

# PATHWAYS OUT OF HATE GROUPS: TRENDS IN THE EMPIRICAL LITERATURE AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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# GENERAL BACKGROUND

- Among the most pressing issues facing those in the field of criminal justice is the rise in hate-motivated violence and incidents
  - *According to the most recent report on hate crime statistics released by the FBI, there was a 12% increase in reported incidents in 2021 compared to the previous year (FBI, 2023) – a number that **underestimates** of the scale and scope of the problem*

# GENERAL BACKGROUND

- To shed light on the factors that contribute to the rise in hate-motivated violence and hate groups, much of the research has focused on individuals' **pathways into** extremist hate
  - *Yet relatively little attention has been paid to motivations for leaving, in part because of the challenges associated with gaining access to individuals, paired with the difficulty of defining and measuring levels of “success” in leaving, among other things*

# GENERAL BACKGROUND

- It has only been in the last decade that researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have begun to turn their attention to how, why, and when **individuals leave** extremist hate groups
  - *Notably, much of the empirical research has incorporated the perspectives of **former extremists**, as they have first-hand experience with and knowledge into such pressing issues in hate and extremism studies*

# PRESENTATION OVERVIEW

- This presentation will explore the **empirical research** that draws from the insights of former extremists to understand pathways out of hate groups

# **PRESENTATION OVERVIEW**

1. Define key concepts oftentimes discussed when leaving hate groups
2. Synthesize the empirical literature on pathways out of hate groups
3. Offer suggestions for progressing research on pathways out of hate groups



# CONCEPTS

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- **Deradicalization:** the process by which an individual is diverted from an extremist ideology, eventually rejecting an extremist ideology and in turn moderating their beliefs (i.e., the ideology)
- **Disengagement:** the process by which an individual decides to leave their associated extremist group or movement to reintegrate into society (i.e., the action)



**WHAT'S A  
FORMER  
EXTREMIST?**

# CONCEPTS

- **Former extremists:** they are individuals who, at one time in their lives, subscribed to and/or perpetuated violence in the name of a particular extremist ideology and have since publicly and/or privately denounced violence in the name of a particular extremist ideology



# **EMPIRICAL LITERATURE**

# BACKGROUND ON FORMERS

- Formers have played an increasingly important role in **informing** empirical research on hate and extremism-related issues
  - *Over the past 15+ years, it has become common for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in the Western world to draw from the perspectives of former to generate knowledge on and respond to the prevalence and contours of extremist hate groups and movements*

# **BACKGROUND ON FORMERS**

- Here formers have been involved in **various roles** such as consultants, peer mentors, interventionists, peace makers, and participants in research
  - *Some have raised serious concerns about formers working in this space, ranging from questions about their credibility and whether their inclusion could raise red flags in the public sphere*
  - *Others have argued that formers can provide valuable, pragmatic insight into key issues faced by hate crime and extremism scholars*

# **BACKGROUND ON FORMERS**

- It should come as little surprise, then, that researchers have drawn from the perspectives of formers to better understand key questions surrounding:
  1. *Processes of joining extremist hate movements*
  2. *Processes of leaving extremist hate movements*
  3. *Both pathways in and out of extremist hate*
  4. *Experiences of women in hate groups*
  5. *The role of the Internet in facilitating hate groups*
  6. *Prevented and countered hate groups*

# FORMERS ON LEAVING

- But for empirical studies that have interviewed formers about their **pathways out** of hate groups, they tend to focus on processes of disengagement *or* deradicalization but not specifically on the interactions between both

# FORMERS ON LEAVING

- **Disengagement research** in this regard has generally highlighted the various complex pathways of leaving extremist hate groups that were linked the exhaustion of hating and disillusionment, aging out, and identity reformation
- **Deradicalization research** has found that family support and a shift in social identity play important roles in an individual's process of deradicalization



# FORMERS ON LEAVING

- Nonetheless, focusing on disengagement or deradicalization in isolation from one another is an important oversight because it assumes both processes occur in a **vacuum**
  - *In response, scholars have urged others to examine how processes of disengagement and deradicalization interact to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities associated with leaving hate groups*

# FORMERS ON LEAVING

- A search using dedicated academic research databases produced just nine studies that interviewed or drew from the accounts of formers with an emphasis on the relationship between processes of disengagement and deradicalization:
  - **Studies:** Altier et al., 2017; Barelle, 2015; Brown et al., 2021; Bubolz and Simi, 2015; Gaudette et al., 2022; Horgan et al., 2017; Mattssona and Johansson, 2019; Sieckelinck et al., 2019; Simi et al., 2017

# FORMERS ON LEAVING

- **Bubolz and Simi (2015)** conducted life history interviews with U.S. former RWEs and found that processes of disengagement and deradicalization were multifaceted and influenced by a variety of factors
  - This included, but was not limited to, a self-reflection process which stemmed from “hitting rock bottom” and/or from contact with law enforcement and subsequent incarceration
    - *This is where participants developed a growing awareness of, and critical perspective on, the ideologies driving the hate group*

# FORMERS ON LEAVING

- **Brown et al. (2021)** interviewed U.S. former RWEs, their families and friends and similarly found a wide variety of journeys out of hate groups, but with the most common factors being disillusionment and burnout – i.e., feelings of disappointment by the hypocrisy and negative behavior of those in a hate group
  - *Research similarly suggests that leaning on family and friends outside of the hate group for support is helpful during the early stages of the disengagement process*
  - *Research also suggests that restructuring identities grounded in positive and meaningful activities and influences is helpful when leaving – i.e., ‘proactive self-development’*

# FORMERS ON LEAVING

- **Horgan et al. (2017)** conducted an in-depth interview with a U.S. former RWE and similarly found that multiple push and pull interactions shaped disengagement and deradicalization decisions, including:
  1. *Time in prison to provide physical separation from a hate movement to self-reflect*
  2. *Adopting new social roles and a sense of identity beyond the movement*

# FORMERS ON LEAVING

- **Altier et al. (2017)** drew from autobiographical accounts to examine disengagement and found that certain push factors (i.e., disillusionment with movement and burnout) were more likely to drive disengagement decisions than deradicalization
  - *Importantly, the authors further pointed out that, while deradicalization may be an important factor for why some leave hate groups, it's not the most prevalent cause nor a prerequisite for leaving; **rather, disillusionment with the movement and burnout are more likely to drive disengagement decisions than deradicalization***

# FORMERS ON LEAVING

- Interestingly, **Simi et al. (2017)** examined challenges associated with leaving RWE via life-history interviews with formers and found that individuals experienced several residual effects that were described as a form of addiction
  - *These residual effects were found to intrude on cognitive processes as well as involve long-term effects on emotional and physiological levels and, in some cases, involved complete relapse into extremist behavior*

# FORMERS ON LEAVING

- **Gaudette and colleagues (2022)** interviewed Canadian former RWEs on their pathways out of violent extremism, among other things
  - *The authors similarly found that, not only were processes of disengagement and deradicalization multifaceted and multidimensional in nature, but extremist beliefs also tended to persist beyond disengagement from violent extremism*



# FORMERS ON LEAVING

- Together, this empirical research conceptualizes leaving hate groups as a **process** impacted by several key events (not a single moment):
  - *Various complex factors influence decisions to leave, much of which is facilitated, at least in part, through self-reflection after “hitting rock bottom”*
  - *Through self-reflection, expectations associated with being part of a group (i.e., family, loyalty, and unity) are less genuine than expected, which is influential*
  - *Further, the combination of burnout, encouragement from spouses or significant others, and positive individuals outside the movement influences decisions*

**SO, WHERE DO  
WE GO FROM  
HERE THEN?**

# PROGRESSING RESEARCH

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- Despite the foundational studies on why and how individuals leave extremist hate groups, several important research questions have yet to be explored in depth – questions that may inform policy and aid practitioners in combating hate and extremist violence:
  1. *An individual's organizational role in influencing their disengagement*
  2. *Lingering extremist views in influencing relapse into extremist behavior*
  3. *Disengagement across hate movements and ideological groups generally*

# (1) ROLES AND LEAVING

- Little attention has been paid to how an individual's organizational role influences their disengagement
  - In response, **Altier et al.** (2022) examined autobiographies and interviews with formers (i.e., nationalists, RWEs, and Islamists) from the U.S., CAN and the U.K. to examine how their role influenced their probability of or reasons for leaving

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  - ***Findings:*** specific roles (i.e., leadership and violent roles) resulted in fewer alternatives for making exit likely

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  - ***Findings:*** on the other hand, both role conflict (i.e., discrepancy between abilities and assigned roles) and role strain (i.e., conflicting roles within or outside of group), as well as those in support roles, were more likely to disengage

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  - ***Findings:*** also uncovered was an association between certain roles and the experience of different push/pull factors for disengagement (e.g., violent operators more likely to experience burnout and physiological distress)



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  - ***Implications:*** more nuanced understanding of the association between group roles and disengagement is needed to inform policies for responding to extremist hate – esp. interventions tailored to individuals' motivations & circumstances

## (2) LINGERING VIEWS & RELAPSE

- Research on the general difficulties of leaving and the extent to which lingering extremist views influence relapse into extremist behavior is underdeveloped, but some work exists:
  - *Relying on life-history interviews with former U.S. RWEs, **Bubolz and Simi** (2015) identified numerous difficulties associated with disengagement, such as negative emotionality (e.g., guilt), ideological relapse, and maintaining social ties with current extremist members*
  - ***Gaudette et al.** (2022) interviewed former Canadian RWEs and similarly highlight the challenges of leaving extremism wherein participants claimed to have disengaged from violent extremism but most still maintained radical beliefs*

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  - Comparably, **Simi et al. (2017)** examined challenges associated with disengagement via interviews with former U.S. RWEs and found that they experienced several residual effects described as a form of addiction
  - ***Implications:*** researchers should examine differences between individual trajectories of disengagement involving substantial residual compared to those who do not, as well as situational dynamics related to specific episodes of residual, and the neurocognitive qualities of identity residual, among other things

## (3) ACROSS MOVEMENTS

- More comparative research is needed to understand the process of disengagement across hate movements and ideological groups generally – only small number of studies have addressed this research question:
  - **Brown et al.** (2021) interviewed U.S. former RWEs and Islamists to examine, among other things, pathways out of violent extremism and found disillusionment and burnout were the most cited reasons for leaving

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  - **Windisch et al. (2019)** interviewed former LWEs and RWEs to compare disengagement processes and found several important similarities and differences:
    - ***Similarities:*** both groups discussed feelings of distrust that stemmed from a lack of integrity and benevolence among leaders and fellow members

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  - **Windisch et al. (2019)** interviewed former LWEs and RWEs to compare disengagement processes and found several important similarities and differences:
    - ***Differences:*** while LWEs discussed distrust stemming from a lack of support following victimization from external entities, RWEs discussed internal violence between members as contributing to perceptions of distrust



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  - **Windisch et al. (2019)** interviewed former LWEs and RWEs to compare disengagement processes and found several important similarities and differences:
    - ***Implications:*** organizational dynamics of each group are indeed different, which in turn impacts disengagement processes – thus, more cross-case comparisons are needed between different ideological groups to expand empirical observations and strengthen theoretical conclusions regarding disengagement processes

# CONCLUSION

- This presentation has shed light on the valuable insights that formers extremists have been able to offer on pathways out of hate groups
  - *While we've described key research in this evolving space, much of this work remains in its infancy and requires further investigation*
- Our hope is that we've sparked interest among those working in the field to consider including formers into their research designs
  - *Doing so may provide them with a unique insider's perspective into an array of pressing issues in hate studies that may not be addressed without the insights of formers*

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