

How Racial Violence Is Provoked and Channeled

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U.S. White Supremacism

Organized white supremacy in the contemporary U.S. is a complex social movement composed of a variety of racist and anti-Semitic groups and unaffiliated activists with a common belief in white racial superiority and a desire to preserve white racial privileges (Futrell, Simi, and Tan Forthcoming). Unlike in much of Europe, the far-right in the U.S. rarely has electoral aspirations or connections to political parties. (Donald Trump's 2016 support from racists in the "alt-right" is an exception). Over the last several decades, the spread of the pseudo-religious doctrine known as "Christian Identity" has furthered legitimized violence in the racist

movement by depicting nonwhites as less human than whites and Jews as literal descendants of the devil (Barkun 1997).

One type of racist group is the iconic Ku Klux Klan whose multiple and often-contending leaders claim to carry the heritage of earlier waves of the Klan that violently resisted the dismantling of southern slave states in the 19th century and racial integration in the 20th century. Today's Klans maintain the virulent hatred of blacks and Jews that was characteristic of earlier Klans but its hatred is also directed at sexual minorities and those who trace their ancestry to the nations of Central and South America and Asia. Modern Klan chapters are mostly small and fairly inactive except for occasional publicity-seeking rallies, although some Klan chapters have been implicated in violent terror plots (Blee 1991, 2002, Chalmers 1981, Cunningham 2013).

A second and more active group of white supremacists are neo-Nazis who regard Jews as a central enemy along with other racial, religious, and sexual minorities and are highly focused on violence (Ezekiel 1996; Simi and Futrell 2010). Neo-Nazis often endorse genocidal and catastrophic violence, ranging from the effort to exterminate European Jewry during World War II to the 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City.

Over the past few decades, the U.S. racist movement has become fragmented and more decentralized. To some extent, this reflects the deliberate effort of racist leaders to thwart federal government surveillance and prosecution by moving away from easily-detected networks of racist groups and leaders. Instead, many have adopted "leaderless resistance" in which white supremacist activities and violence emerge from the relatively uncoordinated efforts of individual racists acting on behalf of a common racial goal. The changing structure of the racist movement also reflects the advance of digital media which has prompted the rise of "lone wolves" racists who commit racial violence in the name of a movement to which they are connected primarily through websites and social media (Southern Poverty Law Center 2009).

Conceptualizing Racism and Racist Violence

Philomena Essed (1991) defined *everyday racism* as the commonplace and institutionalized practices and acts of discrimination, disrespect, and

minor aggressions in racialized societies. We extend Essed's conceptual work to define *extraordinary racism*, in contrast to everyday racism, as the extreme commitment to rigid racial hierarchies that is found in modern U.S. racist movements. Further, we extend the distinction between the everyday and the extraordinary to define *everyday racist violence* as the common practices and acts of violence that bolster racial privileges, in contrast to *extraordinary racist violence* which is engendered by a racist movement's organized, explicit agendas of white Aryan superiority.

In this essay, we explore the complicated relationships among racism and racial violence, particularly the mutually reinforcing nature of extraordinary racism and extraordinary racist violence. Our work is informed by a considerable scholarship on race and violence, especially research that identifies the complex and often surprising causal connections among identity, group formation, intergroup conflict, violence, and racist belief and ideology (Blee 2017b, Crenshaw 2010, Fujii 2009, Goodwin 2011, Mann 2005, Simi 2006, Wieviorka 2009). Much significant research on race and violence has focused on macro-level factors, such as economic and social structures, cultural understandings, and national politics. We take a different direction by exploring the micro- and meso-level dynamics of race and violence. In particular, we ask how racist ideologies and violent practices are provoked and channeled through individual experiences, motivations, and actions as well as through organized group efforts.

Three concerns motivate this essay. One is the causal order of racism and racial violence. Do people act violently to express their antipathy toward racial others, or might participating in aggressive racial attacks produce animus toward the victims? A second is the extent to which violence is central or incidental to racist movements; that is, does extraordinary racism need violence to sustain its momentum and motivate its adherents? The third is the forms that extraordinary racial violence takes in modern racist movements. Is all organized racial violence essentially similar, or does extraordinary racial violence have varying stimuli and expressions?

White Supremacist Life Histories

Our essay draws on an unusually large set of interviews conducted by Blee, DeMichele, and Simi with 47 men and women who had been active in U.S.

white supremacist groups and subsequently left these groups although not necessarily abandoned their racist beliefs. Indeed, a few indicated the desire to rejoin organized white supremacy if they had the opportunity.

The people we interviewed were identified through various sources, including contacts from our partner organization Life After Hate, a group of former white supremacists who assist current members who want to leave racist groups. Each interview lasted between six and eight hours with extensive probing of the person's attraction to, participation in, and decision to leave organized racism. We also gathered information on the interviewee's history of deviant and criminal behavior, substance abuse, mental and physical health, family background, and educational and occupational history. Most of the interviews were conducted as semi-structured conversations that produced highly detailed narrative accounts of each interviewee's experiences and motivations.

Our analysis of these interviews was guided by the desire to identify multiple processes of causation. We searched the life history narratives to identify trajectories and turning points by which they came to racism and racist violence. Traditionally, causal analysis looks at how earlier conditions shape later conditions, as, for example, being raised with strong racial beliefs might increase the likelihood of someone later committing acts of racist violence. In contrast, our more processual approach looks at the twists and turns of causality over a person's life, such as how initial racist socialization might be overcome by subsequent interactions with minorities but revived by an experience in prison. We take up Randall Collins' (2008: 34, see also Wieviorka 1993) challenge to understand "the key stumbling blocks and turning points" in trajectories toward and away from racism and racial violence.

Moreover, traditional causal analysis treats factors such as economic precarity or alienation from mainstream politics as static conditions that affect whether a person will become racist or violent. In contrast, our processual analysis considers such factors to be dynamic and varying over time. This allows us to identify the snowballing nature of racial extremism, as, for instance, how participating in a racist group increases members' economic precarity and political alienation, or how an initial act of racial violence can trigger deeper engagement in racist ideologies, and in turn, motivate further violence.

Our analysis of interview narratives is also interpretive. Our goal was to understand not only what former white supremacists believed or did, but also how they envisioned the possibilities for how they might believe or act. An interpretive analysis is thus attuned to the agentic nature of racist extremism, an important point for attention as few people ever adopt its beliefs or participate in its violence even when presented with the opportunity to do so. Understanding extraordinary racism and violence as interpretive phenomena is key to grasping how these can become imaginable and compelling options for those who become involved in white supremacism.

In the following sections, we first discuss two forms of violence in modern organized white supremacism, and then turn to the trajectories that lead people into such violence.¹ Next, we draw out the implications of our interviews with former racist activists for understanding the relationship between extraordinary racist beliefs and racist violence.

Extraordinary Racial Violence.

The violence of organized racism takes two forms, strategic violence and narrative violence (Blee 2005).² Strategic violence is planned violence, typically developed in a small set of racist leaders or a cell of racist activists or by “lone wolf” racists. It is focused on a specific target and directed by a racial agenda. It is a means toward a racial end, as in the “cool technical violence” of terrorism (Collins 2008: 451, see also Crenshaw 2010). Modern U.S. racist movements engage in strategic violence when they make bombs or poison to destroy their enemies or create catastrophic economic or social chaos or collapse what they refer to as the national U.S. “Zionist Occupation Government” (ZOG). Strategic violence also includes more minor acts designed to

1. We preserve the confidentiality of our interviewees by deleting names and identifying information. When quoting from transcripts, we remove incidental words such as “you know” to improve readability.

2. Michel Wieviorka (2009) warns that distinguishing forms of violence can underemphasize the pathological elements of violence as a means to an end, as well as overemphasize the pathological nature of violence as cultural or emotional expression. To avoid this problem, we focus on the changing meanings attached to violence rather than its abstract forms.

inflict terror and a sense of vulnerability among its enemies, as well as to trigger racial conflicts or a race war in which whites will emerge victorious and more powerful. These include street assaults, erecting Ku Klux Klan crosses, scrawling swastika graffiti, and damage to government or minority-owned properties. One former white supremacist interviewed in the mid-1980s (Blee 2002: 6) described her preparations for strategic violence:

You need to prepare yourself for war constantly—don't speak if you can't defend yourself in every way. Prepare by knowing—then work on guns and ammo, food and water supply, first aid kits, medication, clothing, blankets.

Narrative violence builds solidarity among racist activists and communicates a message of group empowerment and racial identity. In contrast to strategic violence, narrative violence is not part of a larger strategy for white advancement, but is rather a form of group bonding and a stimulus to white collective identity.³ And its targets can be quite varied. It can be directed at racial, religious, or sexual minority persons; an example is the custom that reserves wearing red bootlaces for those who have committed violence for the skinhead movement (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.). It can be directed at whites who do not support an agenda of white superiority and are thus, in the terms of racist activists, “white race traitors.” And it can be targeted at vulnerable populations of whites; an example is the vicious assaults and murders of homeless persons attributed to white supremacists (Anti-Defamation League 2007, Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.). One former white supremacist we interviewed recalled being in a massive physical fight with both whites and nonwhites that involved:

[...] about 20–25 women, 6 men, some nonwhites, i.e., gangbangers [violent gang members][...] others were white trash traitors who had either screwed me over or started trouble because they don't believe in my ways.

3. This echoes a pattern found in racial hate crimes, most of which are committed by persons unaffiliated with organized racism and often by young white men seeking to impress their friends (Wang 1999).

As illustrated in the quote above, the victims of narrative violence can be selected for reasons not clearly connected to a racist agenda, and consequences are not calculated in advance. Within white supremacy, narrative violence creates a diffuse sense that the racist movement is powerful and energetic, forging solidarity and passion among existing members and attracting new ones. As Randall Collins (2008: 242) notes, such violence can be celebratory, as “the moment of the attack itself often becomes a mood of high excitement and even fun.”

Strategic and narrative violence are distinct, but, as we illustrate below, they reinforce and transform into each other in modern white supremacy.

Trajectories into Extraordinary Racial Violence

Commonly, studies of collective racial violence focus on the individual perpetrator’s characteristics and experiences: pre-existing psychological problems such as mental illness or anger disorders, cognitions such as long-held racist beliefs or personal aimlessness, or negative interactions with other races triggered by competition for social welfare benefits, votes, jobs, or housing. The assumption is that a set of initial conditions prompts a person to hate racial minorities, which then predisposes them to join a white supremacist group or commit an act of racial violence (fig. 1).

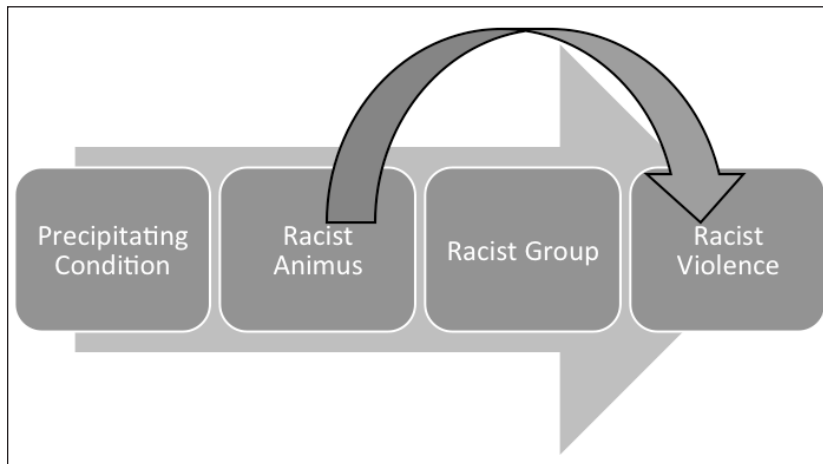


Fig. 1. Common explanation of racial violence

Although widely assumed, it is not necessarily the case that extraordinary racial violence is the result of precipitating conditions. Many of the white supremacists we interviewed did come from families troubled by poverty and abuse, or had personal histories of substance abuse, mental health issues, or episodes of deviance or criminality that thrust them into competition with racial minorities and stimulated racial resentment (Simi et. al. 2017; also Blee 2017a, Cramer 2016, Simi, Sporer, and Bubolz 2016). But to assume that there is always a causal path from background conditions to racial hatred to white supremacy obscures critical aspects of the micro- and meso-level dynamics of racial violence. Indeed, our interviews suggest a more complex, nuanced process, represented in four other paths into extraordinary racism and violence.⁴

The second trajectory that the former white supremacists we studied had followed into racial violence was that they began by participating in racist groups and then learned the racist beliefs that these groups promote (fig. 2).

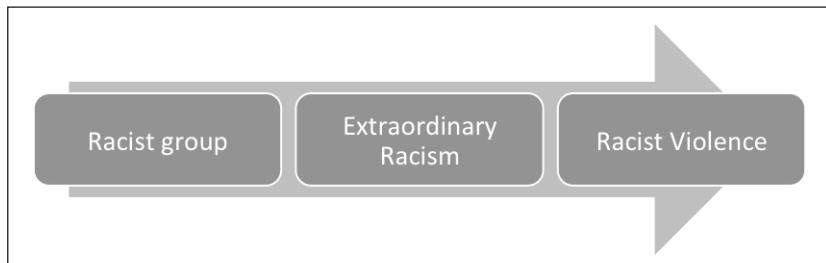


Fig. 2. Racism as an outcome of participating

The white supremacists who followed this path typically joined a racial group for reasons that were largely nonideological. One recounted that

4. Although beyond the scope of this essay, we note that Michel Wieviorka's (2012: 150ff) analysis of five subject positions in the perpetration of violence provides additional insight into the meanings of entering and exiting white supremacist groups, with "floating subjects" for whom violence represents a loss of meaning often characteristic of people who are entering racist groups; "hyper subjects" who find meaning through violence and "anti-subjects" for whom violence is gratuitous found among those currently in racist groups; and the "non-subject" who takes part in violence mechanistically to conform to a group found among those who are considering exiting from white supremacy.

I was just a kid, as a 14, 15 year old... I didn't have a family or a home ... For me, as a child espousing the beliefs [I thought that a racist group] would bring me family.

Another described joining a group for the rush he felt in their presence:

Being a part of something and having an ideal [is] what we're all seeking... It was a high. I'd get chills and everything when I listened to Skrewdriver [white power music band].

For these white supremacists, it was not a pre-existing sense of racial grievance or race hatred that drew them into the racist movement. One former member reported having “no inkling of what [Nazism] really was other than what you saw on TV;” another that, before he joined his racist group, “I did not have any ideology to speak of. I was just pissed off.” Some came into white supremacy to find camaraderie or an outlet to express their diffuse sense of rage (what one described as the “shock value” of being in organized racism). Others came into a racist group for more mundane goals, such as a better economic future, a less powerful federal government, or a lower crime rate in their community.

Once associated with a racist group, these men and women engaged with and learned the ideology of white supremacy (Blee 2002; Latif et al., nd; Simi and Futrell 2010). Many had antipathy toward racial minorities before finding the racist movement. But it was only when they became involved in a racist group that they were introduced to virulent and conspiratorial anti-Semitism and pushed toward strategic violence, such the Phineas Priesthood of those who commit violence against interracial couples. Instruction in racist ideology can be slow and sporadic. One woman recalled that for the first year and a half that she was associated with a racist group, she was never given any racist literature or instruction. She heard racial slurs” but even these were “barely even talked about.”

A third trajectory, a variant of the path described above, is found among white supremacists who participated in racist violence before either affiliating with a racist group or developing extraordinary racist beliefs (fig. 3).

Former racist skinheads recalled being involved in violent racial street brawls before they were fully involved in a skinhead group or understood the ideologies of white supremacy. As one related, it was “just an aggressive

thing.” It was through such narrative violence that they became deeply connected to skinhead groups and other racist individuals and pulled into extraordinary racism (see also Wieviorka 2009). One former white supremacist recalled how she learned racist ideas by fighting alongside the skinheads with whom she had been hanging out, and whose group she later joined:

I'd be with them sometimes where there'd be fights going on. So we would... just go out and find someone and beat the fuck out of them because they weren't white.... I don't think I was as violent as anyone else but I think that I had to do so much to be involved... [that] I started not liking ... anyone that wasn't white.

Former white supremacists report being attracted by the physicality of violence that surrounds racist groups. For some, it was demonstrating prowess at inflicting violence that secured their place in a racist group: “I had just gotten into a bad fight in jail... I put a chick in the hospital and it was all bad, so at that point I was going to be . . . a skinbird, and they all wanted me.” For others, it was being victimized and remaining loyal, as in the case of a woman who began to accept white power ideas despite “not been bred [raised] into hating” after she was beaten by her motorcycle club for having sex with a nonwhite man: “I was starting to get disrespectful... I might see a black person... then I would say stuff like, ‘You know, you fucking nigger... Go back to *fucking Africa where you belong*.” For still others their entry into organized racism came by demonstrating the ability to navigate a world in which violence was unpredictable, what Collins (2008:83) terms an “onrushing flow of events in time.”

We went to this party, it was a Black neighborhood and we were all standing around outside and the next thing I know, gunshots are going off and there's bullets flying everywhere and I'm diving in bushes. [laughter]

A fourth trajectory, fairly uncommon in the contemporary United States, was found among white supremacists who were socialized into racist ideologies and ushered into racist groups at an early age by family members (fig. 4).

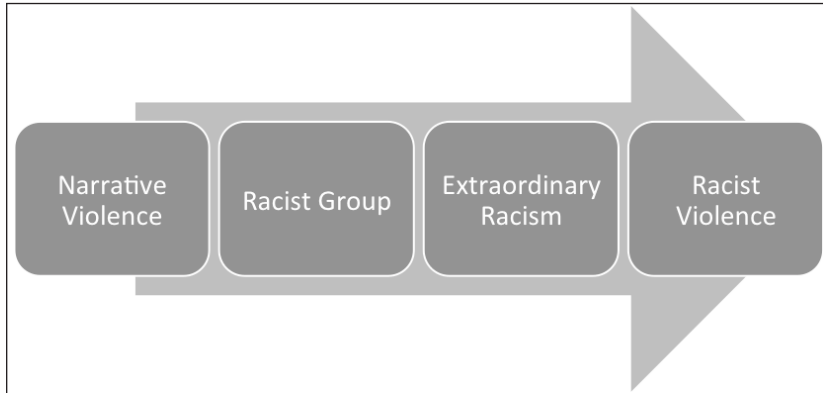


Fig. 4. Socialized into racism

For people who follow this path, extraordinary racist violence is the product of early exposure to racist groups. Since modern U.S. racist groups rarely last for more than a decade or two, and the size of the racist movement varies considerably over time,⁵ this path is fairly uncommon. Few racist activists in our study were raised in the racist groups they joined as adults, or even had close relatives who were members of organized racist groups. And few mentioned any specific instruction in the tenets of white supremacy as children. However, many did learn racial hatred as children, from family members or neighbors who used racial slurs or described nonwhites as inferior, offensive, or threatening.

A former member reported learning racial hate from her grandfather:

He really liked soccer. If there was any players that were Black or even Arab or whatever, he would just start going off and shouting and saying different names and telling me that "If you ever have friends like that or bring anybody over like that, just don't."

5. The Ku Klux Klan would seem to be an exception, but the Klan's continuity is more an image projected by racists themselves than an historical fact. The many Klans that exist in each of its main waves (1870s, 1920s, 1950s, 1970-1990s) frequently collapse and are reborn with different members (Blee 2017b, 1991, Chalmers 1981).

A final route into racist violence is through prison, a path that our interviews suggest is predominantly followed by male racists.

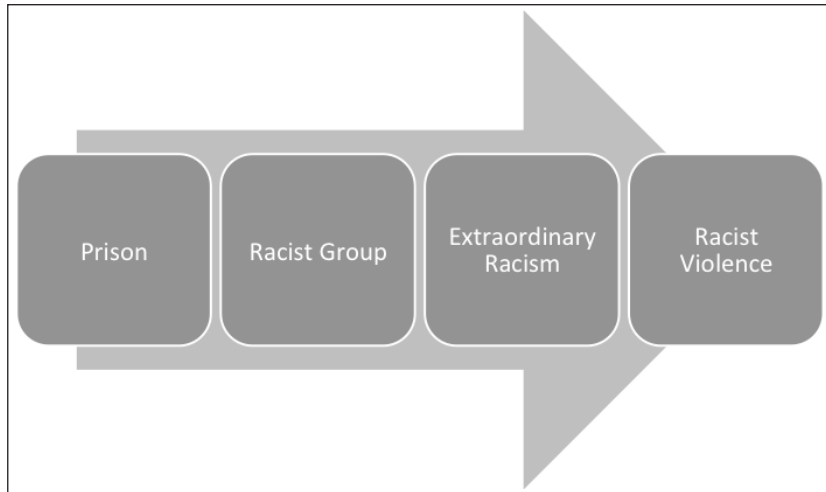


Fig. 5. Prison as a route into racist violence

Even for men who are sentenced for nonracial offenses, the racial structure of some men’s prisons in the U.S. can provide an impetus and the opportunity to develop connections to racist groups and learn white supremacist ideology. This is particularly true for prisons in which well-established white racial gangs such as the Aryan Brotherhood both pull together white prisoners in a network of racial contestation and provide entrée into white supremacist groups on the outside when the prisoner is released (Blazak 2009, Bubolz and Simi 2015). One former white supremacist described his racist organizing in prison in which he “got all the racists together and [said] Let’s get our fucking shit [together]. Let’s make these people treat us right.”

Trajectories out of Extraordinary Racial Violence

Just as white supremacists take varied paths into racist violence and beliefs, so do they follow diverse trajectories when they leave the world of extraordinary racism and racial violence. A common assumption is

that people move away from racist violence because they stop believing in white supremacist ideas and then disaffiliate with racist groups, a trajectory represented in figure 6.

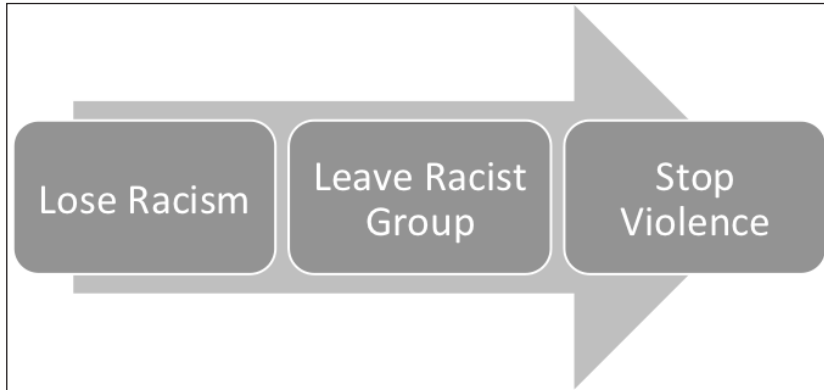


Fig. 6. Leaving racial hate, groups, and violence

A number of the former white supremacists took this path, first rethinking the ideas of white supremacy and then leaving their racial group. For them, a frequent turning point was developing a relationship with a coworker, neighbor, or intimate partner who challenged their racist ideology and presented an alternative way of thinking. Also common was questioning white supremacist ideas that did not match their experiences as, for example, becoming skeptical about the malevolence of Jews after being cured by a Jewish doctor.

I had a Jewish doctor who took me even though I didn't have insurance and was willing to let me make payments, so I could live . . . [A]t this point, I don't give a shit. I have cancer. That was my doctor. "Get rid of it." He could've been Black. I don't care.

Another trajectory we identified had the opposite causal direction. Former white supremacists who followed this path left the racist movement but continued to hold white supremacist beliefs; some continued to be involved in racist violence (fig. 7).

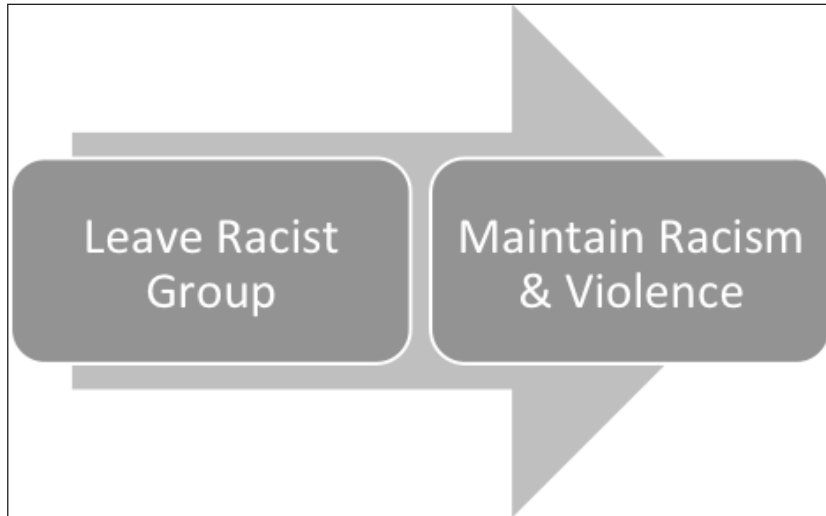


Fig. 7. Disaffiliation without deradicalization

These men and women left their racist group for reasons unconnected to white supremacist ideologies, such as one who described dropping away when another member “told me everything that he’d done and they’d done, all the cheating, the lying, the crime, the everything and that’s the moment I stopped being a skinhead.” They may have exited for personal reasons, such as family commitments, conflicts with other members, or disagreement with the group’s tactics, but never reconsidered their racist beliefs, which could later explode into racist violence. As one former member related, “I am just really angry with the whole government letting all the refugees in and ISIS coming in.... We’re bringing ourselves war.” Even former members who seek to reject racist ideas and proclivities for violence may find it difficult to do so (Simi et al. 2017).

It took me less than two years to learn to hate and it took me nine years to unlearn it. You don’t just stop hating just like that.

I still struggle with that stuff, find myself thinking racist stuff. I smash it down in my mind every time I do. I don’t believe that stuff but it pops up as a reflex.

Another trajectory is evident among racist activists who give up extraordinary racist beliefs but remain in white supremacist groups and even participate in their violence (fig. 8).

Fig. 8. Leave white supremacist ideas, not violence or groups

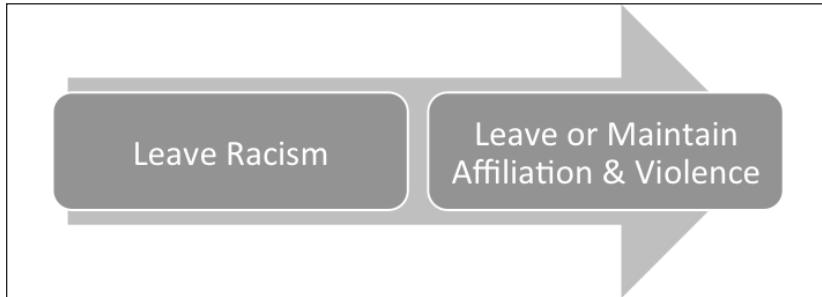


Fig. 8. Leave white supremacist ideas, not violence or groups

People join and remain in racist groups for reasons other than ideological compatibility. The cultural affirmation, social support, and sense of identity and purpose that white supremacists experience (or hope to experience) in racist groups can make it difficult for them to leave, even if they no longer accept racist ideologies. So can fear of the consequences of leaving, whether by retaliation by former comrades or increased vulnerability to perceived enemies of the white race. These same factors can keep people involved in racist violence even after they have abandoned their earlier racist beliefs. An example is a white supremacist who remained a member for a while even after:

The day that my three-year-old son came in there and [NAME] told him that it was good that that [nonwhite] baby was killed in New Jersey ... I had a real mental crack. I no longer believed in any of this and I questioned everything because it was not making any sense.

The final trajectory is found among white supremacists who stop participating in racist violence before they change their racist affiliations or beliefs (fig. 9).

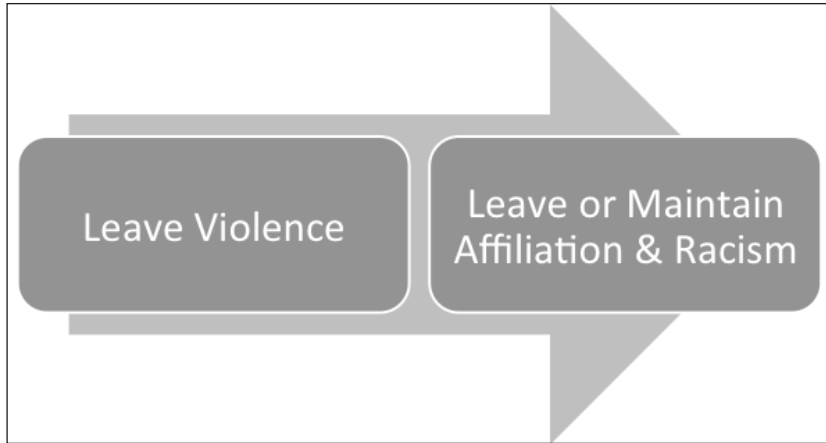


Fig. 9. Exit violence but not white supremacy

The fighting and bloodshed that suffuses many racist groups can be exhilarating to some members, but prove overwhelming to others who withdraw from the violence even as they remain committed to the racist movement:

We're all supposed to be on the same side but they come after you and just pull you out of the fucking car and beat the living shit out of you. "Why would I want to be around this?" I don't want to be around a bunch of people that are just going to fucking beat up their brothers.

Even those who reject the violence of racist groups, however, may remain in the racist movement and continue to embrace its ideology.

Discussion

It is possible to see the complex relationships among racism and racial violence described in this article in a story related by George about what he described as the end of his "skinhead career."

George met Susan on the internet, on which she posed as a "skinbird," and invited her to a party. When she arrived with Tim, a skinhead, George took one look at Susan and decided that "she's obviously fucking Mexican." In response, George's buddy took Susan

into the bathroom and gets a piece of toilet paper and licks it and starts wiping makeup off her face and [demands] “What part of you is White? ... You’re 100% Mexican, that’s obvious. Now you have a choice: you can either stay at this party and we will release the [skinhead] girls on you ... or you can walk out ... and completely disassociate with any white power.”

Despite his own involvement in violent white supremacy, George was ambivalent about the threat of violence that his buddy had leveled against Susan:

I had questioned a lot of stuff [about white supremacy] and I wasn’t 100% sure I hated this girl. I knew she didn’t belong ... but it pisses me off about [Tim]. You say you stand for White Power but you come to a party with a nonwhite that’s trying to portray herself as white.

George’s anger with Tim continued to escalate, and he threatened to notify “all the county’s [skinhead] crews about who you showed up with, so you’re not going home to a safe environment.” But as time passed and “a lot of beer” was drunk, George settled down and Susan and Tim faded back into the party. Later, though, as George and his girlfriend went into the kitchen for another beer, Tim “kind of lurched out” at them and George “nailed him in the face.” When Tim ran for the door, George grabbed him, “stomped on his face and began to beat him,” a fight that George’s friend soon joined in, punching Tim in the stomach until he was “gurgling blood” and begging them to stop, a situation so upsetting that George felt compassion for the first time in his skinhead career.

We provide the disturbing details of George’s story to illustrate the complexities of racial violence that are revealed when we focus on its processes and trajectories. One is the cumulative and path-dependent nature of extraordinary racial violence, as any act of violence narrows a person’s sense of future options. For example, after George and Tim start talking about using violence, they no longer considered other ways of resolving their conflict. Even the minor irritant of Tim bumping into George requires a violent response. But it is also important to note the agentic nature of racial violence. Violence was not an inevitable outcome in this story, even if it was likely. At several points, George decided against

a violent response, and was critical of his brutality toward Tim in the penultimate episode.

George's story also shows the variable relationship between extraordinary racism and racist violence. His initial violent reaction toward Susan and Tim was a racist reaction, as George sought to defend the integrity and boundaries of his all-white racist group. But his and others' subsequent acts of violence were more thinly connected to racism, if at all. Instead, much of the violence in this story erupted from the party's volatile mix of heavy drinking, exhaustion and, perhaps, boredom. Moreover, the violence in this story was not particularly targeted at the enemies of white supremacists. Although Susan was threatened with violence because others thought she was Mexican, most of the violence at the party was unleashed on Tim, a white skinhead. In the highly aggressive world of white supremacism, ideologies of race can be decidedly secondary as a motivation for violence.

Understanding the causal relationship of extraordinary racism to racial violence is just one step to a full analysis of extraordinary racial violence. In addition, scholars need to probe the salience of violence to white supremacism. Too often, we assume that violence naturally matters in racist groups and we simply look for examples of when it does. But this is a classic error of evidence: searching for evidence that violence is significant to racist groups we will generally find it. Instead, we need to explore more extensively the precise contexts in which violence is central to racism, and when it is not, as well as when its significance is declining or increasing. Only through such systematic study will we continue to advance our knowledge of the micro- and meso-level dynamics of organized racial violence.

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