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Understanding the Micro-Situational Dynamics of White Supremacist Violence in the United States

by Steven Windisch, Pete Simi, Kathleen Blee, and Matthew DeMichele

Abstract

While substantial effort has been devoted to investigating the radicalization process and developing theories to explain why this occurs, surprisingly few studies offer explanations of the micro-situational factors that characterize how extremists accomplish violence. Relying on in-depth life history interviews with 89 former white supremacists, we analyzed the situational, emotional, and moral considerations surrounding white supremacist violence. Overall, we identified a variety of strategies white supremacists utilize for overcoming emotional and cognitive obstacles required to perform violent action. Furthermore, we also identified the callous effect of habitual violence. We conclude this article with suggestions for future research and recommendations for practitioners addressing terrorism prevention initiatives.

Keywords: Violence, white supremacy, micro-level, life history interviews, desensitization

Introduction

The study of violent offenders often relies on regional, national, or international factors as a way to understand the manifestation of violence. Today, there is a growing consensus among scholars that macro-level factors such as residential mobility, income inequality as well as population density and heterogeneity are associated with higher rates of violent crime.[1] Social scientists have also examined individual-level and situational factors surrounding violence such as the presence of weapons or drugs/alcohol, the role of bystanders, and certain personality characteristics (e.g., low self-control, psychopathology).[2] Each of these lines of research has added a great deal of insight by emphasizing how social structural features shape the nature and prevalence of violence as well as how internal and context-specific processes influence the expression of violence.

In the case of terrorism, violence is often discussed in the context of radicalization processes,[3] offender characteristics,[4] and distinctions between group-based and lone actor offenders.[5] Generally, violent extremists are presumed to possess strong ideological convictions that motivate their violence.[6] While radical ideologies are associated with violent performances, extremist violence does not derive directly from the presence of ideological justifications.[7] Rather, a variety of micro-level dynamics interact with radical ideologies to provoke and channel extremist violence through individual experiences.[8]

Despite wide recognition among academics of the rarity of terrorism,[9] prior theoretical explanations of violent extremism often take for granted the requirements necessary to commit an act of violence. This line of research often conflates attitudes and behaviors despite decades of social psychological research showing only weak connections between beliefs and actions.[10] Rather, violence is rare and more difficult to commit because humans are generally socialized toward non-violence and avoiding environments that put their safety at risk. For example, even under the most intense situational pressures that encourage violent action, front-line soldiers may intentionally miss their targets and/or refuse to kill enemy soldiers.[11] More generally, when situations involve violence, it is mostly “incompetent” fighting such as failing to hit one’s target or hitting the wrong target.[12]

With that said, people can become violent when they are enmeshed in situations where cognitive and emotional controls (e.g., fear, personal responsibility) that guide their behavior in socially acceptable ways are suspended. Social scientists have identified a variety of social-psychological techniques that increase the likelihood of violence such as moral disengagement[13] and emotional dominance[14] as well as dehumanization and deindividuation.[15] The suppression of cognitive and emotional controls has multiple consequences including

the deactivation of self-awareness, hesitation, guilt, shame, and fear. When these mechanisms are present, it becomes possible for usually non-violent, morally virtuous people to commit acts of destructive cruelty.

In addition to explaining more ordinary, generic forms of violence,[16] the suppression of cognitive and emotional controls is also theorized to apply to extremist violence.[17] From this perspective, individuals who possess radical ideological beliefs are no better at violence than anyone else. Although motives and ideology are important in establishing a history of violence, extremists still experience cognitive and emotional barriers when facing an adversary.[18] In light of this, violent extremists may possess inclinations toward violent confrontation due to ideological convictions, but these individuals must still overcome some of the same micro-level obstacles as non-extremists in order to perform acts of violence.

To address the shortage of studies that focus on micro-situational factors related to how extremists accomplish violence, we analyze how white supremacists cognitively and emotionally express themselves while engaging in violent performances. Rather than focusing on extremism as a specialized type of violence, we adopt a perspective that emphasizes the importance of contextualizing extremism within the broader realm of violent behavior. In doing so, we ask the following question: Do white supremacists experience cognitive and emotional obstacles (e.g., fear, hesitation) prior to violent incidents, and if so, what strategies do they utilize for suppressing these feelings? In addition to our primary research question, we also investigate the emotional and cognitive transformations that white supremacists experience as a result of habitual violence. To answer these questions, we rely on extensive life history interviews with 89 former US white supremacists who see themselves as victims of a world that is on the brink of collapse,[19] unite around genocidal fantasies against racial, religious, and sexual minorities, and have extensive histories of involvement in violent activity.[20]

Suppressing Cognitive and Emotional Controls

Although it is common for people to experience *conflict*, reaching a point of *violent conflict* is more difficult. A major obstacle to committing violence is suppressing cognitive and emotional controls such as fear, personal responsibility, and hesitation.[21] While numerous explanations may account for how people behave in socially acceptable ways, people generally avoid violence for two reasons. First, humans are typically socialized toward non-violence. Second, humans possess certain qualities such as the fear of being hurt by their opponent when violence is threatened.[22] Scholars focused on the situational dynamics of violence highlight a variety of techniques that help suppress these controls.[23] For instance, while moral principles act as guides for prosocial behavior, humans have been found to selectively disengage these values prior to participating in antisocial behavior. Bandura refers to this process as *moral disengagement* in which people commit violence by diffusing personal responsibility, dehumanizing victims, minimizing consequences, and using language that rationalizes their actions (e.g. “collateral damage”).[24]

Another technique involves *deindividuation*, which refers to a psychological state in which inner restraints are lost when “individuals are not seen or paid attention to as individuals.”[25] Based on this perspective, humans naturally act in a rational, orderly, constrained manner and seek to inhibit socially unacceptable desires. For violence to occur; however, individuals must suppress these constraints through a process of deindividuation. According to Zimbardo, a number of micro-situational conditions can produce deindividuation such as wearing a mask to conceal one’s face or blending in with a large group of attackers.[26] Overall, a substantial body of research has found that individuals who believed their identity was unknown were more likely to behave in an aggressive and punitive manner.[27]

Related to—but distinct from—moral disengagement and deindividuation is *emotional dominance*. [28] Based on this perspective, conflict between two parties generates a barrier to violence referred to as confrontational tension, which is characterized by fear and hesitation. When two parties clash, both sides will exchange insults and hostile gestures but typically stop short of violence. With that said, Collins introduces four pathways for overcoming confrontational tension, including: (1) targeting vulnerable victims; (2) participating in a group that encourages violence; (3) conducting clandestine attacks; and (4) fighting at a distance to avoid confronting

the enemy face-to-face.[29] Individuals who utilize these pathways are able to suppress confrontational tension, which allows them to establish emotional dominance and attack their targets.

Based on this body of research, it appears that people can selectively deactivate cognitive and emotional controls that interfere with the commission of violent performances. While support for these claims has been found among non-extremists,[30] less research has focused on whether similar processes are also present among violent extremists.[31]

Methodology

Data Collection

The current study relies on life history interviews with 89 individuals who self-identified as former white supremacists. We identified interviewees by snowball sampling from multiple starts to ensure variety in the location and type of extremist group.[32] We developed initial contacts for the snowball chains through a variety of means, including our research team's extensive prior research with active and inactive far-right extremists, identifying former extremists with a public presence (e.g., media, book authors), and using referrals from our project partners.[33] This snowball sampling procedure produced contacts that otherwise would not have been accessible using traditional means of sampling such as mailing lists.[34] Although snowball sampling minimizes the generalizability of the results, the goal of qualitative research in this case is the identification of social processes and describing causal mechanisms.

Our sampling method resulted in life history interviews with 89 former members of US white supremacist groups. Participants were interviewed in the places they now live, with 85 located in 24 states across all regions of the country and 4 in Canada. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 61 years. In terms of gender, the sample included 68 males and 21 females. 17 participants described their current socioeconomic status as lower class, 28 as working class, 31 as middle class, and 5 as upper class.[35] In terms of length of activism in white supremacism, participation ranged from 3 to 21 years.

Procedures and Data Analysis

Rapport was established prior to interviews through regular contact with participants via telephone and email. Interviews were conducted in private settings such as residential homes and hotel rooms as well as public settings such as restaurants and coffee shops.[36] Most of the interview was spent eliciting an in-depth life history to produce narratives that reflect the complexities and intersectionality of identity, ideology, and life experiences.[37]

The interviews included questions about broad phases of the participant's extremism, such as entry, involvement, and disengagement, with probes to encourage participants to elaborate on aspects of their life histories. Participants were asked to describe their childhood experiences as an initial starting point. Although participants were periodically asked direct questions to focus on specific topic areas, the interviews relied on an unstructured format intended to generate unsolicited data embedded in their personal narrative. We view the elicited narratives as instructive in terms of assessing how individuals make sense of their lives.[38] Each interview concluded with more structured questions and scale items to collect comparable information across interviewees in terms of risk factors (e.g., history of child abuse, mental health problems), demographic information, and criminality. Following the interview, all audio recordings were transcribed with only minor edits. As one indication of the depth and detail of the data collection, the interview sample generated 10,882 transcribed pages discussing participants' experiences prior to involvement, entry into the movement, and exit from the movement.

In terms of analyses, the current study relies on a modified grounded theory approach.[39] The use of grounded theory allows the researcher to systematically, yet flexibly, analyze qualitative data in order to develop theories "grounded" within the data.[40] Grounded theory allows researchers to combine a more open-ended, inductive

approach while also relying on existing literatures to guide the research and help interpret the findings. While the focus of the current study aims to better understand the micro-situational dynamics of white supremacist violence, the initial coding process examined all phases of our participants’ life histories including adolescence, extremist involvement, and exit.

The initial coding process involved various steps, but began by reading entire interview transcripts line-by-line to determine differences and similarities within and across our participants. This technique involves the construction of themes and subthemes as researchers analyzed the data. Codes were used to organize the data into similar concepts. At the same time, memos were used throughout the analysis process to connect emerging themes. After the codes and memos were developed, we compared themes across the sample of participants. Once all participants were coded, final ratings were discussed and reviewed among all authors for quality assurance.

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.[41] The practice of remembering is a reconstructive process where memories of events are typically reinterpreted during each recall.[42] Despite this concern, the rich life history accounts provide important insight from participants’ perspective. Second, 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 proposed to represent. Although grounded theory is not intended to provide generalizations, the hypotheses developed can be tested in future studies.

A Violent Subculture of White Supremacist Extremism

Overall, a substantial portion of the sample reported extensive histories of misconduct including property offenses such as shoplifting and vandalism as well as variety of violent offenses such as murder, attempted murder, street fights, violent initiation rituals, and bomb making. As Table 1 illustrates, 68 (76%) participants reported a history of delinquent activity, 62 (69%) reported a history of arrest, and 48 (55%) spent time in prison.[43]

Table 1. Adult Criminal Conduct and White Supremacist Violence

Variable	Participants	Percent
History of Delinquency	68	76%
History of Arrest	61	69%
History of Incarceration	48	55%
History of Extremist Violence	61	69%
Use of Weapon		
No Weapon(s) Used	20	33%
Cold Weapons (knives, bats)	22	36%
Firearms	2	3%
Combination	17	28%
Targets of Violence		
Whites	55	90%
Racial Minorities	56	92%
Sexual Minorities	27	44%
Religious Minorities	14	23%
Interracial Couples	17	28%
Other (e.g., homeless people)	30	49%

In terms of extremist violence, 61 (69%) participants reported a wide range of violent performances including ideologically motivated activities (e.g., “gay-bashings”) as well as non-ideologically motivated acts (e.g., neighborhood violence, school fights). Although a minority of the sample were not directly involved in violence (n = 27; 31%), each participant belonged to a group that included members who were regularly violent.

Among the 61 violent extremists, 20 (33%) participants did not report using weapons during violent altercations and instead participated in fist fights. Alternatively, 22 (36%) participants indicated the use of cold weapons (e.g., bats, knives), 2 (3%) used firearms, and 17 (28%) participants used a combination of cold weapons, firearms, and explosives (e.g., Molotov cocktail). Based on the data, targets of extremist violence were dispersed among whites (n = 55; 90%); racial minorities (n = 56; 92%); sexual minorities (n = 27; 44%); religious minorities (n = 14; 23%); interracial couples (n = 17; 28%); and other targets (n = 30; 49%).

To provide more specificity to these descriptive findings, the current article focuses on how people cognitively and emotionally express themselves while engaging in violent performances. Since violence has been found to be influenced by individuals’ cognitive and emotional state,[44] a better understanding of one’s psychological presence while engaging in violent performances should help identify key antecedents of violent confrontations. Throughout the following section, we present life history interview data that illustrate strategies participants utilized for suppressing cognitive and emotional controls. Following this, we demonstrate how habitual violence can generate an immunity toward psychological anxieties.

Suppressing Cognitive and Emotional Controls

As Table 2 illustrates, we identified a variety of techniques for suppressing cognitive and emotional controls, including targeting vulnerable victims; participating in groups that encourage violence; and utilizing clandestine attacks to conceal the threat from their targets. The techniques we present are not mutually exclusive as a large portion of our sample (n = 44; 72%) utilized multiple techniques over the course of their extremist careers. Specifically, we identified 17 (28%) participants who only utilized one technique, 12 (20%) who utilized two, and 32 (53%) participants who utilized three techniques. In the following sections, we examine each technique in greater detail.

Table 2. *Micro-Situational Dynamics of White Supremacist Violence*

Variable	Participants	Percent
Suppressing Cognitive and Emotional Controls		
Targeting Vulnerable Victims	37	61%
Participation in a Supportive Group	61	100%
Conducting Clandestine Attacks	40	66%
Adhering to Subcultural Norms	47	77%
Cognitive and Emotional Transformation		
Violence as Rewarding	38	62%
Violence as Normal	39	64%

The first suppression technique we identified was a type of “engineered violence” where participants described targeting individuals whom they viewed as unable to defend themselves. A majority of the participants (n = 37; 61%) discussed targeting homeless people and homosexuals who were situationally defenseless or minors who could not physically protect themselves in a fight. For example, Freddie describes attacking a group of teenagers returning from a concert and realizing the fight was not “fair.”

We were doing clockwork orange stuff like getting homeless people and gays because there was no one there to help them... There was a time when we were beating up these hippie kids coming from a Reggae concert and we put a tack hammer in the kid's head. That night was one of the first nights where I remember thinking, "This isn't fair," almost like empathy in a way, and then real quickly I was like, "All right, get rid of it ... get rid of that thought." I remember thinking that stuff, but it didn't stop me. I might have paused for an extra punch, just to think about it for a second, but then I made it go away and went right back to what I was doing.... We made them our enemy, you know, "They were bad for America, so fuck them." (Freddie, Interview 5, 31 May 2014).

Similar to other participants, Freddie's account illustrates a type of predatory violence that targeted individuals based on their perceived vulnerabilities. From a psychological perspective, targeting youth, homeless people, and homosexuals who were situationally defenseless provided an emotional boost in the form of added confidence because they felt these individuals would be easily defeated. Although Freddie did not initially experience apprehension in carrying out the attack, seeing the physical damage that ensued weakened his fortitude and generated some misgivings about the fairness of the violence. For Freddie, however, such thoughts were momentary and he quickly suppressed the apprehension through self-talk strategies (e.g., "get rid of that thought"). In conjunction with these self-talk strategies, Freddie and others constructed a narrative that homeless people, homosexuals, and "hippy kids" were "bad for America," which further suppressed cognitive and emotional controls. In doing so, Freddie was reinforced by the "righteousness" of a white supremacist ideology and was able to attack his victims without succumbing to feelings of empathy, guilt, shame, or personal responsibility.[45]

The second technique for overcoming emotional and cognitive controls involved belonging to an audience that encouraged violence. Overall, 61 participants (100%) belonged to a group that endorsed violence as part of its collective identity, which reinforced this attitude among individual members.[46] Being a member of an extremist group was intrinsically linked to doing violence in the name of the group and unconditionally supporting other extremist members. From this perspective, the collective nature of the group helped individuals overcome potential apprehension associated with fighting and connected violence to expressions of collective support and enjoyment. Street culture, more generally, involves ongoing character contests that affirm dangerousness and the ability to fight, both of which are essential attributes for extremist members and street fighters.[47] In this way, belonging to an extremist group is more than just style or membership; rather, it requires performance. For example,

I had gotten in fights but there was always fear behind that. It was probably like that with a lot of people...but I got these guys behind me and we all have each other's backs. That strengthened my commitment... Also, if you pull back then there's fear of them coming after you because you didn't give it what you should of. It's as if "We're counting on you and you back down then, we're coming after you." So that always made you go. It almost made you want to be the first to punch somebody because then you're the driving force. (Kevin, Interview 9, 7 July 2014)

Kevin's account illustrates a type of "narrative violence" that builds solidarity among group members and communicates a message of group empowerment and racial identity.[48] Although Kevin experienced fear prior to fighting, the group's attitude toward violence played a significant role in strengthening his commitment and overcoming his personal anxieties. At the same time, blending in with the group of attackers diffused Kevin's level of individual identity,[49] which helped to reduce feelings of personal responsibility and fear. Kevin's account also underscores the fear of disappointing or upsetting his fellow group members if he were to lose his nerve and "back down." In this way, Kevin felt a sense of responsibility to prove his usefulness to the group, which reinforced and increased his propensity for aggression.[50]

A third technique we identified involved relying on an element of surprise to execute violent attacks. Almost two-thirds of the sample ($n = 40$; 66%) attacked their targets unexpectedly or pretended to be non-threatening until immediately prior to the attack. In doing so, these individuals prevented the accumulation of fear before it could occur.[51] These attacks were often premeditated action-sequences set in motion prior to the immediate

encounter. For example, Jim describes a situation in which he and another group member lured and attacked their targets without warning.

Me and my buddy Sammy would dress up like square white boys in Polo shirts and pose like we're from New Mexico and we wanted to start getting pounds [of drugs] off these guys. We would show up and they would over charge us...they were all playing the game and they would be like, "alright cool, well I got 2 lbs. I'll give it to you for \$5,000 each" and they are like only \$3,500 each. And we would act all cool and then pull out guns and be like, "get on the floor you fuckin nigger fuck. What do you think we are lame ass white boys?"...We would get Mexicans or Blacks you know gangsters who thought they were tough. We loved having them let their guards down like "look at these square white boys" and then come out with our guns and they would be like, "fuck." (Jim, Interview 46, 10 May 2015)

For Jim, the specifics of the attack (e.g., location, target) were premeditated to exploit the vulnerability of their targets. In addition to possessing a surreptitious advantage, Jim also achieved an advantage in terms of numbers and weaponry, which has also been found among more conventional violent offenders such as violent football hooligans and street fighters.[52] Further, Jim's account illustrates an aspect of street culture by indicating that his targets were "all playing the game." According to Anderson, street culture articulates powerful norms that govern interpersonal public behaviors, especially with regard to violence. As such, street culture outlines the proper way to present oneself in a manner that demands respect and deters acts of victimization from others. [53] Based on this perspective, over charging Jim for the drugs was considered a violation of the street culture that helped to rationalize his actions and remove any guilt that may have disrupted the attack. As a result, Jim does not view his targets as "innocent bystanders" or "civilians" undeserving of being robbed. Rather, they were viewed as willful participants who transgressed the street culture, thus making violent action acceptable, appropriate, and even obligatory. In this way, the likelihood of extremist violence arising is not only defined by the characteristics of the perpetrators (e.g., race, religious/sexual orientation) but also by the cultural context in which it occurs.

Finally, while prior research suggests that people are more likely to behave in an aggressive and punitive manner when their identities are unknown,[54] we identified a substantial number of participants ($n = 47$; 77%) who preferred attacks that involved fighting face-to-face. Subjects often described this style of violence in terms of an expression of masculinity and physical prowess. Masculinity in an extremist context was often constructed in terms of toughness and willingness to use physical force.[55] For example, Stanley discusses the intimate and personal nature of fist-fighting that could not be achieved using a firearm.

What makes us more of a threat is that we are personal. It is a personal thing that you become white power, because you are feeling that your family is being attacked. You want your enemies to feel that personalization when they are attacked....We're going to look you in the eye. We're going to feel your life drain on our hands....We're not some pussy that's going to do drive-bys; its execution. You know who killed you. You know who fucked you up. That's what got me off.... If I don't like you, I'm not going to shoot you from 50 feet away. You have every chance to defend yourself. If you can best me, best me. (Stanley, Interview 11, 14 July 2014)

Like other participants, Stanley's statement suggests some white supremacists adhere to a version of the street culture that glorifies fist fighting over other types of violence.[56] For Stanley, interpersonal violence was more sensual and intimate, which provided him a sense of personalization he could not attain with other types of violence (e.g., drive-bys).[57] In the context of both a willingness to be violent and a cultural association between violence and masculinity,[58] the extremist group provided a means to express individual aggression. In this way, fighting was seen as a proof of manliness, regardless of whether the individual won or lost.[59] Similar to Stanley, other participants often described interpersonal violence as an "alpha male" or masculine endeavor;[60] whereas, shooting or bombing people from a distance was considered weak and cowardly.[61] For these individuals, interpersonal violence reinforced their self-image as a "bad ass" and "Aryan warrior." [62]

As illustrated throughout this section, our participants utilized a variety of techniques for suppressing cognitive and emotional controls, including targeting vulnerable victims, adhering to an audience that encourages

violence, and conducting clandestine attacks.[63] As a departure from some findings of previous research, a substantial portion of our participants did not prefer to remain anonymous by attacking their targets from a distance but rather preferred to fight their opponents face-to-face. Such a departure hints at organizational and ideological factors that exist among white supremacists who often celebrate hyper-masculinity and out-group humiliation. In the next section, we discuss the emotional and cognitive transformation that accompanies habitual extremist violence.

Cognitive and Emotional Transformation

The role of emotion is a key micro-sociological tool for analyzing violent situations.[64] Our data provide insight regarding how individuals interpret violent experiences. In fact, several participants (n = 38; 62%) indicated that fighting was enjoyable, in part, because of the physiological stimulation violence provided. For example, Chester discussed intoxication and the enjoyment he experienced after a fight.

There was definitely some things that were intoxicating about it, especially the power that you felt afterwards. Even if I knew I was going to win the fight, I would be terrified because you had adrenaline going through your body, there's always that fear. I didn't get to enjoy it, not at all, but after that, the knock out effects after is better than any drug. I definitely enjoyed that... there was something intoxicating about winning that you get a high off of. (Chester, Interview 2, 22 October 2013)

Participation in thrilling or dangerous activities is associated with the release of reward-motivated hormones, including norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin.[65] In turn, this physiological reaction, referred to as "fight or flight,"[66] generates a desire for excitement and adventure.[67] Moreover, fighting was also found to provide a shared sense of accomplishment and solidarity among participants.[68] For instance, Chester experienced academic failure (e.g., poor grades) and suspensions from his high school football team. In this way, fighting provided Chester with a feeling of victory or "winning" that he was unable to attain from more conventional outlets.[69] In this sense, violence is attractive because it provides its own reward system that can offset a lack of achievement in others areas of a person's life. Analytically, the importance of this observation is that it implies a desire for violent expression rather than ideology may be the primary initial attraction to extremism. Of course, this finding does not negate the possibility that ideology, over time, becomes a core dimension of what helps sustain a person's commitment.

While most of the sample indicated that fighting was initially frightening, many participants (n = 39; 64%) described a transformation in how they came to view violence. For these individuals, fighting became normalized as a daily or weekly occurrence, which served to desensitize them to emotional and cognitive anxieties. As Toby explains, a number of factors help individuals learn to enjoy violence.

I think that's addictive. The adrenaline rush and the sense of belonging and camaraderie. It was never difficult to find violence. You know bars fights, parties, white power music shows. There was always low hanging fruit everywhere. When your five guys fight eight and win it's like, the feeling you get, the rush from it that was pretty fantastic. I learned to like it... the more you do that stuff, the more desensitized you become. The more I did stuff, the more desensitized I became. If you get punched out than it's nothing a couple beers can't fix anyways right? (Toby, Interview 16, 27 May 2014)

As Toby's account illustrates, violence was not only normalized by its prevalence in the lives of our participants but in many ways was an important source of pleasure. In this way, violence became enjoyable in the sense that it became a defining feature of a fun night out, which also typically included smoking, drinking, and/or attending music shows.[70] In this way, participants were able to transform the monotony of everyday life by engineering violent conflicts.[71] Similar to Toby, Joel describes a transformation in suppressing his fears and becoming desensitized to violent encounters:

I used to avoid fights at all costs. I did not like it. After getting jumped that changed. I no longer felt pity for people. I no longer feared for my own safety. I mean I guess it was kind of the odd thing of getting

beat that badly and a week or two later I am still alive, I am fine and everything functions...I always refer to that line in *Fight Club* where he talks about how once you realize you are not made of glass. And I used to always tell the younger guys you are not made of glass...that was exactly what I was trying to say because violence was such a regular occurrence that eventually I think people just became immune, it no longer was shocking, or the adrenaline no longer went off like it did when you first started fighting. (Joel, Interview 59, 5 October 2015)

Similar to other participants, Joel initially did not enjoy fighting and went to great lengths to avoid violent confrontation. After getting jumped into a white supremacist group, however, Joel gradually developed an immunity toward the shock of fighting because he realized most fights end without serious damage.[72] Moreover, similar to the process of desensitization,[73] the regularity of violence deflated the shock of fighting for Joel and removed any guilt or “pity” he felt toward his targets. Based on this perspective, as Joel became emotionally comfortable with physical conflict, he began to perceive violence as less degrading to those involved and less violent and offensive than he originally thought. Such modified perceptual and affective reactions were then generalized to judgments made about his targets.

As illustrated among these participants, habitual violence can lead to a transformation in the way individuals come to view confrontation. While violence was initially difficult to commit, individuals were able to develop an immunity and became desensitized to cognitive and emotional controls (e.g., fear, hesitation). This may be due to the realization that most fights do not create permanent physical damage or because of the sensual qualities they derive from fighting (e.g., adrenaline rush, feelings of victory). Analytically, the importance of this finding is evidence of behavioral desensitization and change toward violence over time. Although previous research in social psychology has found evidence that exposure to violent video games, television, music, and the internet can alter perceptual views of violent performances,[74] less research has focused on physiological and behavior changes that occur with routine exposure.[75] Our findings take an important step in examining the process through which violence can be normalized and the behavioral effects this can have in reducing the offensiveness and severity of interpersonal violence over time.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was twofold. First, we examined whether white supremacists experienced cognitive and emotional controls prior to violent confrontation and the techniques they utilized to suppress these feelings. In general, participants were able to overcome fear and hesitation by targeting vulnerable victims, adhering to an audience that encouraged violence, and utilizing clandestine attacks. Overall, these findings suggest that irrespective of their ideological convictions, white supremacists experience similar emotional and cognitive pressures toward interpersonal violence as non-extremists. Second, we elaborate on previous research regarding the micro-situational dynamics of violence.[76] In doing so, we illustrated that while participants were initially apprehensive toward violence, some individuals experienced a transformation in how they came to view fighting. For these participants, the habitual nature of extremist violence generated an immunity toward cognitive controls, thus desensitizing them to the psychological barriers associated with violence.

Previous studies suggest that extremist violence is fundamentally different from the broader realm of violent behavior because it is an overtly political act motivated by clear ideological commitments.[77] While radical ideologies are associated with extremist performances, the current study finds important commonalities between violent extremism and generic criminality.

Similar to non-extremists,[78] our participants often discussed broader cultural values surrounding extremist violence such as achieving masculinity, transforming the mundane, and accumulating symbolic capital (i.e., respect, fear). These findings also illustrate that, irrespective of the violent trajectory, extremists must overcome certain micro-conditions (e.g., fear) in order to provoke and channel racial violence—providing additional insight into research by Blee et al.[79]

Moreover, analogous to street gangs, our analyses revealed that participants used violence symbolically and instrumentally across a wide range of criminal activities such as drug and property crimes.[80] Such behavior served to reify boundaries and establish dominance over rivals. Finally, participants discussed the emotional rewards (i.e., “adrenaline fix”) and sensual characteristics that accompanied interpersonal violence, which has also been found among more conventional violent offenders.[81] Overall, these findings indicate that white supremacists, in many ways, resemble members of conventional street gangs and generic criminal offenders.

While there are similarities between the micro-conditions that spark extremist violence and violence in general, there are also important differences. For example, most participants in our sample belonged to a supportive audience that either approved of violent action or, in some cases, required violent performance. Non-extremists who engage in violence are less likely to be immersed in an environment with this level of support, and in some situations, may experience counter-balancing conditions that constrain their proclivities toward violent action (e.g., spouse or friend intervenes and de-escalates an argument). Although there are differences between non-extremist violent offenders and violent extremists, such differences become less apparent when comparing violent extremists to members of prison and street gangs or various types of organized criminal networks.

These findings have important implications for both terrorism researchers and scholars who study more conventional criminal activity. Given the parallels between extremist violence and the broader realm of violent behavior, terrorism scholars should continue leveraging advancements made in the field of criminology. In particular, developmental and life-course theory is well suited to examine a variety of internal (e.g., need for belonging) and external factors (e.g., childhood adversity, economic distress) that occur prior to becoming an extremist and how these experiences influence a person’s willingness to employ violent action following membership. At the same time, criminologists should revisit longstanding assumptions that conceptualize extremism and terrorism as fundamentally distinct from conventional crime. Doing so will provide important opportunities for criminologists to expand the scope of various theoretical frameworks and further clarify the understanding of several important substantive issues such as the intergenerational transmission of antisocial beliefs/values, the onset of offender trajectories, and patterns of criminal desistance and recidivism.

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