
Identity Reconfiguration and the Core Needs Framework: Exit Narratives among Former Far-Right Extremists

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Abstract

This empirical study examines intensive interview data collected from eight (N=8) former members of white supremacist organizations in order to understand the meanings of exit – that is, disengagement and deradicalization – from the extremist’s perspective. Using a thematic analysis approach, our findings build on the distinction in the existing exit literature between push and pull factors and the process of role exit identified by Ebaugh (1988). These push and pull factors as well as social identity, we argue, are subsumed within a complex exit process, which includes disengagement, identity deconstruction, and transgressive and transitional relationships. For some, this process culminated in an accomplished identity reconstruction and deradicalization. Most importantly, our findings suggest that exit is linked to entry by a developmental drive that we call the participant’s core need. The core need was the background motivator of entry, disengagement, exit, and ultimately deradicalization. We think that this identity reconfiguration and core needs framework may help make heterogenous exit trajectories that have remained puzzling for researchers more understandable.

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Introduction

While there has been a long-standing research interest in terrorism, radicalization, and the processes that drive individuals to join extremist groups, understanding how individuals decide to disengage from extremist groups and the related process of deradicalization has been less well understood (Bjorgo, 2011; Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; 2013; Horgan, 2009; Sageman, 2004). Indeed, many scholars view the research on exit as

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being in an early stage of development, particularly compared to the research on radicalization. For instance, a recent review of the disengagement literature (Windisch, Simi, Ligon, & McNeel, 2016) cited only 114 academic studies examining disengagement from “ideologically based organizations” conducted between 1970 and 2015, with a particular upsurge in the literature after 2009 and the publication of two major empirical contributions regarding the process of exit (see Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009).

In addition to being in the early stages of development, the disengagement literature also suffers from a lack of methodological transparency and consistency (Harris, Simi, & Ligon, 2016). The disengagement research has typically been examined from multiple disciplinary perspectives (e.g., sociology, psychology, criminology, political science) that are not always compatible methodologically or conceptually, making comparison among findings challenging. Moreover, even though there have been calls for methodological transparency and proposed guidelines for researchers conducting studies in terrorism more broadly (c.f., Harris, Simi, & Ligon, 2016), there seems to be a persistent tension between quantitative and qualitative approaches and a conflation of standards between them that further confounds methodological challenges in terrorism research (Fisher-Smith, Sullivan, Macready, & Manzi, in press).

Another problem regarding the exit literature concerns the consistent use of terms. Take, for example, the widely used terms “disengagement” and “deradicalization” (Windisch et al., 2016). In our work, we utilize definitions from Horgan (2009), where disengagement is considered to be a change in role or function of an individual within a violent extremist group (p. 152). This understanding of disengagement suggests that individuals who may no longer be motivated to participate in roles or activities of the group may still remain cognitively committed to the ideology of the extremist group. Deradicalization, on the other hand, is defined as the process of reducing cognitive, affective, and behavioral commitments to the extremist ideology and its associated violence (Horgan, 2009, p. 153). Regardless of however much each term implies different underlying meanings and mechanisms, Windisch et al. (2016) note that many researchers continue to use the terms interchangeably.

In the context of the ongoing research on disengagement and deradicalization and its continuing development, the literature has established the importance of generalizable “push” and “pull” factors that impact both the entry and exit processes (Altier, Thoroughgood & Horgan, 2014; Bjorgo, 2009; Della Porta, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Koehler, 2017). In terms of the exit process, push factors have been described as internal organizational factors that encourage the individual to leave the extremist organization, while “pull” factors include outside influences such as social roles or familial pressures that attract the individual away from the organization. After reviewing the exit literature, Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan (2014) identified a list of push and pull factors. Common push factors included unmet expectations, disillusionment with the actions of the terrorist group or with its membership, difficulty adapting to a clandestine lifestyle, inability to cope with the psychological or physiological effects of violence, loss of faith in ideology, and burnout (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014). Common pull factors included competing loyalties, positive interactions with moderates, employment and/or educational opportunities, desire to marry or establish a family/family demands, financial incentives, and amnesty (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014). Even though the push/pull framework is fairly well established in the literature, some researchers view the framework as “underdeveloped and descriptive” given researchers’ inability to discern the frequencies with which push and pull factors occur or how such factors interact with third variables, such as the specific demographic characteristics of the individual extremist (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014, p. 650; Windisch, Ligon, & Simi, 2017). In other words, which push and pull factors are influential with which specific extremists and why?

One effort to understand the disengagement/deradicalization distinction and the push/pull framework more clearly is Altier et al. (2017), which analyzed data from eighty-seven terrorist autobiographies. Results indicate that push factors, particularly disillusionment with the group’s actions, leaders, members, and day-to-day actions, were more likely than pull factors to be reported as playing a role in exit. Their results also revealed that while deradicalization and disillusionment with the group’s ideology was

important for some, it was not reported to be a leading cause for leaving a terrorist organization nor was it a condition for leaving. Hence, it was possible for an individual to disengage and remain radicalized.

In addition to the push/pull framework, other theoretical models that have been relevant to questions regarding exit have emerged from sociology and psychology (Ebaugh, 1988; Kruglanski, Gelfand, Belanger, Sheveland, Hetiarachchi & Gunaratna, 2014; Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009; Rusbult, 1983). Of particular interest to us is Ebaugh's (1988) research regarding the process of voluntary role exit and Kruglanski's counterfinality model (CFMR) of radicalism (2009, 2014). Regarding the process of voluntary role exit, Ebaugh (1988) outlines four major stages of the exit process. The first stage includes a *period of doubting*, which Ebaugh (1988) describes as a period in which exiters begin to doubt their "role commitments" (pp. 41, 182). Various events can trigger these doubts, including organizational changes in the group to which one is affiliated or changes in relationships. The second stage is described as a *period of seeking and evaluating alternative roles*, although Ebaugh (1988) notes that this period of seeking and evaluating is not necessarily deliberate or analytical, and some exiters only have a "vague or general awareness" of available and viable alternatives (p. 87). Ebaugh (1988) argues that the third stage is characterized by a *turning point and decision to exit*, as well as an almost universally described "vacuum experience," in which the exiter finds him or herself "ungrounded," and "rootless," suspended temporally between the past and one's previous identity and an unknown future and an as yet unestablished social role (pp. 143-145, 184). The fourth and final stage culminates in the challenge of *creating the ex-role*, which includes the "challenge of incorporating a previous role identity into a current self-concept" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 149). For Ebaugh (1988), one of the hallmarks of the ex-role is the exiter's attempt to manage what she describes as "role residual" or vestiges of one's previous identity or social role as one moves into a new social role. While some scholars view Ebaugh's work as extremely valuable to understanding the exit process, they also note limitations, including the

linear stages that characterize the theory, and the lack of empirical research which might validate the sequential stages (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014).

Unlike Ebaugh (1988), Kruglanski's counterfinality model of radicalism (CFMR) is less sociological and emphasizes psychological factors, specifically, an underlying motivational factor he describes as the "quest for significance" (p. 73). According to Kruglanski et al. (2014), the quest for significance is the "fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, to have respect" (p. 73), and he views many of the motivations for terrorism as special cases of the significance quest. Kruglanski's model is complex, and he argues that in order for radicalization to occur, the significance quest must be activated through one of three channels – through a loss of significance or humiliation; through an anticipated significance loss or avoidance; or through an opportunity for significance gain or incentive (Kruglanski et al., 2014, p. 74). Kruglanski et al. (2014) also note that radicalization unfolds over time, and includes not only activation of the significance quest, but also "identification of terrorism/violence as the appropriate means to significance" and a "commitment shift" toward terrorist-related goals (p. 74). Finally, Kruglanski et al. (2009, 2014) recognize that in order for radicalization to occur, additional factors must be in place, including ideology, which provides a means to the goal of attaining significance, as well as a social process or network which facilitates contact with ideology (p. 80). The model is described as "counterfinal" in that individuals become radicalized when they commit to increasingly violent action in the service of ideological goals, but at the cost of incompatible non-violent goals.

Taking a more holistic stance, Kruglanski et al. (2014) also contend that radicalization and deradicalization are related phenomena with one concept acting as a mirror image of the other. That is, deradicalization is conceptualized as a reversal of radicalization. The authors elaborate, "Radicalization reflects increased commitment to the ideological quest for significance and to the violent means of its pursuit, coupled with reduced commitment to alternative, incompatible pursuits. Deradicalization constitutes a decreased commitment to the ideological goal accompanied by a resurgence of alternative pursuits and objectives" (Kruglanski et al., 2014, p. 87).

In many ways, our own research reflects the research of Ebaugh (1988) and Kruglanski et al. (2014). While Ebaugh (1988) did not limit her research interest to extremism, her model of role exit as well as Kruglanski's concept of significance quest were important theoretical backdrops for our own work. Our research focuses on the meaning that individuals give their voluntary disengagement from far-right extremism – in particular, disengagement from white supremacist organizations. We used a qualitative approach which prioritizes these participant meanings, and among the questions that our research asked was how an individual who had formerly affiliated with such an extremist group came to understand that exit was imperative, and how that leaving unfolded. While we were influenced by the existing research literature and were theoretically sensitive to concepts including “disengagement,” “deradicalization,” push and pull factors, and other theoretical perspectives regarding exit including identity and social role formation, we were nevertheless open and attuned to the particularity of the narratives of disengagement that our participants had to tell.

For instance, given our qualitative methodological approach, it would have been impossible and inappropriate to employ push or pull factors in our data in an efficient causal or predictive manner. Alternatively, what emerged in our participants' narratives was a highly complex *process of disengagement*, which included deconstructing and reconfiguring one's identity through the roles of both transgressive and transitional relationships, only later culminating for some in an accomplished identity and deradicalization. Our emphasis on the complex particulars of the individual process is not to say that push and pull factors were unimportant. Indeed, they are present in our findings, but integrated in different ways across the process of disengagement. Obviously we also do not wish to suggest that the concept of identity or motivational factors were unimportant in our findings. These factors emerged as well, but not in the prescribed manner that Ebaugh (1988) or Kruglanski et al. (2009, 2014) might suggest. The major question that emerged in our analysis and findings regarded the *intersection* of self-identity, social role, and psychological development including the role of developmental challenges and how these are encountered as salient for the individual across

exit. It is this intersection of the sociological, psychological, and relational that we found most interesting in our investigation of disengagement and deradicalization.

Additionally, our findings suggested that we could not understand the meanings of disengagement and deradicalization without understanding the meanings of radicalization, but not simply as a mirror or reversal of one another. Rather, entry and exit were inextricably linked in an over-arching gestalt that included a primary motive or core need which emerged out of an individual's background developmental context. The emergence of the developmental core need emphasized the dynamic intersection between psychological factors, social role and social identity factors, and development, while underscoring the impossibility of reducing any one factor to another.

Method

Participants

Our research group conducted eight semi-structured interviews with individuals formerly affiliated with white supremacist organizations. While these eight participants constituted the original sample, the research is on-going. We conducted face-to-face interviews, either in person, or by video link, and our participants included one woman and seven men, and both European and North American subjects. The participants ranged in age from 37 to 56 years. The in-depth interviews were variable in duration, lasting between 45 and 120 minutes. In order to prepare for the in-depth interviews, we developed eleven semi-structured interview questions which served to guide the interviews with participants (see Table 1). Ebaugh's (1988) model regarding role exit helped guide our initial thinking regarding these questions, but as we established working relationships with our research participants, our interview questions organically evolved based on the emergent dialogue with our participants. Additionally, one of our lead researchers is a clinical psychologist with extensive experience in clinical interviewing, and this clinical experience also impacted how the interview questions developed and evolved over time. The semi-structured interview

format was flexible, in that it allowed us to both guide the interview process and query our participants according to our research questions. It also allowed our participants to shape the process as well, since we were open to where the dialogue might take us. Hence, we viewed the semi-structured format as a collaborative process. All interviews were later transcribed according to the Baylor University Institute for Oral History Style Guide.

Table 1. A listing of semi-structured research questions used in our qualitative study with former far right extremists regarding the processes of disengagement and deradicalization

1. Describe your first encounter with members of the organization that you joined.
2. What were the immediate benefits of joining the organization? (How were these benefits important to you)?
3. Can you tell me about your family ? (Characterize your home-life? Your relationship with your siblings? Relationship with parents? Religiosity ? Community ?)
4. Did you experience any conflict with the beliefs or values of the organization when you joined? If so, how did you overcome it?
5. What were the reasons that led you to leave the organization? How long did it take for you to leave ; how did that process unfold?
6. Describe your feelings after you left.
7. Once you left the organization, how did your beliefs and values change over time?
8. Are you still in contact with members of the organization? Have you helped others leave the organization and how is that significant or meaningful for you?
9. Have you formed new relationships outside of the organization?
10. Do you fear reprisals from members of the organization?
11. Did leaving the organization give you a different perspective on issues (e.g., life, relationships, jobs, skills, others)?

In order to recruit appropriate participants, we used convenience and snowball sampling techniques. All the interviews except one were conducted by the lead researcher and another member of our research team. Circumstances dictated that one of the interviews be conducted by a single member of our team rather than the usual two. Our success in recruiting appropriate research participants was facilitated by one of the members of our research team, who had already made contact with a high profile “former” extremist. This “former” had made a public exit from an extremist group primarily through the media. Our group member’s contact with this high profile “former” served as legitimation for our group and facilitated initial introductions to other “former extremists,” and these introductions “snow-balled” into further introductions in a broad web-like manner.

Participants were also asked to complete a short on-line demographic survey. Five of the original sample of eight participants completed this survey. While we had permission in the research consent documents to follow up with our participants through email or other forms of communication, some of our participants are no longer traceable through their original forms of contact information, and hence, some data has been lost through attrition. Survey results indicate that participants’ employment at the time of their involvement in the far-right extremist organization ranged from non-skilled jobs including laborers to technically skilled jobs such as electrician, sales, and full-time “work” as an extremist. Employment following disengagement from the far-right extremist group varied, and included social work, public speaking, education, and working in the non-profit sector. Three participants indicated they had been married; one participant noted two common law marriages; one participant noted a history of divorce and one participant noted no history of marriage. Four participants reported having children.

In addition to conducting semi-structured interviews with participants and requesting that participants complete an on-line demographic survey, our research team also analyzed additional archival material to better corroborate and contextually situate our participants’ interviews. In some cases, participants had published memoirs addressing their entry and exit from far-right extremist organizations, and in these cases, we used our interview questions as

guiding frameworks to select text from the memoirs as additional archival material to analyze. In other cases, participants were included in filmed documentaries regarding far-right extremist organizations or in other media, and we used a similar approach, applying our research questions as guiding structures to better frame the analysis of the content in various media. In all cases of archival material, the goal was to supplement the semi-structured interview data with additional archival content to better contextualize and ultimately understand our participants' experience of disengagement and deradicalization. This study received ethical approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Dallas.

Approach

Our approach to the transcribed interview texts utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative thematic analysis. We adopted this methodology for its six-phase procedural rigor as well as the method's flexibility. Braun & Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis (TA) as a "method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). A theme typically expresses something salient in the data set in response to the research question, and "represents some level of patterned response or meaning" within the textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82.) In our analysis we found that themes typically arose across multiple participants' data.

Additionally, our analysis tended to proceed in an inductive or bottom-up fashion. That is, the themes that we identified were strongly linked to the actual textual data, and we were not attempting to fit the textual data within a pre-existing coding frame. This is referred to as semantic coding in which themes and analysis are based on the explicit meanings of the participants' words and language. That being said, our own theoretical position and values regarding qualitative research acknowledge that researcher bracketing is impossible. Indeed, our epistemological and ontological commitments are broadly phenomenological and hermeneutic, meaning that we give priority to the meaningful contexts of human "lived" experience, and we assume this lived experience is best accessed through the researcher's interpretive and embedded frame of reference

From this phenomenological and hermeneutic perspective, it is important for researchers to be clear regarding their own interpretive frame of reference regarding the textual data, because this interpretive frame is impossible to escape (Fisher-Smith et al., in press). Indeed, interpretation and understanding are inextricably linked in the hermeneutic tradition (Gadamer, 1960/1979), and hence, we were always involved in a recursive process of seeking to understand and interpret our participants' meanings. The potential danger is that the researcher may become entangled in a loop of confirmation bias, seeing only what he or she wants to see or interpret. From a hermeneutic (Gadamer, 1960/1979; Ricoeur, 1976) perspective, one remedy to this danger lies in being open to the alterity of the text.

Another is to cultivate an awareness of the assumptions and biases that might be orienting the very effort to understand (Gadamer, 1960/1979). In the case of our research, we maintained a theoretical sensitivity to the meanings of "disengagement" and "deradicalization" which permeated the empirical literature, as we analyzed the data and remained open to how our participants idiographically described their experience. Additionally, while our textual analysis was bottom-up, we tended to approach themes *interpretively*, moving from the level of summary and description, in which we organized themes to "show patterns in semantic content" to interpretation, in which we attempted to show patterns of meaning and signification that were not necessarily explicit in the text itself. This kind of interpretive or even latent analysis attempted to capture how participants were actively framing and structuring their world and relationships. However, much of this framing and structuring is often outside of the participants' immediate awareness, because it is lived rather than thematically known.

Procedure & Analysis

After being transcribed, the interview transcripts were compiled in an electronic database and checked for accuracy against audio recordings by research assistants and by the primary researchers. No corrections were made to grammar or syntax, but interviews were recorded and transcribed exactly as stated by participants (including all verbal and non-verbal

utterances). Any personal identifiers were removed from transcriptions. TA is not a linear, but a recursive process that requires constant movement between the textual data and analysis. Additionally, the procedures are not hard and fast rules, but guidelines that should be tailored to fit the research question and context. The first step of TA includes *familiarizing oneself with the textual data*. This often includes immersing oneself in the data by reading, and re-reading the transcripts, and in our case, also by listening to the original interview recordings, because they give the researcher a sense of meaning by way of tone of voice, inflection, and pace of the interview among other factors. This immersion is not a familiarization in the sense of increasing one's learning or memory of the text, but rather requires what Churchill et al. (1998) describe as “empathic dwelling” with the data, in which the researcher enters into “direct, personal contact with the psychological event being studied” (p. 65). The point is not to challenge the veracity of the participant's narrative or to explain it, but rather to *understand* it through his or her world.

The second step of TA includes *generating codes from the data*. Coding is typically an initial way of organizing the textual data into meaningful groups by identifying a feature of the data that is interesting or relevant to the researcher. In our research, data extracts – chunks of textual data that are literally extracted from the larger transcript – were coded. Codes were organized manually into an electronic document (initially organized by transcript) with tabled columns for the extract and the codes related to the extract. The third step of TA *refocuses the analysis at a broader level of themes* rather than codes. This step requires that the researchers examine the relationship of codes to each other, potentially collating codes into overarching superordinate themes. The goal here is to have an emerging sense of themes (including higher-order themes and sub-themes) as well as extracts of data that have been coded within these themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) encourage the use of a “thematic map” or visual representation of these emerging themes to better help the researcher organize the themes and their relationship to one another. Our thematic map went through multiple revisions, reflecting the recursive process of coding, theme building, and revision,

foregrounding extracts and codes within the larger transcript, and this larger transcript within the even larger gestalt of the transcripts taken as a whole.

The fourth step of TA includes the process of *reviewing themes*. Once the researcher has compiled an adequate number of candidate themes, each theme must be reviewed and refined across two levels. First, all collated extracts must logically cohere within the organized theme. Second, the validity of themes in relation to the entire data set must be considered. In our research, this second level was particularly important as we were examining themes and their relation to each other across different transcripts and other pieces of archival data. At the end of this phase, the researcher should have a good idea of what the themes of the data are, how they relate to each other, and in our case, how the themes narrate the “story” of the transcripts taken as a whole – all of which should be representable in a thematic map.

The fifth step of TA includes *defining and refining the themes*. This includes making sure that researchers have an “internally consistent account” of the themes as well as an accompanying narrative that describes the themes and their relation to one another. The final and sixth step of TA is producing a report, which is a fully articulated thematic analysis of the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that this analysis should “provide a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tell” and should provide evidence of themes across the data (p. 93).

Results

Our data analysis resulted in a complex and developmentally-informed thematic process that reflects the participants’ lived experience of disengagement and deradicalization. As the analysis will show, this experience is not a discrete linear process with clear phases, but rather, an experience characterized by recursive and bi-directional dynamic movement and even at times stagnation. We identified three superordinate themes and several subordinate themes that defined the complicated process of disengaging and deradicalizing from a white

supremacist organization. Given the depth of analysis of the interview texts, it is impossible to present our findings in an exhaustive way given current publishing constraints. Hence, we only sketch the broad outlines of the most salient themes. These superordinate themes include: **Deconstructing Identity** (and the sub-themes *Implicit/Explicit Dissonance*, *Catalytic Moment*, and *Transgressive Relationships*); **Reconfiguring Identity** (and the sub-themes *Stop-Gap Measures*, *Temporal Loop*, and *Transitional Relationships*); and **Transformed Identity**.

As noted above, we had a pre-investigatory theoretical sensitivity to distinctions in the empirical literature between disengagement and deradicalization, as well as the process of role exit. Additionally, some researchers distinguish between both psychological and physical forms of disengagement (Horgan, 2009). For instance, whereas physical disengagement refers to voluntary or involuntary exit from an extremist organization, psychological disengagement refers to disappointments and disillusionments about the extremist organization that hasten exit. As we also noted above, definitions of deradicalization generally center around the abandonment of extremist ideology and decreased threat of terrorist violence.

What is important regarding these distinctions in our data is that multiple variations of disengagement and deradicalization emerged as possibilities in participants' exit experiences. For instance, one participant disengaged but remained radicalized, even after exiting from the white supremacist organization. Another participant disengaged but appeared to have never radicalized from the outset. Most participants appeared to engage and radicalize, later disengaging from the extremist group, some more abruptly than others, with the process of deradicalization unfolding slowly over time. The upshot is that the participant's trajectory of disengagement and/or deradicalization was an idiographic and dynamic process with multi-layered influencing factors and outcomes, and most of our participants seemed to be "on the way" or even stuck in a repetitive pattern rather than completing disengagement and deradicalization and reaching a transformed identity. This is not to suggest that an end point was inherently elusive, but rather to note that reaching it was a relatively rare circumstance.

In order to better interpret our findings and analysis, another important feature of the data should be discussed – what we are describing as the participants’ *core need*. We view the core need as a multi-faceted theme, because it refers to the participant’s individual response to social/relational and environmental features within the broader or more universal context of human development. Hence, the core need is first, a primary motive that emerges out of a participant’s unique developmental context to influence behavior. While core needs are usually tacit, they provide a motivating center for understanding a participant’s behavior, and they play an active role in influencing how the participant interacts with the social environment. Second, the core need must be understood within the broader context of developmental and psychological motivations such as attachment and emotional security which psychologists view as both necessary for normative development across all human beings but also as occasions for life-span developmental challenges (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Erikson, 1968).

It is critical to keep in mind that the core need emerged from the data. That is, the researchers did not approach the data from the outset with a developmental theoretical framework or agenda. Rather, it became increasingly clear throughout the data analysis that participants’ narratives of disengagement and deradicalization included a developmental history that was relevant. The core need might be thought of as the energy of the overall thematic model, often tacitly driving the participant, not only through the process of exit (i.e., through the process of disengaging and deradicalizing from the organization), but also, earlier, through the process of entry (i.e., through the process of radicalizing and engaging the organization). In other words, what the participant reportedly gained from the white supremacist organization in terms of core need fulfillment at entry (and throughout the participant’s commitment to the organization), re-emerged as a core need in the participant’s effort to disengage, deradicalize, and reconfigure identity. Hence, in our analysis, one could not understand the *complementary processes and meanings* that defined exit and entry without *recognizing the crucial role of the participant’s core need*. We turn now to a

discussion of the findings, including a detailed articulation of the three superordinate themes and their relevant subordinate themes (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1.



Deconstructing Identity: Explicit (and Implicit) Dissonance & Catalytic Moment

One of the key themes that arose during the initial exit process was the possibility of a participant experiencing a *Catalytic Moment*. What we are calling a catalytic moment participants imagined as a kind of tipping point during which any background disillusionments (or incipient disappointments) a participant may have developed with the organization gradually became foregrounded. Consequently, the catalytic moment was often accompanied by *Explicit Dissonance* regarding the white supremacist organization with which he or she was affiliated. In other words, when the incipient disappointments with the organization could no longer be overlooked or rationalized away, participants could experience explicit frustrations and disillusionments regarding the organization and its members. Additionally, the catalytic moment was usually the impetus for opening fissures in

the participant's group-based identity, often precipitating a disengagement process. Some participants made a clean and abrupt break after a catalytic moment (with a focus on the physical exit from the organization), while others disengaged in fits and starts, moving away from the organization more slowly (moving back and forth between psychological disillusionments and the possibility of physical exit). For instance, the catalytic moment for one participant came after engaging in an extremely violent attack. He stated,

Um, so, the last things [sic] that make me leave the organization was [sic] when me and two of my mates attacked a guy who was a Communist. Uh, that attack lead [sic] me to 6 month [sic] in prison and about 100,000 Swedish krona, because the attack was so awful. So I told myself, 'How could I leave this? [What am I] gonna do to leave this?' Um, I take a call to the leader of [sic] organization and told him why I back off, I don't want to be a part of this shit anymore. And I thought to myself, 'This was good. Now I have left all of these things behind me.' (Participant 8)

The result for this participant was an abrupt break with the Neo-Nazi extremist organization that sponsored the attack.

Other participants did not identify a unique catalytic moment per se, but still described both tacit and explicit disillusionments with the organization that ultimately precipitated physical disengagement and the inchoate beginnings of deradicalization. These participants tended to experience a more formal *moratorium* or suspension in their active affiliation with the white supremacist organization during this period of transition and disengagement. This moratorium period meant that the participant was dislocated from the organization – either purposefully or fortuitously – and this dislocation and separation not only often fostered growing disillusionments with the organization, but created a psychological space for the participant to begin the rudimentary work of reconfiguring identity in parallel with the slow process of deradicalization. For instance, one participant experienced intense disillusionment with the organization after a more purposeful moratorium during which he was hiding from the legal system following an organization-affiliated hate-crime:

...that two to three months before I actually ended up going to prison was probably the most peaceful time in my whole life. I, uh, I didn't have the issues that I had in my head, you know, where I was angry and I was mad an—and there was [sic] other people that were like me that were just kinda [sic] adding fuel to the fire; um, I was alone, and I liked it [laughing] You know? I felt like just a normal person. And, uh, I think that was probably my ultimate decision why I ended up leaving: because I just, I don't know, I lost all that hate, or, just the calmness that I was feeling at the time. I guess that's why. I let my hair grow out – my hair was pretty long when I went to prison. (Participant 7)

The moratorium also grants the participant a certain amount of flexibility and freedom to pursue identity questions which invariably arise in the absence of the social and ideological framework provided by the far-right organization during the participant's active affiliation.

Deconstructing Identity: Transgressive Relationship

Participants lived many of these experiences and processes as simultaneous and overlapping rather than in a linear chain. Hence, the growing dissonances or moratorium were not static processes but dynamic experiences through which disengagement and deradicalization were unfolding. The same dynamic principle can be applied to the *Transgressive Relationship*. Whether participants co-experienced a catalytic moment and growing dissonance regarding the organization, or a moratorium, almost all participants reached out to another person or persons, forming a *transgressive relationship*.

This relationship is described as transgressive, because it violates the normative standards of the white supremacist organization and symbolically represents the participant's explicit means of moving away from the group. The transgressive relationship has several characteristics. It is a "breaking relationship" in that it ultimately makes it impossible for the participant to remain a member of the organization, creating a wedge between the participant and his or her ties to the organization. For instance, many of our participants' transgressive

relationships were developed with the very ethnic minority individuals (e.g., Black) who should have been shunned, on grounds of the participant's supposed superior "white" race. Additionally, there must be availability or opportunity for a transgressive relationship within the participant's environment. In one participant's case, a transgressive relationship with a Black co-worker arose, because the participant was specifically entreated by a close friend to help the Black man find employment driving trucks where the participant was employed.

Moreover, the transgressive relationship demonstrates inconsistencies in the organization's ideology by building trust and integrity in the transgressive relationship itself. Consider the case of the participant described above and the entreaty for him to help the Black man find employment. The participant elaborated,

And this guy pulls up: I see the truck; I see the cowboy hat, and this guy's about yay tall [gestures that he is short in stature,] jumps out. And he's black. With his cowboy hat that's about—it's not even ten-gallon, man – he's in a twenty-gallon hat. And he comes walkin' [sic] up, and he says, 'You ____?' I say, 'Yep, I'm ____.' Just like, 'You do know who I am and what I am, don't you?' He goes, 'Yeah, I don't really care. I need to work.' [pauses] We became friends. That guy worked harder than I did, and I was putting in seventeen-hour days at that time. [pauses] So, that guy got a lot of respect. And he was, pardon my language, he was no longer a 'nigger.' (Participant 2)

This participant's willingness to help the Black "cowboy" with a possible job at the participant's place of employment ultimately led to other cascading dissonances and awareness of inconsistencies in the far-right ideology regarding race. However, these growing dissonances which ultimately contributed to the erosion of the group's ideology began, in part, in the transgressive relationship. For this participant, the Black cowboy had demonstrated grit and determination – he had shown that he was not intimidated by the participant – and this grit gained the participant's respect and was crucial not only to securing the friendship between the two, but also crucial in helping begin to undo the extremist

ideology. In this way, the transgressive relationship can offer an alternative or contrasting possibility, not only of reality, but of the very fundamental structures of identity. For instance, participants described not only “respect” in the transgressive relationships, but also “compassion,” and “non-judgmentalness.” Hence, transgressive relationships were “breaking” relationships that simultaneously modeled new ways of being for participants.

Reconfiguring Identity: Core Needs, Stop-Gap Measures, and Temporal Loops

The ultimate result of moving through the *catalytic moment*, *explicit dissonance*, *moratorium*, and the breaking effects of the *transgressive relationship* is often an intense identity vacuum. Prior to the catalytic moment and other related experiences, the participant had relied upon the extremist group for foundational markers of identity. Now, the participant is faced with the daunting task of re-narrating and restructuring the identity or the self from the ground up, and in the face of this task, the participant often grapples for new sources of identity cohesion and integration. One participant asked himself during this period of psychological and physical disengagement and looming identity crisis, “And, so, when I look around about, where [sic] [am I] gonna turn? Who can help me? Who can help me to be a good human?...and I didn’t know—who the fuck am I now? I [sic] always been a Nazi; who am I now? (Participant 8). This is also a precarious period for the participant, who is socially and psychologically vulnerable, and susceptible to re-engagement and re-radicalization.

The Core Need: Foreground and Background. It is during this precarious period of psychological vulnerability that the participant’s core need becomes foregrounded given the demands on the participant for identity reconfiguration. In the same way that the participant’s core need is foregrounded at entry, the participant’s core need is foregrounded at exit. That is, at entry, the participant is often in an equally psychologically vulnerable state, frequently encountering the far-right organization during a critical developmental transition. It is during this transition that the organization seemingly meets the participant’s core need. Once the participant’s core need is apparently met, it recedes into the background, at least until dissonances arise with the organization. The participant’s situation at exit, however, becomes

particularly acute and is often experienced as a crisis, because what was previously stable (i.e., the participant's identity constellation vis-à-vis the extremist organization) is now destabilized. Hence, the participant's core need emerges out of the background into a foreground context of crisis, as the psychological, social, and interpersonal situation at exit begins to deteriorate. Recall that the core need, in our analysis, emerges out of a participant's unique developmental context to influence behavior, but this motive itself is grounded in broader socio-developmental processes such as desires for human attachment and emotional security as well as developmental challenges which are necessary to normal human development. Unlike entry, during which the participant's core need is seemingly met by the extremist organization, exit presents a crisis during which the participant's core need elicits various strategies of identity reconstruction.

Stop-Gap Measures and Temporal Loop. While there are three formal strategies that participants employed in their efforts to reconfigure identity, we discuss two strategies here, and reserve the third for a final section. As the participant confronts the task of reconfiguring identity, he or she begins to develop a new narrative about the self. However, this new narrative cannot be constructed instantaneously or ex nihilo, and so it is often the case that there are lacunae in the developing *self-narrative* that require *stop-gap measures*. These temporary measures are ideally place-holders that allow the participant to continue to develop other aspects of the new self-narrative. Several stop gaps emerged in the data including the use of *scripted language* or a *composite symbol* to better narrate the self and expand one's identity, filling in the holes created by the loss of the group's ideological framework.

In concert with these stop-gap measures, participants' developing self-narratives typically included a *temporal structure* in which participants were working to come to terms with their past sufficiently to reorient to a future, and begin the construction of a new, alternative identity. This also meant that participants were in danger of re-enacting a temporal loop, in which they re-lived their past in various ways, ultimately recapitulating the process of disengagement and deradicalization and not resolving these challenges nor completing the reconfiguring identity process. The upshot is that those participants who were most

successful in moving toward disengagement and deradicalization were also simultaneously successful in reconfiguring identity by relying less and less on stop-gap measures and avoiding a temporal loop, being pulled more by their future than entrenched in their past.

An Exemplar. One participant, for whom recognition and affirmation emerged as the core need, sought out the White Aryan Resistance during his adolescence, given the allure of notoriety and power which the organization represented to him. Interestingly, when this participant was asked how the process of deciding to leave the organization unfolded, he struggled to answer the question directly, responding with ritualized responses or with *scripted language (a stop-gap measure)* in which he remained one-step removed from the interviewer's questions. For instance, when asked about exit, he stated, "It was a journey, and, and most people who leave, it's a three to five [year process] —even the radical jihadists will tell you, it's a —it's a process. It's a process of learning. It's a process of exposing yourself to people from different ethnic groups and changing—your delusional mindset." (Participant 1). The participant's response is a general response, referring to an abstract, general other, rather than to his own personal experience. In response to the question of exit, this participant also referred to topics such as "daddy issues" or former "parenting" as influential factors, but these factors were similarly abstract and general, largely disconnected from his own experience and personal narrative. The participant relied upon these ritualized or abstract responses as *stop-gap measures*, because he appeared to be unsure of who he was to become in the absence of the white supremacist organization. Indeed, because this part of his identity continues to remain unclear to him – even in the present - he borrows images and rhetoric common to the narrative(s) of other "formers" (similar individuals formerly affiliated with white supremacist organizations) to fill in the lacunae in his own developing self-narrative.

With respect to temporal structure, rather than coming to terms with his past, it is in the past that his narrative comes most alive and he is in full possession of himself. By contrast, his narrative of the present is unidimensional and his future unclear. Interestingly, during the interview, the participant claimed that he spoke in the "third person" when

discussing his “old self” (his past self that was affiliated with the white supremacist organization), because he no longer “identified” with the organization and with the ideology. However, in actual conversation with the participant, this was not the case. The interview text demonstrated that the participant only lapsed into third person when asked about the *exit process and his current life*. For instance, when asked directly how he understood leaving the organization, the participant referred to “a lot of people” (not himself), who “just stop going” or who stop affiliating with the organization.

This is in direct contrast to his narrative regarding the past period of affiliation with the white supremacist organization, in which he used the first person, and boasted of his fearlessness, his powerful physique, his ability to intimidate, and his capacity to propagandize. When discussing this past period of affiliation, he stated, “I looked like the big, bad, bald-headed, big [sic], ugly, mean skinhead guy, and um, so I was a celebrity skinhead.” He also asserted, “I was at the forefront of most of the activities that we were involved with... the majority of the um violent confrontations” (Participant 1). This first-person narrative and the differences between first and third person perspective, as well as his lack of self-awareness regarding the differences, are relevant because they reveal the participant’s entrenchment in a temporal loop in which he is reliving an animated and vitalized past when he is most fully identified as himself. Hence, he occupies the temporal space of the past in the first person, whereas his present appears purgatorial, a temporal space in which he has a ghost-like existence in which he is still attempting to reconfigure his identity in the absence of the organization.

As this participant engages in the strategies of identity reconfiguration – both the *stop gap measure of scripted language* and the *temporal loop* – his working through is paradoxically both tacit and explicit. He consciously recognizes that he is re-creating an identity apart from the organization, but much of this process is largely tacit and outside his awareness as the temporal entrenchment and language usage differences across first and third perspectives demonstrate. Part of the reason for this individual participant’s lack of self-awareness and embeddedness in the temporal loop is related to his core need of affirmation

mentioned above. The participant's past in many ways remains *presently* enlivened and animated, because he felt most *affirmed* during his past affiliation with the far-right organization when his core need was being met. Indeed, he described himself as a “celebrity skinhead,” – a skinhead who, as a “celebrity,” was affirmed and recognized by all. Unlike his past, his present and future are flat temporal spaces in which he finds it challenging to meet his core need.

What is particularly relevant about this participant's search for affirmation as a core need is that it is foregrounded throughout entry and exit, shaping his disengagement and deradicalization process. This participant seeks affirmation and recognition not only in the extremist group at entry, but in the social groups to which he is affiliated post-exit – he not only becomes a “celebrity skinhead” during his time in the organization, but he attempts to achieve similar celebrity status post exit as someone who publicly defines himself as a “former” and discusses his previous experiences in the White Power movement publicly, including television interviews and various other public forums. We do not intend to pathologize seeking affirmation in human relationships nor do we suggest that all public post-exit experiences as “formers” are problematic, but we note that *for this participant*, seeking recognition and affirmation was a repetitive theme across entry, exit, and identity reconfiguration, indicating that it holds a core role in his psychological development, and therefore impacts how he moves through the processes of disengagement and deradicalization. Because this participant is most alive in the past – a past where he felt most affirmed and recognized - his current and present process of identity formation as a “former” is reconstructed at a distance from his very sense of self. This inability to own the self in the present reveals that this participant has not yet successfully reconfigured identity.

Reconfiguring Identity: Transitional Relationships

The third and final strategy employed by participants in the face of the challenge of identity reconfiguration is the establishment of transitional relationships. Whereas specific kinds of relationships have already played a role in participants' experience of exit (e.g.,

transgressive relationships), these were primarily “breaking relationships” that helped participants move away from the far-right organization, both psychologically and physically. Transitional relationships, on the other hand, are “bridging” relationships that provide a scaffolding function by which participants may build a new identity. Hence, transitional relationships help provide support for new value systems, new identity roles, new relational skills, new purposes and goals, and a potential new community or network of social support. In this regard, participants’ transitional relationships tended to be deeper and longer compared to transgressive relationships.

Additionally, because transitional relationships often facilitated entry into a new social community, the transitional relationship or community itself frequently became a safe holding pattern or base for the participant. For some participants, establishing this holding pattern within a new social community was particularly important during the early stages of identity reconfiguration, when the participant longed to feel accepted, understood, and validated. However, this desire for acceptance could manifest itself in a pattern of insularity that replicated the participants’ past affiliation as far-right extremists with their polarizing boundaries between in-groupers and out-groupers, us and them. Alternatively, the most effective transitional relationships were those that helped the participant move away from this pattern of psychological insularity and polarizing boundaries, working more toward tolerance of difference and a “we” framework, rather than a more sharply oppositional stance that cast others as out-groupers (i.e., us against them).

It was not unusual for our participants to report establishing one or more transitional relationships and/or embeddedness in a community after the participants left the white supremacist organization and began the process of reconfiguring identity. For instance, after a moratorium period in the military during which he was separated from the extremist organization and struggling with disillusionments regarding the organization, one participant actively reached out to a formal European Exit organization in order to assist his own disengagement. For this participant, the Exit organization or community to which he reached out was a government-affiliated organization that offered targeted support for those wishing

to leave white power or neo-Nazi environments. Hence, for this participant, Exit acted as a community of social, therapeutic, and legal support and services for reinserting oneself in the wider community. Initially, this “bridging” transitional community served an insulating function for the participant as he was surrounded by other “formers” who had similar experiences with extremist organizations and each recognized his or her experience in the other. The participant stated,

“I would say, in the beginning, I was very centered to just hanging around [sic] with Exit people, and we were kind of—I’m not sure isolated was the right word, but we were very, very keen on hanging around with each other because we were kind of—we knew each other, we knew what we had gone through. And then there was all this other good stuff, sure, but, I would—I would choose to hang around with people from the same environment because I would—I could relate to them, and we could discuss things that was [sic] important to me and all of that...” (Participant 4)

It was not until this participant branched out in his own commitment and work within Exit, including field work, that he began to move away from the insularity of a purely “former” community. He described meeting an Iranian man who was also involved in field work at Exit who “met me where I was” and was “enthusiastic about meeting a ‘White Power guy,’” and the participant noted this encounter (and subsequent encounters with what the participant described as this “very likeable person”) as the “first kind of contexts that I had outside of the movement and the formers in that sense” (Participant 4). This was important to the participant, because the encounter allowed him to imagine and experience being understood by a different Other; not only a similar Other with similar experiences (e.g., as he had presumed within the “former” community). This kind of experience within the bridging community allowed this participant to begin to depolarize his attitudes and tolerate difference.

Transformed Identity & Deradicalization

Whether participants were able to continue to reconfigure their identity and ultimately transform the self, moving toward deradicalization and a genuine change in belief system, was a function of their continued elaboration of identity, but also of their reduced reliance on stop-gap measures and temporal loops which kept participants trapped in various ways in the past. For instance, two of our participants were able to develop more complex self-definitions with multi-faceted and widely distributed social roles which helped them develop transformed identities. We also viewed these two participants as deradicalized, with participant 4 in our sample representing the best picture of a transformed identity and deradicalized state. A caveat should be re-emphasized, however. The results of our analysis suggest that how participants move through the process of disengagement and deradicalization cannot be understood except in relation to the core need of the individual participant. This indicates that disengagement and deradicalization trajectories are highly variable. Hence, our second participant (i.e., participant 7) whom we viewed as achieving a transformed identity (in addition to participant 4) was someone who had engaged the extremist group, but who had never radicalized, and so never had to deradicalize. The upshot is that neither participant can be understood except by reference to their unique core need, which emerged at entry and at exit, and which impacted the process of identity reconfiguration and ultimately transformation.

Participant 4, whose core need was efficacy or competence, pursued higher education and completed a Masters degree, established a family and had children, and began clinical work in the school system which was an extrapolation of his original field work with the Exit program. From his perspective, while he greatly appreciated the initial support he received from the Exit program, which he viewed as essential to his initial first steps away from the extremist organization, he nevertheless perceived his later “distance [from Exit]” and from the former community itself, as crucial to his identity development and ultimately to his successful deradicalization. In other words, this participant’s particular core need of efficacy or competence led him to develop particular alternative social networks such as those

affiliated with higher education. These social network affiliations which met his core need were separate from the initial transgressive relationships and provided a foundation for him to rebuild himself apart from his previous (extremist) self.

An indicator of this successful distancing and rebuilding was the participant's response to a chance encounter with active members of the white supremacist organization after he had left. The chance encounter occurred on a ferry crossing when the participant confronted several active members who were inebriated, and while he described different emotions in the confrontation, the over-riding emotional response was one of "relief" particularly "of not being there [in the group]" and of "actually [having] left" (Participant 4). Hence, this confrontation with the past was not experienced as a loop that subsumed his present (e.g., as idealization or overwhelming guilt). Rather, what stood out for this participant was the past-ness of the past. The participant had entirely left behind the extremist group, and re-oriented toward a future in which his core need was met with new goals and aspirations. Of course, part of what made for this participant's successful reorientation and transformed identity was that the alternative social networks and projects to which he committed met his core need of competency in ways that the extremist group had never done.

Discussion

A feature of much of the literature on disengagement and deradicalization has been the identification of various push and pull factors that are associated with exit. For instance, in their recent review of the disengagement literature, Windisch et al. (2016) specifically examine disengagement processes as these occur in terrorist organizations. The most common factor for disengaging from an extremist organization that emerged across the literature reviewed was disillusionment, emerging in 58% of the studies reviewed, where disillusionment referred to the individual's incongruence between his or her idealized or fantasied expectations regarding the organization and the realities of group association. Similar disillusionments arose in our findings, but our analysis places the various push and

pull factors within a thematically linked model in which such factors are subsumed within a period of identity deconstruction. Thus, such “push” factors as Windisch et al.’s disillusionment, could only be understood within the larger context of losing one’s coherent sense of self vis-à-vis the social and ideological structures of the extremist organization. In sum, from the vantage point of our findings, one of the limitations of a granular focus on pushes and pulls is that we lose the gestalt or holistic focus that we think is necessary to understanding exit. In other words, exit is linked to entrance; deradicalization to radicalization.

This holistic focus is in part why we are sympathetic to Kruglanski’s model, which sees radicalization and deradicalization as related phenomenon (Kruglanski et al., 2009, 2014). Additionally, Kruglanski’s counterfinality model of radicalism (CFMR) emphasizes a primary underlying motivator as the driver for engagement in terrorism – the “quest for significance” (Kruglanski et al., 2014, p. 73). While a quest for significance did not arise as a primary motivator in our research, there was nevertheless a driving motivator or developmental core need. Rather than a quest for significance, our participants articulated developmental histories and narratives in which they attempted to meet a core need, albeit in a manner that could be outside of their active awareness. While an individual might certainly have a core need of significance or achievement (as Kruglanski might suggest), not all individuals in our sample were motivated by this need. Indeed, in our study, the participants’ core needs were unique to their developmental context and identity formation and included such needs as competency, affirmation, recognition, belongingness, nurturance, and obligation to name a few. In other words, in the context of our findings, we tend to view the quest for significance as an instance of a larger set of fundamental developmental core needs.

If we reconsider the figure (see Fig. 1) that represents both the core need and the exit process, part of what our analysis demonstrates is that there are no absolute divisions between the processes of disengagement, deconstructing identity, reconfiguring identity, a transformed identity, and a deradicalized state. This is in part why the figure that depicts this deconstruction-reconfiguring-transformative process is a “house” and the building of a house

over time. Despite the lack of absolute divisions, there are achievement markers along the way in the participants' identity transformation. These achievement markers suggest a transformed identity or what our figure shows as a completed "house." There are two aspects of this process of identity transformation worth emphasizing. First, this reconfigured and transformed identity was highly contingent on the development of *transgressive and transitional relationships*. While these relationships serve different functions (e.g., breaking or bridging), the process of exit seems to require relationships of mutuality in which the individual who is the midst of exiting feels understood and validated. Second, a transformed identity was characterized by an increasingly *independent identity narrative* that included complex social role development *free of stopgap measures and temporal loops*. That is, participants identified with multiple social roles – father/mother, husband/wife, teacher, volunteer, counselor, brother/sister, uncle/aunt, friend, mentor, supervisor, etc. as their identity narratives became more transformed. We should note that other research has also emphasized the importance of identity and social role to the exit process (Barrelle, 2015; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Ebaugh, 1988; Simi, Blee, DeMichelle, & Windisch, 2017), but in general, this research does not situate identity in relation to a developmentally driven core need.

Ebaugh's (1988) research regarding the process of role exit is particularly relevant here as she identified many similar elements that also emerged in our analysis. Such similar elements included doubting or disillusionments regarding the organization to which one was formerly affiliated, the turning point that helps mobilize the decision to exit, the experience of identity vacuum upon leaving one's group affiliation behind, and the challenges of the ex-role including the formation of a new identity that incorporates what Ebaugh (1988) describes as "role residual" (pp. 56, 173-180) from one's previous identity. However, we view our findings as adding another psychological and developmental layer of complexity to Ebaugh's (1988) original research. Whereas Ebaugh (1988) defines personal identity in terms of social role and social structure, we tend to view her emphasis on social role as a partial perspective that omits important aspects of personal development that informs how an individual

approaches the social context. This is why identity reconfiguration in our model is not only a social identification or social role process, but a process that also involves tacit developmental background motivations that direct movement through social contexts.

A good example of how our findings elaborate Ebaugh's (1988) original research concerns her discussion of the establishment of the ex-role. Ebaugh (1988) argues that "To become well integrated and a whole person, an ex must incorporate that past history into his or her current identity" (p. 4). This is the crux of what Ebaugh (1988) means by the challenge of role residual (p. 5). While we are sympathetic to this account, we believe that it does not do justice to the entire experience of exit. In our findings, the establishment of a new identity – the reconfiguration phase – was highly contingent on the nature of the individual's developmental core need. While we agree with Ebaugh (1988) that to become fully integrated, an ex must incorporate his or her past history into a new identity, what she fails to elaborate are the individuals who become entrenched in various ways in their past narratives and identities, failing to integrate what she describes as "residual identities." Our findings do just that – elaborating not only the failures to successfully form new identities, but the hows and whys of that failure. In our model, these failures are best articulated and understood through the temporal loop in which an individual has trouble escaping the past and his or her past identity. But this temporal loop can only be understood vis-à-vis the developmental core need. Whatever the character of the developmental core need, (e.g., a need for competency, affirmation, recognition, or belongingness), it shaped how the individual navigated the temporal landscape, and in the case of failure, it could keep the individual locked in a past narrative, unable to move forward to develop a new present or projected future and reconfigured identity.

There is, of course, research that takes a more broadly developmental perspective (Sieckelinck, Sikkens, van San, Kotnis, & de Winter, 2017; Sikkens, van San, Sieckelinck, & de Winter, 2017; Simi, Sporer, & Bubolz, 2016), although in general, this research focuses on the influence of various developmental variables (e.g., childhood adversity and risk factors such as physical and sexual abuse and neglect or the family's influence as a whole) and their

impact on radicalization and/or deradicalization. Scant research appears to apply a psychological/developmental theoretical framework to their findings, although Sieckelinck et al.'s (2017) autobiographical case study applies a similar kind of approach. The authors use a “journey” metaphor to argue that radicalization and deradicalization are “connected as two stages of the same developmental process” (Sieckelinck et al., 2017, p. 12). We are again very sympathetic to this approach, and see our own work as moving in a similar direction, but whereas Sieckelinck et al. (2017) emphasize “critical life events” and autobiographical trajectories that downplay the salient role of identity, our work tends to emphasize the intersections of core need, development, and social identity.

Because the core need emerged as the motivator and driver of entry and exit, we were able to break free from the dichotomy and linearity of more traditional interpretations of disengagement and deradicalization. For instance, the literature notes that some individuals disengage, but do not cite ideology as an important “push” factor in the process of exit from an extremist group (Altier, Boyle, Shortland, & Horgan, 2017). Such literature cites the importance of other “push” factors including disillusionment for instance, but this still leaves an open question regarding the role of ideology (and ultimately deradicalization) in the exit process. We think our findings help provide the context for understanding this phenomenon. Focusing on the individual’s core need and the unique disengagement/deradicalization trajectories across entrance and exit allows for flexible possibilities that are more contextually sensitive, synthetic, and holistic rather than dichotomous and linear.

For instance, one participant, who seemed to disengage but who ultimately stayed radicalized, exemplified a core need of respect, which for him, was conflated with power and machismo. This participant partially met this core need through the process of identity reconfiguration by marrying and starting a family. He described his wife as his “saving grace” and he particularly noted how she could “talk him off the ledge [of violence]” as she both provided and earned his respect (Participant 2). However, this participant continued to struggle with his past, which remained haunted by the victims of his perpetration. In his attempts to establish new social networks, he recapitulated some of the vestiges of his old

identity by re-affiliating with inverted social groups – social groups that in some ways were mirror images of the extremist organization from which he was attempting to exit, but which unlike extremist groups, maintained the visage of social acceptability (e.g., religious fundamentalism, hyper-partisan politics). This participant remained stuck in a temporal loop, unable to completely reconfigure a new present identity, and hence, remained radicalized.

Another participant seemingly radicalized (at entry), but never really engaged the extremist group, remaining on the periphery, because he always viewed himself as superior to members of the extremist group itself (of which he was supposedly a member) – he described himself as the “intellectual upper echelon of the movement” (Participant 5). He described other members within the movement as “petty criminals” and “drug addicts,” noting that “they might be useful as storm-troopers in a war, but you don’t want to mix with them” (Participant 5). Indeed, this participant’s core need emerged as superiority, in which the participant constantly sought status and power over others. Never really engaged, this participant could never really disengage. Rather he too remained radicalized but in a similarly inverted manner to the previous participant discussed above by finding a more socially acceptable analogous ideology.

Our findings suggest that “complete” deradicalization is rare in some respects, because participants were still “in process” and “on the way” towards rebuilding a self – re-narrating a self and coming to terms with their past – all in the direction of a deradicalized and transformed self. Our data also suggest that for those individuals who become caught within these processes – there is a heightened probability of staying looped in the construction process rather than moving forward. Critically, none of these heterogeneous exit trajectories can be understood without reference to the developmental core need, which allows for interpretive nimbleness and flexibility with respect to understanding an individual’s entry and exit patterns. Without such nimbleness and flexibility, we remain captive to linear and dichotomous understandings that restrict the possibilities for the disengagement and deradicalization process. We think our holistic and developmental thematic model offers a hopeful alternative.

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