wear. I didn't know what box of cereal I wanted to eat. I didn't know what to watch on television. You know, everything was viewed in this … you know, in this very conscripted, limited way. (Participant 3)*

The development of a new identity may lead to full-family involvement, finding a new job, becoming re-engaged in pre-movement activities or hobbies, or reconnecting with previous social circles. Throughout this process, they usually start to socialize or even make friends with people from different backgrounds and nationalities. According to some of them, these new relationships have allowed them to develop a greater openness, as well as a non-discriminatory outlook towards human relationships:

> *But the process was just kind of like, getting away from that, it took a long time. And I think, working where I work, with so many different types of people, from like all over the world, has totally changed my view on everything. 'Cause I made some good friends who were from like, everywhere. Like one of my good friends now, she's from Trinidad. And she's like the best. She's like such a good friend. And it's just, you look past everything you did, and you just see the person. And it took, I don't know. I don't know how long it took, but it took years to get out of that mindset, like totally. (Participant 1)*

Employment opportunities are considered a positive factor for the reintegration of former extremists. However, as Laub and Sampson suggest, the pro-social influence does not necessarily result from being employed, but rather from the multiple social dynamics afforded therein.[44] Study participants' narratives highlight the distinction between deradicalization and disengagement. As evidenced from the quote above, leaving a peer group with a bad influence may happen quickly, but the change in beliefs and attitudes is more gradual. It is for this reason that we believe that those who wish to leave this kind of trajectory require constant help adapted to their needs to cope with isolation and reconstruction. A preventive strategy in this regard aims to build on the experience of former extremists, and it turns out that this practice can also be beneficial for them in expressing remorse for their actions. In the next section, we will see how some of the study participants experienced this event.

Remorse, Regrets and Giving Back

Study participants' narratives revealed that while in the movement, many had second thoughts about having joined a RWE group. At the end of their engagement in violent extremism, some began to feel greater remorse for what they had done to innocent people in the past:

> *And … yeah I just—I took a long time and carried, and still carry, so much guilt that it—My self-esteem took a tremendous hit and I felt like… I felt like I was the worst person for a long time. And I ended up self-sabotaging a lot of things, especially employment that I—employment opportunities that I had that, you know, that I felt, you know, I didn't deserve this break. (Participant 3)*

They became aware of the extent of the physical and psychological damage they caused. While they acknowledge their inability to change the past, they focus on adopting pro-social behaviors and consider how they perceive others in society. For some, giving back to society is a significant way to address their feelings of guilt. This can take many forms such as volunteering with stigmatized and victimized communities,

involvement in various prevention programs and assistance to security and police forces in countering violent extremism. By helping the victims of extremism, as well as extremists looking for a way out, they hope to discourage this phenomenon in the years to come:

> *You know what, I carried a lot of shame for quite a number of years there. But now that I'm volunteering with [a helping program], as shameful as some of the experience is I think it was a fair trade-off because now I'm able to give you guys all these insights which will hopefully help in the future. (Participant 6)*

The involvement of former extremists in helping others to disengage generates a circular pattern of prevention. In fact, several reported having been influenced by other former extremists' testimonies to share their experiences to dissuade others from going down the same path, or to motivate some to disengage. As they were heavily committed to the cause in their pathways, they later invest their time in fighting the movement they were in. Again, their engagement affords them a sense of purpose and the feeling of being part of something that is bigger than themselves.

Concluding Remarks

This study intended, among other things, to fill an empirical gap in the current literature on right-wing extremism by looking at in-depth life-course interviews of former extremists to uncover similar themes within their trajectories in and out of violent RWE groups. Based on the testimonies of ten Canadian former RWEs, we were able to underline some converging patterns and similarities between these two processes. Among other things, we saw that their journey towards violent extremism was a central part of their lives, and that it was the result of multiple sources of influence and a mix of identity, belonging and status needs. With respect to the pathways out, it appeared to us that aging out, fatigue and social relationships could lead to group disengagement. However, engaging in this process often involves an important period of isolation, coupled with fears, remorse, regrets and rebuilding of identity. These findings also highlight the importance of similarities between these converging patterns. Together with other aspects, we noted similar push and pull factors among study participants, such as the need for purpose or identity. In addition, feeling isolated and disconnected from peers seems to have led to a change of trajectory in both cases. Finally, we have found that identity rebuilding processes and major changes in peer networks also coincide with pathways in and out of violent extremism.

Overall, it is interesting to see that we can link some of the findings of this study to a multitude of other studies on the subject. As we have seen from the participants' upbringing and early lives, our sample was very heterogeneous. In contrast to Laub and Sampson, we could not consider our sample as having shared beginnings, but they definitely had divergent lives before and after their involvement in violent extremism. However, we found converging patterns in their pathways in and out of violent extremism, which we consider to be crucial aspects to consider in the development of prevention strategies. For example, we found that their journey towards violent extremism was not isolated. Although the study participants were all part of violent RWE groups, other people influenced their radicalization process before joining any group. In fact, they were exposed to the ideology by somebody else, and then sought to solidify their beliefs. The study participants' testimonies also showed the crucial relevance of pull factors. As Simi, Sporer and Bubolz have found, despite the ideological immersion in which extremists find themselves, their initial attraction seems to have been motivated more by non-ideological factors.[45] As such, other researchers have also noted that listening to white power music such as Nazi punk rock, or other genres like nationalist socialist black metal, combined with group dynamics, contributed to their ideological acceptance process.[46] Moreover, the converging patterns we outlined in the pathways out of violent extremism completely support Barrelle's "Pro-integration" model. Study participants emphasized the relevance of considering isolation and the rebuilding of identity that characterizes leaving extremism, the exhaustion and disillusionment that facilitate behavioral

and belief system changes, and the benefits of social support and pro-social behavior.

If there is no single trajectory towards violent extremism, there is probably no single strategy to counter it.[47] Nonetheless, we can draw from the current study to suggest that some prevention strategies may have significant potential. First, our study showed that extremists occasionally have second thoughts, even during their involvement in a violent extremist group. During that period of their life, they may be disillusioned by their group or ideology for different reasons, or simply be pondering their future. Considering that some of the study participants told us that having a trustworthy person with whom to openly talk could have deterred them from going down that path or motivate them to leave once involved, it is of utmost importance to educate people about right-wing extremism and offer the necessary resources to help violent extremists return to a pro-social path. For instance, this can be achieved through various EXIT programs, or by the simple intervention of former extremists asking open-ended questions.[48] As many of the study participants carry the burden of their past, their involvement in prevention strategies might help them to mitigate their remorse by giving back to society. In addition to the formers, the involvement of family members also appears very important to us. As we have seen, parents or relatives of the study participants were almost all aware that they were headed down that path, but they failed to act. We believe that this is more of a matter of education than parental negligence or bad faith. Indeed, engaging in discussions with youth or young adults on sensitive issues such as violent right-wing extremism is not easy, and we believe that more research and awareness campaigns should be dedicated to this subject.

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