

ON THE ORIGINS OF WHITE NATIONALISM

What motivates far-right extremism? Sociological studies are giving new insights and ways to tackle the phenomenon. **Peter Byrne** investigates

TIM ZAAL hurt a lot of people in his time: blacks, Mexicans, gays. Strung out on drugs and propaganda, he fitted the toes of his engineer boots with razor blades, all the better to kick the scum and save the white race.

Zaal has since recanted, but others continue to follow in his footsteps. After decades largely under the radar, race-based violence and extremism is back in the news. In June 2015, white supremacist Dylann Roof killed nine black worshippers at a Methodist church in Charleston, South Carolina. In August 2017, the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, saw youths on the streets giving Nazi salutes, and one counter-protestor killed,

deliberately mown down by a car.

It's not just in the US. In June 2016, British politician Jo Cox was murdered by a white nationalist. Last November, tens of thousands rallied by torchlight in Warsaw, Poland, waving banners that advocated deporting refugees and making Europe white again, while chanting "Sieg Heil" – in the once-Nazi-occupied land where Auschwitz was built.

For most, the motivations of such hate seem unimaginable. But pioneering work in the US is beginning to reveal its roots. What it is uncovering turns a conventional view of terrorist motivations on its head – with implications for how all societies should deal with the phenomenon.

The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 brought together groups from across the far-right political spectrum

IT IS a cold night in January, and I'm eating hamburgers with Zaal in a mall restaurant at the border of Orange County and Los Angeles. A big, affable man in his early 50s, he talks easily about his life as a violent white supremacist during the 1980s and 1990s. Also at the table is Pete Simi, a sociologist at Chapman University in the city of Orange who researches white supremacist extremism.

Simi first met Zaal when he disengaged from organised racism at the turn of the millennium. Since then, Simi has interviewed Zaal about his life history, as he has done scores of active and former far-right extremists. The two have common acquaintances, and casually drop names. "Did you

know that so-and-so is dead?"

White supremacy has a long tradition in the US. From the 1860s, after the southern Confederate states lost the US civil war, white workers found themselves competing with freed slaves for economic resources and social status. The backlash was often murderous: thousands of black men, women and children were lynched, shot, stabbed, tortured and burned alive, and their property often expropriated with impunity. Racial segregation was the law of the land, not just in the agrarian south, but also in the industrial north as millions of black people fled the cotton fields for factory ghettos. By 1925, membership of the Ku Klux Klan approached 6 million, >

about 5 per cent of the US population.

Orange County is best known as the home of the Disneyland theme park. Its affluent suburbs were long a bastion of old-school Republican conservatism. Richard Nixon was born there and it is where Ronald Reagan kick-started his political career. Until the 1970s, the county was almost exclusively white, before African-American, Hispanic and Asian incomers changed its complexion.

Like similar places nationwide, Orange County became a centre of a small but hardcore white supremacist backlash. Zaal viewed himself as a patriot fighting against a Jewish-orchestrated plot to commit genocide on the white race. "We saw it as doing what police wouldn't do," he says. "We were cleaning up our neighbourhoods of the scum."

Just days before I met Zaal, white supremacist Samuel Woodward was charged with stabbing to death a Jewish gay man called Blaze Bernstein, whose body was found buried in an Orange County park. Woodward has pleaded not guilty to the charge. The murder was cheered online by Woodward's comrades in the neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division.

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IN THE wake of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, counter-terrorism expert Erroll Southers at the University of Southern California wrote an opinion article for *USA Today*, which linked the violence to Donald Trump's

WHAT MAKES A RACIST?

Pete Simi's research among former white supremacists has shown that many experienced childhood emotional trauma and are predisposed to crime. Of the 103 people he studied

- Half report witnessing serious acts of violence growing up
- Half report experiencing physical abuse during childhood
- One-quarter report being sexually abused during childhood
- Half report being expelled or dropping out of school
- Three-quarters report a history of physical aggression before they got involved in far-right politics
- Half report exposure to parental racism
- More than three-quarters report parental divorce
- Half ran away from home during childhood or adolescence
- Half were shoplifters or petty criminals
- Slightly less than half report a family history of mental health problems
- Two-thirds report substance abuse issues
- Two-thirds report attempting suicide



JASON ANDREWS/GETTY

Members of the Rise Above Movement join the rally in Charlottesville

Bottom right: A rally in Shelbyville, Tennessee, in October 2017

racialised rhetoric. The next day, someone shot out his front door.

Southers is black. A retired FBI agent, he teaches courses on homegrown terrorism to law enforcers. "White nationalists are a greater threat to Americans than jihadists," he says.

The Anti Defamation League reports that in the US, white supremacists were responsible for 18 of 34 terrorist murders in 2017. Seven of the remaining 16 were anti-government extremists, leaving nine tied to Islamist terrorism. Since 2002, there have been three times as many deadly far-right terrorist attacks than jihadist attacks in the US, although the jihadist attacks have claimed more victims overall, reports the New America Foundation.

In the UK in the year to March 2017, right-wing extremists made up around one in six of over 6000 referrals to the country's counter-extremism programme, Prevent, and almost 40 per cent of 332 people entering Prevent's "Channel" process, which supports individuals considered vulnerable to be drawn into terrorism. In February this year, police said that they had foiled four far-right terrorist plots in the UK in the previous 12 months.

In the US, the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups, has catalogued more than 600 active neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups and hundreds of anti-government militias that either have a stated intention to overthrow liberal democracy or

historically engaged in armed struggle.

Southers sees similarities between the white extremist and Islamist terrorists: both fit the prevailing notion among researchers that most terrorists are not psychopaths, but relatively typical people motivated by circumstance to protect their "in-group" from dangers, real or imagined. "Given their belief systems, both types of terrorists are acting rationally," he says. "Most terrorists are 'altruists' who view themselves as soldiers fighting for a noble cause." The calling to enact political change precedes the calling to violence: the ends justify the means.

Simi's research suggests that is not the whole story.

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SIMI and I are hiking with "Chuck" (not his real name) on a rocky beach north of San Diego. Chuck is a 50-year-old electrician who used to advocate Christian Identity, the idea that white Europeans are the lost tribe of Israel.

As an adolescent, Chuck listened to white power punk, hung out with swastika-tattooed neo-Nazi bikers and was into weed, amphetamines, LSD, magic mushrooms and alcohol. He was discharged from the US Navy after he was sentenced for assaulting a Mexican man – for being Mexican, he adds.

On release from prison, Chuck joined the San Diego branch of the Hammerskin Nation, an ultra-violent neo-Nazi group with international branches. He ran in the same head-

slamming circles as Zaal, but he was more enamoured of the cross than the swastika. "I did not consider myself to be a national socialist, but a Christian patriot ready to start a race war and take the country back from the Jewish communists."

As Chuck grew older, raising a family, he began distancing himself from violent extremism. There was no blinding light, just a fading of interest until one day he no longer believed in a world conspiracy. He has been active with Life After Hate, a group that offers "off-ramps" and counselling to far-right extremists who want to heal.

Simi has a professional background in mental health assessment. His interviewees start by talking about themselves in an unstructured way, to uncover their life priorities and emotional impulses. This is followed by more structured, factual questioning about past events, which probes subjects' emotional motivations. It is rare to get such an insight into the minds of those who hold these kinds of extreme views. When terrorist suspects are interviewed about their pasts it is usually by intelligence and police agencies, often in prison and with a focus on ideology and operational methods.

Simi and his team record the emotions associated with events the subjects mention such as family traumas, hurting people, or joining or leaving a violent group. They can then determine the intensity of pleasure

or pain the events evoked, as revealed in the language used. The results are digitised for statistical analysis to uncover the extent of shared motivations between the people he interviews. The aim is to avoid fitting the data to pre-existing theories of causes and effects.

The first results from this programme were laid out in 2016, in a 260-page paper from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), principally authored by Simi, with the title "Recruitment and Radicalization among US Far-Right Terrorists". The analysis revealed that white extremists, while not necessarily psychopathic, are often violent before they join extremist groups. Only after joining are they generally schooled in ideologies that justify channelling pre-existing urges into violence towards Jewish people, non-white people and anti-racist groups. The ideology is the excuse for ultra-violence, not the reason. "Far-right ideologies channel a pre-existing need to express violence by narrowing the selection of victims," says Simi.

That insight challenges thinking on the origins of extremism, says ethnographer Kathleen Blee at the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, whose research focuses on female white supremacists (see "Women of the right", page 39). "It shows that the embrace of those really terrible ideas could be a consequence of an immersion in the culture, rather than the cause of an attraction to the culture," she says.

Simi's analyses tease out the possible driving factors. About 80 per cent of his interviewees have experienced childhood traumas: violence, sexual abuse and broken homes (see "What makes a racist?", left). Many had horrible, shame-filled childhoods that morphed into lonely, self-hating adulthoods. White power groups can provide angry loners with a sense of pride in community and conveniently dehumanised targets to blame. White supremacist propaganda is filled with references to collective shame related to feelings of cultural, racial and economic dispossession, from the Confederacy's defeat in the civil war to the election of Barack Obama as the first non-white US president. ➤

Verbatim quotes from Pete Simi's interviews with current and former white supremacists

"I believed I was doing something noble, altruistic, that I was dedicating my life to my people, to my race... It wasn't like, 'Hey, I'm a hater and I'm proud of it.'"

(Donald, *White Aryan Resistance*)

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"We're here to defend God and defend the people... not oppressing or taking over."

(Callie, *American Front*)

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"Fighting is a lot like a hug. It makes you feel good... It's always been that way. Ever since I got the s* beat out of me as a teenager."**

(Stanley, *United Society of Aryan Skinheads*)

“It wasn’t about the racism... I knew the whole time that it wasn’t right... But to be accepted, to feel like I belonged...”

(Kevin, *Blood and Honor*)

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“It was more fashion than politics by a huge factor.”

(Jacqueline, *Society Skin Nation*)

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“You’re running by yourself in the streets. It’s the camaraderie that draws you in, at first. And then once you see what’s really going on in the world politically... you’re like, well, now, I’ve got something to believe in, something to defend, the white race! You feel invincible even when you are getting all beat to s* by cops or anti-racist skins.”**

(Logan, *Public Enemy No 1*)

“The behavioural problems represent lives spinning out of control,” says Simi. “Resorting to violent extremism can be a coping mechanism for these people. They are drawn toward violent extremist groups for non-ideological reasons, for shelter, protection, a sense of family.”

As happened with Chuck. His parents, he says, were pot-smoking hippies who failed to recognise that the male babysitter was sexually molesting him on a regular basis. “I just kind of buried that, and it turned into shame and then anger and then self-hatred that got projected onto the world.”

The sun sets and he rides away on his motorcycle. “Most of these guys are not crazed lunatics,” says Simi. “But neither are they socially or psychologically healthy. They carry invisible scars.”

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SOCIOLOGICAL research on extremists is difficult to design. Researchers cannot advertise for “Nazis” or “violent white supremacists” to join a scientific study. Simi developed his volunteer cohorts of active and former extremists by gaining the trust of his often-paranoid subjects one interview at a time. Interviewees then suggested others for him to contact in a method called “snowballing”.

This is not a randomised process. It is subject to ethical review by institutional boards, and Simi’s studies are required not to cause harm to his subjects. His studies of individual life histories differ in method and level of detail from his previous real-time, ethnographic observations of active white supremacists.

Starting in the mid-1990s, Simi was a guest in the noose-draped homes of white extremists for days and sometimes weeks. He attended white power music festivals in the wilds of Idaho and birthday parties in honour of Adolf Hitler, encounters detailed in a 2010 book, *American Swastika*, co-authored with sociologist Robert Futrell. Simi’s entry ticket was an easygoing demeanour, an ability to drink lots of beer and the colour of his skin.

White power families can seem like any other from the outside. They live in suburban homes, mow the lawn, do run-of-the-mill jobs. But the Christmas tree is often topped with a



JASON ANDREW GETTY

swastika, not a star. They give their kids racist colouring books. They rally around burning crosses, an ancient Scottish war signal. Armed with automatic weapons, they train to exterminate non-white people.

Some of Simi’s field subjects had been convicted of attempted lynchings, aggravated assaults and murder. They would happily have stomped him if they had smelled a rat, he recalls. He made a point of identifying himself upfront as a scientist studying their culture, appealing to vanity, perhaps. Not everyone was thrilled by his presence; he did not pretend to agree with racist politics. But he didn’t argue with his hosts either, or ask the wrong kind of questions about weapons or criminal acts. He kept conversations tracked on cultural and ideological issues, while observing the interplay of relationships in the environment.

In the late 1990s, Simi spent time with an itinerant Hammerskin musician named Wade Michael Page. He had been recruited into organised racism while in the US Army after the first Persian Gulf war. Years later, in 2012, Page gunned six Sikhs to death at a temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, before being killed by police.

Simi didn’t see it coming specifically, he says, but he was not shocked. The bass guitarist had many risk factors for violent behaviour, including chronic depression, alcoholism and suicidal ideation. Adding in white supremacy proved to be a recipe for terrorism.

But not every white supremacist with these risk factors opens fire on a minority church congregation, or points their car at an anti-fascist protester and accelerates. “The idea of predicting something as complicated and as rare as terrorism is just not realistic,” says Simi. Terrorism is primed when an emotionally damaged person meets the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

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ZAAL did jail time for his violent deeds, and now regularly tells the story of how he deradicalised at the

Anti-fascist campaigners in Charlottesville

WOMEN OF THE RIGHT

White nationalism is often portrayed as a male affair. But while most white supremacist organisations hold that God created women to cook, clean the house and make babies, that doesn’t mean they are wall flowers, says Kathleen Blee of the University of Pittsburgh. Male leadership in white nationalist organisations is often dependent on the adoration of followers. Female influence is more informal, indirect and personal - and so potentially more effective, she says.

Researching her 1991 book *Women of the Klan: Racism and gender in the 1920s*, Blee found that millions of middle-class white women, including suffragettes, joined the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan

supported voting rights for white women to diminish the electoral power of non-white people.

It is a pattern repeated among women Blee has interviewed who are involved with today’s white power skinhead, Christian Identity, neo-Nazi and Ku Klux Klan groups. Most of them are educated, middle class and were raised in relatively typical families. Ideology is not the primary attraction for joining what many initially view as a social club, a place to have fun.

Some women find the violent images of racist culture to be personally empowering. “It gives them a feeling of mastery and of female potency, however illusory, that they rarely find in other social

Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance.

But the Charlottesville march triggered something deep inside him. The chant “Jews will not replace us” horrified most people. For a moment, Zaal thrilled at the prospect that the revolution might finally be on. “Such momentary relapses are not uncommon,” says Simi.

In 2017, Simi and Blee, together with colleagues Matthew DeMichele and Steven Windisch, presented a study of 89 former white supremacists in *American Sociological Review*. They wrote that “the habitual and unwanted thoughts, feelings, physiological responses, and behavior that can follow exit” from active status mirrors the effects of withdrawing from opiate addiction. It may be no coincidence that, as Simi’s earlier studies showed, many white supremacists are also substance abusers: the reward of hate may be dopamine, too.

In an unpublished pilot for a future study, Simi and collaborators at the University of Nebraska and the National Institutes of Health have taken fMRI and EEG scans of the brains of five repentant white supremacists and a control group of five mixed martial arts fighters whose brains were likely to show similar signs of trauma.

The volunteers were shown symbols and images designed to be neutral or to activate the former white supremacists’ previous identity and ideological

settings,” says Blee. Once inside an organisation, women are socialised to adopt the idea that white people are at risk of extermination and must fight back (and produce more babies) before it is too late.

“The racist movement can construct an ideology of extraordinary racism by using dystopian themes from everyday discourse,” says Blee. Take a seemingly race-free slogan such as “family values are under attack”. What distinguishes this sentiment in the mouths of extremist women is not the belief that the family is dying, but who they believe are responsible for its downfall: Jewish people, black people, Mexicans, gay men, lesbians and liberals.

orientation. The experiment found significant activation in the emotion processing regions of the brains of the former white supremacists in response to racially charged images, such as of an interracial couple. No such regions were activated for the control group. The researchers conclude that “the inherent racial bias in former white supremacists happens before more active cognitive processing”.

In her 2002 book *Inside Organized Racism*, Blee observes that, “The mainstay of any substantial racist movement is not the pathological individual but rather a pathological vein of racism, intolerance, and bigotry in the larger population that the movement successfully mines”. Unconscious bias towards protecting our in-groups is a natural, evolutionarily adaptive feature of the human psyche, and the wellspring of racism. Shortly after the violence in Charlottesville, an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll reported that 9 per cent of adults in the US surveyed, equivalent to about 22 million people, said it is acceptable to hold neo-Nazi or white supremacist views.

In a roundabout way, that answers the question why only very few people with horrible childhoods and other risk factors for violence end up kicking people with razor-blade-tipped boots: they are the extreme values in a Bell curve that covers all forms of social racism. That provides at least some handle on how to counter the problem, both through tackling childhood trauma and rooting out racism in society as a whole.

For Zaal, the path out of his addiction to hatred opened up unexpectedly after he became a parent. “I was with my 3-year-old son at a grocery store. And he says, ‘Look, Daddy, there’s a big - and he dropped the ‘n’ bomb in the store. The black guy just walks away, shaking his head. But all of these little white ladies are screaming and hollering at me, I mean old ladies. ‘Oh, how dare you! How dare you teach your child these things!’ And my son looks up at me and says: ‘Aren’t you going to beat them up, Daddy?’ That was my moment of clarity.” ■

Peter Byrne is a journalist based in northern California