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Addicted to Hate: Identity Residual among Former White Supremacists

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Abstract

The process of leaving deeply meaningful and embodied identities can be experienced as a struggle against addiction, with continuing cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses that are involuntary, unwanted, and triggered by environmental factors. Using data derived from a unique set of in-depth life history interviews with 89 former U.S. white supremacists, as well as theories derived from recent advances in cognitive sociology, we examine how a rejected identity can persist despite a desire to change. Disengagement from white supremacy is characterized by substantial lingering effects that subjects describe as addiction. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of identity residual for understanding how people leave and for theories of the self.

Keywords

addiction, symbolic interactionism, identity, culture, racism

The U.S. white supremacist movement represents one of the most enduring political subcultures in American history yet is surprisingly one of the least understood. Following the recent presidential election and the "alt-right's" efforts to rebrand white supremacy to appeal to a younger and more tech-savvy generation, the movement has received greater attention (Futrell and Simi 2017). Yet the alt-right's veneer of normalcy conceals a much deeper culture of hate and violence, in which adherents build a collective identity and participate in an all-encompassing movement lifestyle (Blee 2002; Simi and Futrell 2015). The hardcore and overt elements of the white supremacy movement make it one of the most radical, deviant, and stigmatized social movements in the contemporary United States.[1]

Progress has been made to understand how individuals come to enter the white supremacist movement (Blee 2002; Simi, Sporer, and Bubolz 2016) and the socio-spatial contexts where collective identity is sustained (Futrell and Simi 2004), but much less is known about individual experiences following disengagement from the white supremacist movement. What happens after people leave such an intensive and marginalized lifestyle is a difficult question to answer because scholars tend to focus primarily on identity transformations prior to or at the time of mobilization while neglecting how people may remain tethered to

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a movement identity even after leaving. Moreover, scholars have emphasized activists' cognitive and relational transformations in terms of how individuals embrace new ideas and build new social networks, but research has neglected transformations involving deeper consequences, such as neurophysiological changes that may operate in more automatic ways and reflect alterations in bodily and emotional expressions that endure over time.

To address this gap, we ask the following question: Why do individuals who have already rejected white supremacist ideologies and left the movement (i.e., "formers") have such a difficult time shaking their former thoughts, feelings, and bodily reactions, and, in many cases, come to think of themselves as being addicted to white supremacism? The issue of addiction raises central issues in sociology, especially regarding the relationship between agency and deterministic forces embedded within biological and environmental processes (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson 2015). Addiction is a concept that represents a variety of complex, overlapping processes that implicate social, psychological, and biological forces. As such, when both laypersons and clinicians use the term addiction, they are essentially referring to a bundle of different characteristics or symptoms. In this respect, we are less concerned about whether our subjects are actually addicted to white supremacy and more concerned with their descriptions of involuntary and unwanted thoughts, feelings, bodily responses, and behavior. To be clear, we are not suggesting that hate should become a new addiction diagnosis, but rather pointing to the ways social experiences can become so engraved in our interactions, psyche, and body that the parallels between identity residual and addiction become an interesting point of exploration.

This article relies on extensive life history interviews with 89 former U.S. white supremacist activists who were members of the overlapping networks (Burris, Smith, and Strahm 2000) of racist groups in the movement's four major branches: Ku Klux Klan, Christian Identity, neo-Nazi, and racist skinheads (Barkun 1997; Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 2000; McVeigh 2009). Organizational and doctrinal differences exist across these networks, but all share fundamental ideas such as the impending catastrophe of "white racial genocide" and the view that a multicultural society is antithetical to the interests of European-Americans (Zeskind 2009).

On the one hand, conventional wisdom suggests white supremacists are entirely consumed by hatred and thus the prospect of change seems unlikely ("once a hater, always a hater"). In this sense, being addicted to hate might make sense. On the other hand, previous studies note the high burn-out rate among members of the white supremacist movement and the substantial retention efforts initiated by various groups to sustain participation (Blee 2002; Simi and Futrell 2015). The question is not whether people can leave white supremacist hate groups, as they clearly do, but rather what happens after they leave?

White supremacist identity provides an important case to examine several broader theoretical concerns. Many treatments of identity change focus on either the stages of transformation (Athens 1995; Ebaugh 1988; Prochaska et al. 1991) or the conscious, intentional dimensions of self-change (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Kiecolt 1994). Less is known, however, about the neurocognitive dynamics related to involuntary and unwanted aspects of identity residual. Identities are constructed and performed through situational occasions, so when situations are routinized, insular, and involve extreme hatred, the persistence of these identities may be much greater than previously thought. In this sense, disengagement is not really the end of that identity. Instead, a whole other layer of unwanted and involuntary thoughts, feelings, bodily reactions, and behaviors may persist and continue to shape a person's life.

DISENGAGEMENT, RESIDUAL AND ADDICTION

Scholars use the term "disengagement" (Ebaugh 1988; see also Vaughan 1986; Wright 1991) to describe physical and psychological withdrawal from particular identities or roles.

The continuing influence an identity or role may exert following disengagement is what Ebaugh (1988) refers to as "residual" or "hangover identity." More than 50 years ago, Anslem Strauss (1959:97–98) observed that disengagement from an identity may generate reactions similar to addiction: "The fuller meaning of temptation is this: you are withdrawing from an old psychological status and coming into a new, and in doing so something akin to the withdrawal symptoms of drug addiction occurs." But not all identities or roles involve residual. As Turner (1978:1) explains, "Some roles are put on and taken off like clothing without lasting effects. Other roles are difficult to put aside when a situation is changed and continue to shape the way in which many of the individual roles are performed." Yet, this point tells us little about the characteristics associated with identities that result in substantial residual, and few sociologists since Strauss have considered the addictive qualities that highly salient identities may produce. As such, our goal here is to analyze the social processes that produce qualities similar to addiction after leaving a highly salient identity. We do so by applying DiMaggio's (2002) typology of cognition to the experiences of identity residual among former white supremacists and analyzing how these individuals develop self-talk strategies to resist such consequences.

A growing number of studies examine the factors that prompt the initial point of disengagement, but what happens following a person's disengagement from a highly salient identity such as white supremacism has received little scholarly attention. Existing studies of disengagement from political extremism tend to focus on the disengagement process as a discrete end point. Beyond this end point, individuals are assumed to begin another phase of life (post-extremism) that involves a new process of identity formation with new social roles and networks. In short, the person starts a new life. But life does not unfold in this type of linear fashion with clear-cut phases of beginning and ending (Wacquant 1990). Rather, as we analyze, a core identity sometimes lingers in a person's life after the person no longer holds that identity. As such, a former identity never truly disappears; we thus conceptualize becoming and disengagement as contiguous and emergent processes deeply tied together and ultimately inseparable.

Our focus is not *why* white supremacists disengage,[2] but rather the habitual and unwanted thoughts, feelings, physiological responses, and behavior that can follow exit. Although we cannot definitively conclude whether involvement in hate produces a form of addiction, the empirical evidence we present provides a strong starting point to further consider the sociological significance of addiction and the extent to which social processes are embedded in psychological and physiological ones. Although the sociological literature is rife with references to the addictive qualities associated with identity (e.g., hangover, residual), surprisingly few studies extend beyond the metaphorical to investigate the empirical overlap between residual and addiction. We use the term addiction cautiously in order to avoid older tendencies that pathologized deviant behavior (Lemert 1951). Sociological critiques of psychopathology, however, sometimes suggest an artificial distinction between broader social processes and supposedly individual-level phenomena. In contrast, we consider identity residual and addiction as reflecting the intersection between psychological, biological, and sociological processes.

The possibility of social processes having addictive qualities is supported by burgeoning neuroscience research that identifies how the consumption of licit and illicit drugs activates certain neural pathways that increase dopamine in the reward circuit (Goldstein and Volkow 2011). As Reinarman (2005:309) notes, studies have identified similar neurological consequences for a number of non-drug activities, such that people will like and thus tend to repeat "anything you can do that turns on these dopamine neurons." This is not a trivial realization, but rather points to the possibility that under certain conditions (e.g., strong ties, high levels of commitment, long-term exposure) social environments and related identities may generate neuro-physiological changes that over time mimic addiction.

IDENTITY AND COGNITIVE SOCIOLOGY

A long tradition within sociology focuses on the development of different types of identity, including distinguishing between personal and collective identities (Burke 1980; Cooley 1902; Mead 1934; Snow 2001; Stryker 1968). Identities are defined as part of a person's overall sense of self—"the meanings one has as a group member, as a role holder, or as a person" (Stets and Burke 2003:132)—and involve "self-cognitions tied to roles and thus to positions in organized social relations" (Stryker 2000:28). Identities function at conscious levels, through deliberate action, and at unconscious levels, as individuals process stimuli without awareness (Burke and Stets 2009; Erikson 1959). One's degree of commitment to an identity-related role specifies its salience. Identities, roles, and behavior are inextricably intertwined. Role behavior is the basis for identity, and identities strongly move people to actions that express these meanings (Stryker 2000). When an identity cuts across multiple dimensions (personal, social, and collective) and involves a deeply meaningful and emotion-laden set of associations and commitments, disengagement from that identity is likely to involve substantial residual (Thoits 1992). These are the kind of identities formed in marginalized insular groups that cultivate strong emotions such as extreme hatred.[3]

Cognitions, Emotions, and Residual

To provide a deeper analysis of residual related to rejected identities, we turn to recent developments in cognitive sociology that integrate advances from the neurosciences (Cerulo 2010, 2014; Ignatow 2009, 2014). We rely on several concepts to explain different types of cognition and emotion and their relationship to identity residual. In particular, automatic cognition characterizes rapid, unintentional thoughts or fast cognition, whereas deliberate cognition refers to more reflective, planned thinking, or slow cognition (Cerulo 2010, 2014; DiMaggio 2002). The speed of cognition has been an area of recent sociological interest (Moore 2017; Vaisey 2009) and underscores the potential sociological relevance of dual process models from the cognitive neurosciences (Lizardo et al. 2016). Dual process models argue that humans rely on two types of cognitive processing: system 1 is fast and largely unconscious, and system 2 processing is slower and conscious (Kahneman 2011; Moore 2017).

Neuroscientists have also described another dimension of cognition, called hot and cold, which refers to the extent that emotional affect is part of a particular cognition. Hot cognition involves a heightened response to stimuli, one that is saturated with a high degree of emotion. In contrast, cold refers to unemotional, calculating thought (Cerulo 2010; Ignatow 2014). The consideration of emotion distinguishes the hot–cold continuum from the automatic–deliberate continuum.

As an effort to synthesize these various aspects of cognition, DiMaggio (2002) proposed a typology that contrasts four cognitive combinations across two dimensions: hot–cold and deliberate–automatic. Cognition that combines automatic and hot orientations corresponds with impulsive, stereotyped action, such as adherence to a strong and rigid ideology, that we argue is most likely to characterize experiences with identity residual. Within the realm of politics, cognitive sociologists have also examined how the strength of a person's ideology can influence cognitive style such that strong ideologies have "preorganized the world so as to make effortless, efficient associations" (Martin and Desmond 2010:9). Individuals with strong ideologies hold more available schematic information than do those with weak ideologies, and thus they are more likely to engage in automatic cognition and avoid deliberate cognition. This characterization is consistent with extreme hatred, which typically involves rigid boundaries of "us" and "them" and various types of dehumanization (Sternberg 2005). Hot and automatic cognition related to a strong ideology are especially important for understanding potential similarities between addiction and the persistence of a rejected identity (Gladwin and Figner 2014).

The strength of ideology is an important dimension to add to the hot–cold and automatic–deliberate typology. Related to ideology, we think two factors are especially important for understanding when identity residual is most likely to involve addiction-like qualities. First, when identities are highly salient a large portion of a person's life is organized around that identity (Burke 1980). When a highly salient identity involves participation in an insular social movement, the person may develop a dense set of social ties while simultaneously becoming isolated from nonmembers (McAdam 1989; Polletta 1999). The diminished presence of nonmember relationships magnifies the intensity and influence of relationships within the movement.

Second, identities that involve extreme hatred related to group-based prejudices, or what Fromm (1973) called "character-conditioned hate," are likely to produce identity residual. Part of white supremacism includes a central focus on hate, which can be defined as a strong cognitive and emotional disposition toward particular objects, groups, or individuals (Sternberg 2005). When directed at a social group, hate often refers to extreme dislike associated with prejudice that provokes aggressive impulses (Allport 1954), a process that is social-interactional as well as neuro-cognitive (Blee 2004; Zeki and Romaya 2008). Emotion is an important dimension of social movements more broadly (Berezin 2001; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Jasper 1998), but not all movements focus on extreme hatred in this respect. Movement identities that do involve high levels of extreme hatred are thus likely to produce different types of personal consequences for those activists.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ADDICTION AND HABIT

The addiction concept remains somewhat peripheral within sociology (for exceptions, see Denzin 1993; Graham et al. 2008; Hughes 2007; Lindesmith [1968] 2008; Ray 1961; Weinberg 1997, 2000, 2002, 2011), but habit has received renewed interest (Bennett et al. 2013; Crossley 2013), including recognition of its long-standing significance within classical social theory (Camic 1986). The habitual dimensions of behavior are generally understood as durable generalized dispositions that permeate an entire domain, or even the entire course, of a person's life (Bennett et al. 2013; Camic 1986).

Addiction, on the other hand, can be defined as thoughts, emotions, bodily experiences, and unwanted behavior of a chronic, relapsing, and compulsive nature that occur despite negative consequences and are characterized by episodes where people feel they have lost control (Boshears, Boeri, and Harbry 2011; Dingel et al. 2012; Marks 1990). Addiction implies an element of unwanted and negative consequences that are present in some (but not all) types of habitual behavior.

Although addiction can be understood as a form of habitual behavior (Graybiel 2008; LaRose, Lin, and Eastin 2003; Lindesmith [1968] 2008; Weinberg 1997, 2000, 2002, 2011), the line between habit and addiction is currently unclear. In colloquial terms, an addiction is often referred to as a "bad habit" or a "hard habit to break." More recently, neuroscience studies suggest a substantial overlap between the transition from goal-directed to habit-driven behavior and addiction (Bergen-Cico et al. 2014; Goldstein and Volkow 2011; Graybiel 2008). Following Everitt and Robbins (2005) and Marlatt and colleagues (1988), we argue that addiction is a type of habit. Not all habit can be described as addiction, but all addiction involves habitual behavior. At the same time, it is unclear how broadly the term addiction should be applied to habitual behavior, as evidenced in the controversies over the growing number of behaviors now referred to as "behavioral addictions" (e.g., game-playing, Internet use, excessive sexual behavior) (LaRose et al. 2003; Marks 1990; for a critique of expanded definitions, see Akers 1991).

Embodying Addiction

To understand how the addictive qualities of white supremacism are experienced through—but also projected outward from—the bodies of participants, we turn to two strands of scholarship on the social body (Crossley 1995; Howson and Inglis 2001; Turner 1997). The phenomenological writings of Merleau-Ponty (1982) are the foundation for one line of research on the intertwined nature of the corporal body and subjectivity. In one example, he describes how soccer players absorb the lines of the field into their sense of self until players and the field in which they play become indistinguishable. The ways the body intersects with personal identity, experience, and perception are similarly described in scholarship on how physical limitations condition how people see themselves and the outside world (Turner 1997).

A second line of scholarship considers the body as a site from which cultural symbols are projected—for example, in the bodily performances of various athletes. Although the two research trajectories are distinct, Turner (1997) argues that they intersect in Bourdieu's concept of *habitus,* in which the body is understood as both socially constructed to hold cultural representations and lived within a complex web of social relationships and interactions. Recent sociological studies of the body draw from both traditions, such as Wacquant's (2004; see also Wacquant 2014, 2015) "carnal ethnography" that considers bodily construction and practices in a boxing gym, or Crossley's (2001, 2006) work on "embodied reflexivity" that positions the body as mediating social practices and personal intentionality.

This dual theoretical perspective is particularly useful for understanding the construction and residual effects of a white supremacist identity that individuals continue to experience. Moreover, research on the body is useful for thinking about how addiction to hate becomes etched in physicality and performance while simultaneously serving as a perceptual lens to which people return after leaving white supremacism. Indeed, addictive-like qualities are embedded within a broad range of human behavior, in part because environmental features are processed through social (e.g., interaction, networks, situational) and biological (e.g., physical capacity, size, attractiveness of stimuli) mechanisms to produce habitual behavior. Previous studies highlight the social aspects involved in the formation of addiction, but less attention has been given to the possibility that social processes themselves may have addictive qualities.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Sample

Sociologists studying deviance use innovative approaches to gain entry into any subcultural environment, but two factors make access to former members of organized hate groups particularly difficult. First, former white supremacists are often loath to be identified as such. They fear that information about their prior affiliations or activities will expose them to violence by current extremists, to legal prosecution, or to sanctions by current employers, neighbors, family members, child protection agencies, and others. Second, unlike current members, former extremists cannot be found through network ties or spatial locations, since most seek to sever all connections to their previous lives. Because there is no way to compile a list of former members to serve as a sampling frame, we identified interviewees by snowball sampling from multiple starts to ensure variety in the location and type of extremist group (Wright et al. 1992). 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, lecture series), and using referrals from our project partners.[4] Because we used multiple individuals to generate unique snowballs, only a small

segment of the participants were acquainted with each other.

Our sampling method resulted in life history interviews with 89 former members of U.S. white supremacist groups. Participants were interviewed in the places they now live, with 85 located in 24 states across all regions of the United States and four in Canada. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 61, and included an unusual gender diversity with 68 men and 21 women. Among respondents, 11 described their current socioeconomic status as lower class, 42 as working class, 31 as middle class, and five as upper class. They had participated in white supremacism from three to twenty-one years. A large portion had extensive histories of criminal conduct, including property offenses such as shoplifting, vandalism, and other forms of property destruction, and a variety of violent offenses such as murder, attempted murder, street fights, violent initiation rituals, and bomb-making. Of the 89 participants, 69 reported a history of violent offending, 77 reported a history of delinquent activity, and 39 had spent time in prison.

To be clear, the individuals in this sample no longer identify as "white power" and are no longer affiliated with organized hate groups. All of the individuals currently see themselves as "formers" or something equivalent to a former (e.g., "I'm not involved anymore," "I moved on"). In some cases, individuals have been disengaged for more than a decade and have experienced substantial changes in their social and cognitive orientations (e.g., interracial marriage; conversion to Buddhism). In this sense, the residual we identify does not reflect individuals moving from a high level of extremism to a lower level of extremism, but instead characterizes individuals who experienced substantial transformation.

Procedures and Data Analysis

We established rapport prior to interviews through regular contact with participants via telephone and e-mail. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol and in private settings such as hotel rooms and residential homes and public settings such as restaurants and coffee shops.[5] 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 (McAdams 1997). Subjects were asked to describe their childhood experiences as an initial starting point. The interviews included questions about broad phases of the subject's extremism, such as entry, involvement, and disengagement, with probes to encourage subjects to elaborate on aspects of their life histories. Subjects were periodically asked direct questions to focus on specific topic areas, but the interviews relied on an unstructured format intended to generate unsolicited data embedded in their personal narratives. We view the elicited narratives as instructive in terms of assessing how individuals make sense of their lives (Blee 1996; Copes, Hochstetler, and Forsyth 2013; Giordano et al. 2015; McAdams 1997). 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. Interviewing former extremists as opposed to current ones allowed us to elicit information on highly sensitive issues such as previous involvement in violence, crime, and substance abuse.

The interviews lasted between four and more than eight hours and generated 10,882 pages of transcripts, which indicates the level of detail provided by the life histories. We used modified grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; see also Berg 2007; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Miles and Huberman 1994), in order 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.[6] The constant interaction with data also involved a virtual ongoing analysis and identification of social processes that affected each new round of interviews. The initial data coding began by reading entire interview transcripts line-by-line to determine differences and similarities

within and across our subjects. Subsequent coding techniques helped identify and extract relevant empirical and conceptual properties and organize the data into similar concepts. Inductive codes emerged from the initial phase of line-by-line analysis (Berg 2007; Charmaz 2006; Lofland et al. 2006). Deductive codes were extracted from scholarly literature on white supremacism, group affiliation, disengagement, and related topics. After developing the initial codes, we compared and contrasted data themes, noting relations between them, and moving back and forth between first-level data and general categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Miles and Huberman 1994). Analysis of these interviews also required balancing between accepting and decoding the subjects' narratives. For example, narrated statements about addiction may reflect a larger cultural tendency to frame deviant behavior in medical terms (Conrad 1975; Schneider 2015) and actors' tendency to adopt readily available discursive models that absolve them of responsibility for past and current behavior. Yet it is also important to consider the possibility that addictive qualities may actually characterize certain types of identities. We return to this issue in the conclusion.

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 (Bridge and Paller 2012). Despite these concerns, the rich life history accounts provide important insight from the subjects' perspective. Second, due to the relatively hidden nature of this population, we derived the sample through snowball techniques, which means it is not representative and we cannot generalize from these findings. The goal of a grounded theory approach, however, is to develop a conceptual explanation that closely fits the data (or incidents) the concepts are intended to represent. Grounded theory is not intended to provide generalizations, but the hypotheses developed can be tested in future studies.