

Narratives of Childhood Adversity and Adolescent Misconduct as Precursors to Violent Extremism: A Life-Course Criminological Approach

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Abstract

Objective: We examined how nonideological factors such as childhood risk factors and adolescent conduct problems precede participation in violent extremism (VE). *Methods:* We conducted in-depth life-history interviews with former members of violent White supremacist groups ($N = 44$) to examine their childhood and adolescent experiences, and how they explain the factors that led to the onset of VE. *Results:* Based on self-reports, we found substantial presence of childhood risk factors and adolescent conduct problems as precursors to participation in violent extremist groups. *Conclusions:* Our findings suggest that pathways to VE are more complex

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than previously identified in the literature and that violent extremists are a heterogeneous population of offenders whose life histories resemble members of conventional street gangs and generic criminal offenders. We conclude our article with implications related to criminological theory, directions for future research, and limitations.

Keywords

life-course theory, developmental theories, criminological theory, terrorism, violence, antisocial behavior, qualitative research, research methods

Routine or “normal” crime (Sudnow 1965) and violent extremism (VE) are typically studied as distinct phenomena (Mullins 2009). VE is defined as violence committed by an individual and/or group in support of a specific political or religious ideology, and this term is often used interchangeably with terrorism (Borum 2011). As such, criminologists have rarely considered VE within the broader realm of criminal offenders due to the presence of ideological motivations, while terrorism scholars routinely ignore the potential for utilizing a criminological perspective to study this type of violence (Mullins 2009; Rice 2009). While Clarke and Newman (2006) argue that terrorism is similar to more ordinary crime, other prominent scholars, such as Hirschi and Gottfredson (2001:94), suggest criminological theory is poorly suited to explain this type of violence because terrorism “reflect[s] commitment to a political cause” (see also Silke 2008). In contrast, other scholars have recently explored the applicability of using criminological theories to help explain VE vis-à-vis subcultural theory (Pisoiu 2015), rational choice (Perry and Hasisi 2015), displacement and diffusion (Hsu and Apel 2015), social disorganization (Fahey and LaFree 2015), routine activities (Parkin and Freilich 2015), and deterrence (Argomaniz and Vidai-Diez 2015). Despite advances, however, the use of criminology to study VE remains substantially underdeveloped.

Although several observers have suggested the utility of using life-course criminology (LCC) to study VE (Freilich et al. 2014; Hamm 2013), virtually no studies have relied on a LCC framework to understand VE (for an exception, see Hamm 2013). LCC encompasses a broad range of theoretical elements across the entire criminological discipline. The influence and analytic power of LCC is so substantial that some observers have contended, “Life-course criminology is now criminology” (Cullen 2011:310). Relying on in-depth life-history interviews with former members of VE groups ($N = 44$),

we use LCC to examine how nonideological factors such as childhood risk factors and adolescent conduct problems are part of a cumulative and age-graded set of environmental adversities that precede the onset of VE. Social-psychological processes that implicate emotion and cognition mediate the effects of risk factors on future engagement in antisocial behavior (Giordano, Schroeder, and Cernkovich 2007). As the person experiences cascading effects (Granovetter 1978) where negative experiences spiral together over time, the individual becomes increasingly susceptible to the pull of various types of criminally-oriented groups including VE. Our findings contribute to a growing effort that examines the empirical overlap between what has previously been characterized as a unique or distinct offender population and more generic criminality. Doing so, in turn, expands the scope of criminological theory and underscores the relevance of using a criminological framework to study VE.

Violent Extremism (VE), Crime, and Pathways to Entry

In general, the predominant view within the study of VE can be described as a collective dynamics model (Post 2005; Silke 2008), which focuses largely on the influence of organizational characteristics and the role of ideology. While several past studies of VE point to the importance of nonideological motivations (Bjørge 1997; Crenshaw 2000; De Cataldo Neuberger and Valentini 1996; Horgan 2014; McCauley and Moskalenko 2011; Sageman 2004; Stern 2003), few studies of VE have carefully documented nonideological concerns in a systematic, empirical fashion beyond single case studies, inventory-style lists, or broad generalizations.

Most studies that have examined nonideological motivations rely on data obtained from international samples (Bjørge 1997; De Cataldo, Neuberger, and Valentini 1996; Della Porta 2006; Sageman 2004; Stern 2003). These studies have also not applied a criminological framework such as LCC to understand how adverse environmental conditions may contribute to participation in VE. Moreover, recent studies of VE rarely include in-depth life-history data obtained through interviews and, therefore, are limited in how much can be learned about childhood experiences including the presence of various risk factors. Finally, much of the research that acknowledges nonideological factors related to VE focuses on group-level processes that pull or attract individuals toward extremism as opposed to push or risk factors. Without the presence of adverse environmental conditions, however, pull factors present within extremist groups would likely be much less influential.

To study questions related to VE, we use U.S. White supremacist groups, which are part of a broader resurgence of far-right extremism mobilizing across the globe (Simi and Futrell 2010). The organizational characteristics of White supremacists vary substantially and include terror groups, street and prison gangs, religious cults, and hybrid organizations that represent some combination of these different organizational types (Freilich, Chermak, and Caspi 2009; Noble 1998; Simi, Smith, and Reeser 2008). White supremacists have a long history in the United States that includes substantial involvement in criminal offending such as mass murder, physical assaults, home invasions, property crimes, identity theft, counterfeiting, drug distribution, fraud, acts of terrorism, and various forms of hate crime (Flynn and Gerhardt 1995; Freilich and Chermak 2009; Freilich et al. 2009; Hamm 2002; Ligon et al. 2013; Simi 2010; Simi, Bubolz, and Hardman 2013; Smith 1994; S. A. Wright 2007). Similar to street gangs, not all White supremacists are violent and, in some cases, individuals form nonviolent political organizations. In general, however, White supremacists express strong support for violence as a tactical strategy (Dobratz and Waldner 2012).

Previous studies have found that White supremacist groups attract individuals for reasons such as ideological alignment, the perception that it provides a substitute family, and the search for status, excitement, and identity (Baron 1997; Bjørgo 1997; Blazak 2001; Blee 2002; Schafer, Mullins, and Box 2014; Simi and Futrell 2010). Individuals also join White supremacist organizations because of personal grievances with members of different races, ethnicities, religions, or sexual orientations related to conflicts that may have begun during childhood and adolescence (Aho 1994). For many individuals, the process of joining White supremacist movements is gradual, as they slowly separate from mainstream society, restructure their identity, and adopt a conspiratorial worldview (Blee 2002; Simi and Futrell 2009).

Risk Factors and the Onset of Conduct Problems

Social scientists have studied a broad range of risk factors, as they relate to the onset of delinquency and antisocial behavior (Dahlberg 1998; Farrington 2000, 1998; Hawkins et al. 1998; Loeber et al. 1998; Moffitt 1990; Staff et al. 2015). In short, risk factors involve the presence of different types of adverse conditions that increase the likelihood of delinquent and criminal behavior (Coie et al. 1993; van der Geest, Blokland, and Bijleveld 2009). The risk factor paradigm was originally inspired by public health approaches to addressing problems like heart disease and lung cancer

(Farrington 2000). Since that time, the risk factor approach has become a major perspective within criminology, as a substantial volume of criminological research finds risk factors significantly increases the odds of short- and long-term offending (Hautala, Sittner, and Whitbeck 2015).

Risk factors, however, do not operate in isolation but rather exist within a broader constellation of mediated processes (Maschi, Bradley, and Morgan 2008). A number of studies support a “cumulative risk hypothesis,” wherein the number of risk factors rather than any particular combination has been associated with childhood misconduct both concurrently and longitudinally (Deater-Deckard et al. 1998; Rutter et al. 1975). The potential effects of risk factors include adverse psychological and physical consequences and, in some cases, may result in trauma. In turn, symptoms of trauma typically include various negative emotion states such as anger, hostility, lowered self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Neller et al. 2005).

The study of street gangs is an area of research that has previously emphasized the importance of risk factors in terms of increasing individual susceptibility to gang membership (Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller 1992; Hill et al. 1999; Klein and Maxson 2006; McGarrell et al. 2009; Thornberry et al. 2003). Research on the life histories of gang members has consistently discovered family conditions characterized by alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, sexual molestation and incest, neglect, and instability (Fleisher 2000; Miller 2001; Moore 1991). Some individuals cope with adverse family conditions such as child maltreatment by relying on the gang as a source of social support (Miller 2001; Moore 1991; Thompson and Braaten-Antrim 1998). As we discuss below, our results closely approximate findings from the street gang literature, suggesting substantial overlap between a segment of violent extremists and members of conventional, nonideological street gangs.

In this article, we contribute to the broader study of VE by examining the presence of childhood risk factors and adolescent conduct problems in a sample of former White supremacists. Our focus on the presence of risk factors within the context of life transitions is consistent with a broader life-course theoretical perspective (Farrington 2003; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Hagan and Foster 2003; Sampson and Laub 1993). At the same time, we also expand the scope of LCC by focusing on VE, which involves an offender type previously considered to possess fundamentally different characteristics than generic criminals. To explore the similarities between generic criminal offenders and VE, we focus on subjects’ in-depth descriptions of childhood risk factors and adolescent conduct problems, and how subjects’ narratives suggest these experiences influenced the onset of

VE. As Giordano and colleagues (2015:9) point out, “narratives do not mirror precisely the real reason . . .” but rather address “how [offenders] talk about and understand [their own] behavior . . .” In areas of less developed research, life-history interviews provide an effective method for identifying different pathways that may be otherwise “obscured by a focus on aggregate trends . . .” (Giordano et al. 2015:9) which characterizes much of the extant literature on risk factors related to delinquency and crime.

Methods

Participants

Data for this study were drawn from life-history interviews with 44 former members of violent White supremacist groups. Subjects lived in 15 different states across all regions of the country. The first author’s long-term ethnographic fieldwork with far-right extremists provided the basis for initial contacts with former White supremacists. The study also relied on contacting former extremists with a public presence who have either written books about their lives or shared their experiences in some type of public forum. Each of the initial subjects was asked to provide referrals to other former extremists who might be willing to participate in the study. This snowball sampling process produced contacts that would not otherwise be accessible using traditional means of contact such as the Internet or mailing lists (R. Wright et al. 1992). Multiple individuals were used to generate unique snowballs and, thus, only a small segment of the subjects were acquainted with each other. Substantial rapport was established and maintained through regular contact with subjects via telephone and e-mail.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 61, and included 38 male and 6 female subjects. Four described themselves as lower class, 20 as working class, 15 as middle class, and 5 as upper class. Overall, the length of participation among the subjects ranged from 3 to 21 years. Only a small portion of the subjects embraced White supremacist ideology prior to group involvement. While only three subjects were raised in a household with immediate relatives who were involved in extremist groups, a majority of the subjects ($n = 28$) were socialized during childhood with ideas relatively consistent with White supremacist ideology such as racism and/or anti-Semitism.

A large portion of the sample has extensive histories of criminal conduct including property offenses such as shoplifting, vandalism, and other forms of property destruction. Individuals were also engaged in a variety of

violent offenses such as murder, attempted murder, street fights, violent initiation rituals, and bomb making. Of the 44 subjects, 40 reported a history of violent offending, 41 reported a history of delinquent activity, 29 reported a history of arrests, and 13 spent time in prison.

Procedures and Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted in public settings such as restaurants and coffee shops although a subsample was conducted in private settings such as the subjects' home. Life-history interviews produce a narrative that allows the researcher to understand the complexities and intersectionality of identity, ideology, and life experiences (McAdams 2006). Members of the sample provided a rich and detailed history of their lives anchored around themes such as family socialization, romantic relationships, job attainment and stability, reasons for joining and leaving extremism, and involvement in criminal and violent behavior. The life-history interviews averaged between four and five hours and generated 3,757 pages of transcripts, which provides an indication of the level of detail contained in these data.

Interviewing former extremists as opposed to those who are currently involved provided several advantages especially in terms of examining highly sensitive issues such as involvement in violence and mental health factors.¹ Subjects described their earliest memories in a sequential manner moving forward to the present. During the interview, subjects were asked direct questions at various points to focus on specific topic areas, and probes were routinely utilized to encourage subjects to elaborate aspects of their life histories. In order to prevent priming or leading subjects during the initial open-ended portion of the interview, we avoided asking questions specifically related to risk factors but instead asked subjects to describe different aspects of their lives (e.g., relationship with family during childhood, etc.). As such, the interviews were not designed to focus specifically on risk factors but instead to capture a broad view of the subject's life history. Each interview concluded with a more structured set of questions that specifically focused on the presence of various types of risk factors, demographic information, and a variety of other more structured questions.

We analyzed the data using a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Miles and Huberman 1994), which allows researchers to combine a more open-ended, inductive approach while also relying on existing literatures and frameworks to guide the research and help interpret the findings. The initial data coding involved various steps but began by reading entire interview transcripts line-by-line

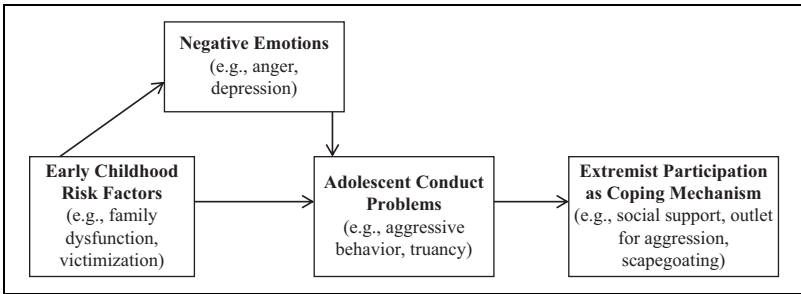


Figure 1. Risk factor model of extremist participation.

to determine differences and similarities within and across our subjects. Coding techniques helped to identify and extract relevant empirical and conceptual properties present in our data. The constant interaction with data involved a virtual ongoing analysis and identification of social processes during each instance of data collection. Codes were used to organize the data into similar concepts. Deductive codes such as identifying different types of risk factors (e.g., child abuse) were drawn from existing literature while inductive codes emerged from the initial phase of line-by-line analysis (Charmaz 2006). After initial codes were developed, we compared and contrasted data themes, noting relations between them, and moved back and forth between first-level data and general categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Miles and Huberman 1994).

Sequential Model of Violent Extremism (VE)

In the following sections, we present segments from the life-history narratives to illustrate how childhood risk factors catalyze a sequential process of cumulative disadvantage that influences the onset of VE. The risk factor model includes three primary dimensions: (1) different types of childhood adversity experienced, (2) subsequent onset of adolescent conduct problems, and (3) nonideological motivations and circumstances leading to extremist participation (see Figure 1). We organize the excerpts from various life histories according to the different stages of the model. The narrative data are not meant as a formal test but rather to illustrate empirical and conceptual categories. The pathway to extremism that we present is similar to a stage model (Ebaugh 1988); however, the stages do not necessarily unfold in a linear fashion nor are the stages completely distinct from each other (Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014). Our model does not

describe all individuals who become involved in extremism, nor do we specify all of the dynamics related to the process of entry. Thus, our model is necessarily incomplete; however, we do address several important dimensions not explored in previous research.

Early Experiences with Environmental Adversity

Of the 44 subjects, 37 (84 percent) reported experiencing one or more of the following adverse environmental conditions: childhood physical abuse (43 percent), childhood/adolescent sexual abuse (23 percent), emotional and physical neglect (41 percent), parental incarceration (27 percent), parental abandonment (36 percent), and witnessed serious violence (domestic and/or neighborhood; 64 percent). We highlighted the above conditions, as previous studies have noted the importance of each of these adversities in particular (Carlson 2000; Dahlberg 1998; Farrington 1998; Fleisher 2000). In addition, 19 of the 37 subjects (51 percent) experienced three or more of these adverse environmental conditions. As previously noted, a broad range of studies document the importance of examining risk factors in terms of cumulative influence (Farrington 1998; van der Laan et al. 2010). More broadly, we also found two other risk factor items worth noting: 26 of the 44 subjects (59 percent) reported being raised in households characterized by substance abuse, and 32 of the 44 subjects (73 percent) reported being raised in households characterized by some type of family disruption (i.e., divorce, deceased parents, or parents who were never married). We also examined a series of mental health-related factors. Almost two-thirds (57 percent) of the interview subjects reported attempting suicide and/or seriously considering suicide while 41 percent of our sample reported experiencing mental health problems either preceding or during their extremist involvement. Finally, nearly half of the subjects reported a family history of mental health problems (48 percent). Each of these risk factors represents different types of stressors that can potentially disrupt the normal development of a young person's life (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003; see Table 1).

The figures above exceed rates of child maltreatment found within the general population. A recent survey found 28.3 percent of American adults retrospectively reported being physically abused as a child, 20.7 percent reported being sexually abused as a child, and 12.4 percent reported being neglected as a child (Middlebrooks and Audage 2008; see also Finkelhor et al. 2013 for similar but lower estimates). The elevated rates of childhood adversity reported in our sample are comparable with previous studies of youth supervised in juvenile justice settings (see Hoeve et al. 2014) and

Table 1. Early Experiences with Environmental Adversity.

	Frequency	Percentage
Childhood physical abuse	19	43
Childhood/adolescent sexual abuse	10	23
Emotional and physical neglect	18	41
Parental incarceration	12	27
Parental abandonment	16	36
Witnessed serious violence	28	64
Household substance abuse	26	59
Household with family disruption	32	73
Suicidal ideation	25	57
Mental health problems before/during extremist involvement	18	41
Family history of mental health problems	21	48

Note: $N = 44$.

studies of gang-involved youth (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995; Miller 2001; Moore 1991).

We use these two types of population comparisons for the following reasons. First, rates derived from the general population provide an indication of whether domestic VE are otherwise “well-adjusted individuals” as some scholars have suggested (see Post 2005; Silke 1998). Second, samples of incarcerated youth and gang-involved individuals provide points of comparison to high-risk populations that have been extensively studied. Based on both types of comparisons, the findings suggest that our sample includes individuals with elevated rates of childhood risk factors as compared to the general population and similar rates of childhood risk factors when compared to high-risk samples.

In the examples below, subjects discuss specific childhood experiences with different types of risk factors. We draw specific attention to the emotional and cognitive impact that our subjects discuss in their life histories. The first case, Kathy, involves a former member of the Aryan Nations who is now 47 years old. Kathy became active in extremist groups in late adolescence and spent more than 20 years involved. During the interview, Kathy responded to a question about her early family life, which included a description of one particular incident of severe marital conflict that occurred between her parents when she was 13.

I remember my mom coming home late from work. We were like, ‘Where have you been?’ She’s like, ‘I’ve been in the hospital.’ She said that she met

my dad at the bar with some other lady. She got in a fight with the lady and said that my dad held her down or something. He betrayed my mom pretty bad. What happened was that they drove off. The girl backed over my mom with the car and hit my mom with the car. My mom flipped and hit her head. She got in her car, tried to chase them but then passed out while she was driving the car. She got a head injury. I was plotting to find that lady and go beat her up. From Friday to Monday when my dad didn't come home the whole week, my mom was suicidal. I had to sleep in her bed with her to watch her. I was mad at her for doing that. (Kathy, June 17, 2014)

Kathy explained this incident was indicative of a larger pattern of family conflict that characterized her childhood upbringing. Kathy's chaotic family life included a suicidal parent and, as she explained, the role reversal (Kenny and Donaldson 1991) she experienced after becoming a custodial supervisor for her mother resulted in feelings of anger, resentment, and uncertainty. Kathy's unstable home life preceded adolescent experimentation with drugs and alcohol, truancy, and teenage pregnancy. In turn, each of these adolescent misconduct problems preceded her eventual involvement in VE. Adverse childhood events such as the one described above are formative and are an important part of a larger chain of events that may predispose a person toward delinquent and criminal trajectories (Leverentz 2006). Clearly, experiencing an unstable family environment does not guarantee involvement in VE or any other criminality, but that also does not mean that these early experiences are unimportant nor should they be ignored (Cullen 2011).

The second example of childhood adversity involves Will, a former member of the National Alliance, now in his mid-40s, who described a particularly severe instance of child abuse as well as a cycle of spousal abuse that he witnessed during childhood.

There was one point when I was, like, 5 years old and my mom hooked me up like a dog in the bathtub and made me eat dog food and then proceeded to beat me like a dog with a whip . . . *Yeah, that happened regularly*, but only when my dad wasn't home. As soon as my dad come home, he'd hear it from the neighbors, what had happened, then he'd beat her. Then, it start all over again . . . Once I figured that I could run away I was gone at least I tried but I got caught in some barbed wire. If it hadn't been for the barbed wire, I'd have been gone. We were living on a farm and I couldn't squeeze through the barbed wire, I got caught. Otherwise, I would have been gone. (Will, July 22, 2013)

Will's experience with this type of abuse coupled with physical and emotional neglect left him feeling vulnerable and powerless; two common consequences of childhood maltreatment (Finkelhor and Browne 1985). His narrative depicted an unsuccessful effort to leave his abusive home environment, which he also explained reinforced feeling trapped. As his narrative unfolded, Will explained that by the age of 12, he found a sense of escape by hanging out at a local music venue that featured punk rock shows. At the music venue, Will reported he met older members of a violent punk street gang who befriended Will and groomed him for membership. Eventually, Will transitioned from the punk street gang to a violent White supremacist group and during his adulthood was incarcerated for a hate crime offense.

Next, Clint, who is now in his mid-40s, discussed the sexual abuse he experienced as a child. He reported the experience was the catalyst for his initial feelings of intense anger, which ultimately motivated the development of a violent self-image.

I had a pretty traumatic childhood for other reasons. When I was 10 the people behind us had an 18-year-old son. He was our babysitter for a while. I won't go into any details of that. That was kind of the root of my anger and hate. At that point, I was damaged, pissed off, hated the world. (Clint, June 10, 2013)

During the interview, Clint consistently expressed the idea that the initial seeds of his anger and hatred stemmed from his sexual abuse. He also explained that over time as his anger and hatred grew, he became increasingly violent. In addition to the trauma of sexual abuse, Clint discussed the domestic violence he witnessed between his parents prior to their divorce, which he viewed as a contributing factor to his own involvement in violence:

They split up when I was nine. I have vivid memories of a couple of times, them fist-fighting in the hallway. There was a lot of physical stuff . . . I started fighting pretty young. That was a direct result of my dad's aggression, and the [sexual] abuse. (Clint, June 10, 2013)

Clint's understanding of how he became a violent extremist relied largely on how he understood his experiences with sexual victimization and witnessing domestic violence. His narrative framed these experiences in terms

Table 2. Conduct Problems during Adolescence.

	Frequency	Percentage
Problems with alcohol and/or illegal drugs	32	73
Experimenting with alcohol and/or illegal drugs before age 16	28	64
Truancy	26	59
Academic failure	24	55

Note: $N = 44$.

of their emotional and cognitive consequences, which, he says, shaped his own violent disposition.

Conduct Problems during Adolescence

The second dimension of the precursors to VE involved conduct problems during adolescence. The data indicated a range of adjustment problems and high-risk behaviors among the subjects in our sample prior to their involvement in VE. In terms of substance use, 73 percent of the subjects reported having problems with alcohol and/or illegal drugs. More specifically, 64 percent of the subjects reported experimenting with illegal drugs and/or alcohol prior to age 16. Early experimentation with alcohol and illegal drugs is typically an indication of a more general high-risk lifestyle and predicts a variety of unhealthy outcomes (Calvert, Bucholz, and Steger-May 2010). In terms of educational experiences, 59 percent of subjects reported truancy, while 55 percent of the subjects reported academic failure (i.e., expulsion from school or dropping out; see Table 2). Problems with truancy and academic performance are one of the strongest predictors of delinquent and criminal behavior (Huizinga and Jakob-Chien 1998; Savolainen et al. 2012). Only three subjects reported not having conduct problems during adolescence. Like the elevated rates of child maltreatment, the above figures reflect levels of adjustment problems and high-risk behavior that far exceed typical rates of these behaviors found in the general population.

In the first case, Brent, a 45-year-old former member of the American Front, described an incident of “calculated retaliation” (Jacobs 2004) and “ultra-violence” (Athens 1992) that occurred during his teenage years.

I had this chick there that I liked and I was in love with. My buddy Chad had said something so she walked off with some other dude. There were some

other punk rockers out there. She went off with some skinny dude that I didn't even know. I was depressed ... Some big old 25-year-old dude. I'm like a 16-year-old kid. He fucking whipped my ass pretty good. He had, he was all, everything I hated. So we jump in the car. I'm sitting there, me and my buddy Chad. I'm thinking. I see this dude sitting there and so I just backed the vehicle and hit him. I pulled forward and backed up on him again. I got him good ... (Brent, July 27, 2014)

Brent also explained that during adolescence, he began committing home invasions to steal money and drugs. In short, Brent's adolescence involved an extensive record of juvenile offending that included multiple arrests and incarceration at youth detention centers and residential treatment facilities. Brent's adolescent conduct problems followed a series of childhood traumas such as sexual abuse and finding his father's dead body at the age of five.

In the next case, Brenda described an early onset using alcohol and illegal drugs and then eventually dropping out of high school. Her conduct problems preceded involvement in extremism and became increasingly more severe over time.

I started drinking at 12 ... It is hard to even remember. It's kind of a big blur. When I did go to school I was always severely hung over. At such a young age where all the drug use really blurred a lot of my memories. I did them so heavy and so much, I drank so much at that age ... From high school I dropped out. That is when I was I think I was 15. (Brenda, July 5, 2013)

Eventually, this escalation process of substance use led to an entanglement in an abusive romantic relationship with a much older male leader of a local VE group. Brenda's involvement in VE culminated in witnessing a brutal murder committed by members of her VE group. Prior to involvement in VE, Brenda's biological father abandoned her during early childhood and her mother and stepfather were emotionally and physically neglectful.

These examples highlight the importance of a sequential process where childhood risk factors and adolescent conduct problems precede extremist involvement. Rather than an average person being influenced by the group dynamics that characterize VE, our data suggest substantial risk factors and conduct problems were present prior to becoming involved in VE. This finding does not diminish the importance of group dynamics or ideology nor does it mean that all individuals who become extremists possess these

same types of risk factors. In the next section, we present data regarding extremist groups as a general support system that attract individuals with specific nonideological needs (e.g., shelter) and who are already involved in various types of criminality including violent offending.

Nonideological Functions of Extremist Participation

Based on the analysis of our sample, we suggest the importance of ideology primarily follows rather than precedes entry (see also Blee 2002). Because entry is part of a general social learning process, individuals typically experience a learning curve (Giordano et al. 2015; Mead 1938; Sutherland 1939) that involves becoming increasingly familiar with different aspects of a specific extremist ideology. For example, Clint reported that ideology did not prompt his initial entry into extremism:

It was a lot more about just being bad. Then I kind of developed, after being around it a lot, probably more after getting involved with the World Church of the Creator and starting to read that propaganda; then I started to become more attuned to it politically. (Clint, June 10, 2013)

Clint's description emphasized the point that while ideology is important, its primary relevance emerged following entry as opposed to preceding it. Other participants identified involvement in extremist groups to be the result of serendipitous events (see Copes, Hochstetler, and Cherbonneau 2012; Jacobs 2010), a desire to establish a tough reputation (Katz 1988), and to acquire shelter (Hagan and McCarthy 1997). Jeremy, a 42-year-old former member of Volksfront, discussed how his involvement in various types of antisocial behavior eventually bled serendipitously through informal network links into involvement in an extremist group.

Steve got this big house and we lived there, and that is kind of where I first started running with like these guys who sold weed and they were like meth heads and shit like that ... [I was] about 13 or 14. Then these guys [a racist skinhead group] okay, these guys were really violent. I mean they were known for doing crazy and fucking people up ... Well this whole meth thing it was all like all over southeast Seattle and you know as far as the skinhead shit we were thugs and so we just started running with them too because all of us were pretty much in the same circle ... (Jeremy October 16, 2012)

Jeremy's description highlights several important issues. First, the early age of exposure to older and more criminally experienced individuals provided

an important source of influence in terms of social learning (Harding 2009; Warr 2002). The exposure to these older peers resembles mentoring relationships (Dishion, McCord, and Poulin 1999) where older individuals show younger individuals *the ropes*. Jeremy also characterized the extremist group he belonged to as a group of violent “thugs” with substance use problems who used the collective as an outlet for anger and frustration, which is also consistent with our focus on the importance of nonideological factors in terms of becoming a violent extremist.

Other nonideological functions of extremist participation include establishing a reputation. For example, Greg told us:

It wasn't really the ideology at least not at first . . . A lot of it for me was just making a name for myself, that's all I ever really wanted was just to make a name for myself. At some point in that area of time was when I just realized was what I wanted to do was basically end up getting into it with somebody. Hopefully I'd end up dying, something like that. I just didn't care and I was just depressed. It was like if I die, I don't give a shit. That's why I got into so much trouble. (Greg, November 14, 2013)

Last, James described how he found refuge from homelessness in an extremist group.

Yeah after my parents died I didn't have anywhere to go and this kid who was already a skinhead let me live in his garage for the summer. When that happened I started meeting the guys who were in his crew and that's how I got started in the group. (James, January 9, 2015)

The circumstances surrounding James' decision to join the extremist group underscores that a perceived lack of viable alternatives may strongly influence the decision-making process. James chose to live in his friend's garage in order to address an instrumental need to find shelter.

Summary Case Description

We conclude this section with a description of a single case in order to illustrate each aspect of the sequential model. David, a former White supremacist now 28, discussed his earliest memories from childhood (approximately four or five years of age) involving different aspects of domestic violence and child abuse.

I can recall him [step-father] being like a buddy, even after he raped my mom, beat her. He came out and he put his hand on my head and rubbed my hair, kind of patted my head, like I remember the feeling, or something like that, and just being like, stuck. And feeling like don't touch me ... Oh yeah, there's lots of memory after memory after memory about physical violence and stuff. Some of the things being kicked in the face, kicked in the ribs, held up against the wall by the throat, thrown down stairs, bounced off walls, on and on, right? (David, April 15, 2012)

David's recollection illustrates the paralyzing capacity of witnessing violence and its potential to traumatize victims and observers (Carlson 2000). David discussed how he felt "stuck" after his stepfather sexually assaulted his mother. Children who witness and experience violent subjugation (Athens 1992) are likely to experience feelings of helplessness, anger, and frustration and begin to view the world as a cruel place where only the strongest survive. In addition to witnessing violence and experiencing abuse, over time David's mother's mental health deteriorated, which culminated in the incident described below when he was 11:

[Later] she [his mother] had tried to kill my brothers and my sister and my cousin and all the pets in a sacrifice by lighting the house on fire as she danced around the fire outside naked to the point where her legs were black with frostbite. So when the house is burning down, kids are almost going to die, my uncle comes and phones the police ... (David, April 15, 2012)

David's intensive and long-term experience with various risk factors, however, did not automatically result in his entry into VE. Instead, David's chaotic home life eventually led to his placement in a treatment facility after he attempted suicide at the age of 14. Following his time in the mental health facility, David became homeless and began to live on the streets. During his time living on the streets, David was involved in regular street fighting, but his violence was not motivated by any particular ideology. While he was homeless, a leader from a VE group befriended David by offering shelter and support including encouragement and reinforcement of his violent behavior.

Then me and Roger [leader of an extremist group] started hanging out on the street. He was drinking a lot, we had lots of heartfelt conversations. He

actually taught me how to roll people [rob people] effectively and this sort of thing . . . I was on the streets, this was how I got off the streets . . . I had a role; I got invited into a small cell of guys who worked under a larger organization that had like a hundred and some members. It was this tiered system. (David, April 16, 2012)

As David began spending more time with members of this group, he eventually became a member himself. In time, David embraced White supremacist ideology and his violent offending expanded to include victims selected based on racial and ethnic characteristics and sexual orientation. David's description also highlights the role of criminal mentors as well as the role of social bonds that extend beyond ideological factors. Although David eventually became highly committed to White supremacist ideology, the process developed over time after group entry.

Discussion and Conclusion

We had several goals in this article. First, while the importance of studying VE has recently received greater attention among criminologists (Agnew 2010; LaFree and Dugan 2004), less attention has been devoted to understanding the similarities between violent extremists and generic criminal offenders. Our focus on childhood adversities, adolescent conduct problems, and nonideological motivations for joining violent extremist groups highlights the continuities between VE and generic offending. This study also highlights the utility of an LCC approach to studying VE. Investigating VE helps expand the scope of LCC and provides a new theoretical framework for understanding the development of VE.

Second, we emphasized that former VE's narratives highlight the importance of childhood risk factors as a series of destabilizing and adverse conditions that dovetailed with adolescent misconduct. The criminological relevance of risk factors is less about any particular single event producing some type of breakdown, but rather an understanding of these adversities as conditioning experiences that incrementally increase a person's susceptibility to negative outcomes including violent offending. In addition, few criminological studies have examined the qualitative dimensions of childhood risk factors and adolescent conduct problems as part of an age-graded process. Our focus on childhood helps expand LLC and simultaneously mitigates against the tendency toward adolescent-limited approaches within criminology.

Third, following Widom's (2014) argument regarding violent offenders more broadly, we also acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of VE, which involves a number of diverse pathways. Various orientations exist within any extremist subculture, including bandits (i.e., common criminals) and revolutionaries (i.e., terrorists). In many ways, the distinction between common criminality and VE is illusory. Generic interpersonal criminality often involves an aspect of terror at least for the victim and VE, by definition, involves unlawful behavior. In addition, an extremist may simultaneously engage in both common criminality and terrorism at any one time. Finally, an extremist may evolve from one to the other over time (i.e., a person starts as a nonideological criminal and becomes ideological and vice versa). The violent extremists in our sample overlap considerably in terms of individual background factors such as child maltreatment and high levels of other risk factors with members of conventional street gangs and ordinary violent offenders. In this respect, our findings depart from previous claims that there is little overlap between violent extremists and nonideological criminal offenders (Hirschi and Gottfredson 2001; Silke 2008).

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study are important to mention. First, the retrospective nature of the life-history interviews raises questions about validity and reliability due to memory erosion, distortion, and selective recall (Baddeley 1979). The practice of remembering is a reconstructive process where memories of events are typically reinterpreted during each recall. Despite these concerns, the rich life history accounts provide important insight from the subjects' perspective. Due to the relatively hidden nature of this population, the sample was derived through snowball techniques and, as a result, is not representative which prevents generalizing from these findings. The goal of a grounded theory approach, however, is to develop a conceptual explanation that closely fits the data (or incidents), which the concepts are intended to represent. While grounded theory is not intended to provide generalizations, the hypotheses developed can be tested at a later point by the researcher or other researchers in future studies. Lastly, our data do not allow us to address possibilities of biosocial interactions that may play a major role in the sequential model we identified (J. P. Wright and Beaver 2005). We see biosocial interactions as an important aspect of VE that future research should explore.

Future research should explore how these findings compare with extremists from different ideological orientations and across different

geographic areas. More specifically, future research should compare the findings from this North American-based sample of former White supremacists with similar samples from various European countries and with other types of extremists such as former violent jihadis and left-wing extremists. Relatedly, future research can compare violent extremists with non-violent extremists to determine if entry pathways and background exposure to risk factors vary between these two types of extremists. Finally, future research should focus on whether gender and socioeconomic status influence pathways toward VE.

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Note

1. In terms of mental health, subjects were asked whether a medical practitioner had ever diagnosed the person with a mental disorder. In addition to self-reports regarding physician diagnoses, we coded self-reports of suicide attempts and other relatively clear instances of maladjusted behavior (e.g., self-mutilation) as evidence of mental health problems. Alcohol and substance abuse can also be viewed as a type of mental health problem and, in fact, is listed in the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association 2013). Substance use problems, however, were coded separately from all other mental health problems and findings regarding substance use problems are reported as distinct frequencies. We did this to

prevent inflating the mental health findings, given the ubiquitous nature of substance abuse among White supremacists. The findings are likely conservative, as we only counted the presence of mental health problems when subjects responded “yes” to questions involving being told by a physician that he or she had some type of mental health problem or if the person reported a relatively clear type of maladjusted behavior such as self-mutilation or attempted suicide.

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