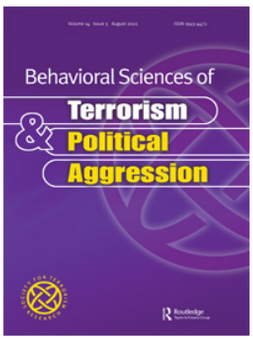

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Exiting far-right extremism: a case study in applying the developmental core need framework

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a case study of voluntary exit from a far-right group in the United States. Our analysis of 'Tom' (a pseudonym) foregrounds the role of psychological development in 'Tom's' narrative of disengagement. While developmental factors are sometimes referenced in the radicalization/deradicalization literature, they are often reduced to risk factors or early environmental adversities that are viewed as predictors for subsequent involvement in extremism. By contrast, we offer a deeper understanding of psychological developmental factors as a 'core need.' While the core need originates in normative development and attachment history, it also arises out of an individual's idiographic context and unique path through development, helping to establish identity security and acting as the tacit background driver across entry and exit. In this case study, and in our qualitatively informed model, the developmental core need is crucial to understanding the often idiosyncratic processes of radicalization, disengagement, and deradicalization.

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Radicalization; deradicalization; case study; far right extremism; psychological development; attachment

What is the relationship between the psychological development of an individual and their involvement in extremist groups? While developmental factors are sometimes referenced in the radicalization/deradicalization literature, they are typically described as risk factors, triggers, or early environmental adversities such as a history of family instability or physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Simi et al., 2016; Bubolz & Simi, 2015). In our research, we understand radicalization and deradicalization in terms of an extremist's underlying developmental 'core need' (Fisher Smith et al., 2020). Our conception of a core need flows out of normative human development including attachment and emotional security needs (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1973, 1969/1982). At the same time, we argue that a subject has a unique history and pathway through development which shapes the 'idiographic' core need. In our research, this developmental need is not simply a nonideological variable correlated with increased risks of radicalization. Rather, it emerges from a holistic understanding that relates how a subject establishes a sense of identity security or equilibrium to what drives a subject across entry and exit.

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What follows is a case study of one subject's voluntary exit from a far-right extremist group in the United States. While we offer this singular and descriptive case study, the case itself is situated within a wider qualitative data set which includes ten semi-structured interviews with individuals formerly affiliated with far-right extremist groups (Fisher Smith et al., 2020). We chose this particular case, because it demonstrates the *developmental core need* (which was the primary finding of the data set as a whole) with particular clarity, while also being a complex and multi-dimensional case. The case is also instructive because it shows the individualized trajectory of radicalization, disengagement, and deradicalization. While we recognize the plurality of definitions of radicalization, including the debate about whether there should be a differentiation between violent and non-violent radicalization (Bartlett & Miller, 2012), in our research, we define radicalization as the process by which one becomes an extremist, typically by adopting certain ideas leading to the use of violence or other acts of terrorism (Koehler, 2017, p. 67). We also rely on Horgan's (2009) definition of disengagement as a change in role or function of an individual within an extremist group (p. 152), and deradicalization as the process by which an individual reduces and removes their affective, cognitive, and behavioral commitments to extremist ideology and violence (p. 153).

We recognize that case studies have advantages and disadvantages. Qualitative idiographic data, for example, is not readily generalizable given its emphasis on a single case. But because this case is grounded in a wider qualitative data set, it is cross validated with other interview and archival data. To be sure, details will differ across other individual cases, but we believe that the underlying structure of this case – with particular reference to the developmental core need – may be applicable and helpful in efforts to understand entry and exit from a far-right extremist group. This case is also based largely on interview data. Consequently, we must rely on the participant's self-report, which may be influenced by gaps in memory, a tendency to present oneself in a favorable light, and other purposeful omissions (Churchill, 2000). Nevertheless, the strength of bringing qualitative methods of analysis to bear upon these interview texts is their ability to extract tacit and underlying meanings that are often not obvious or conscious even to the participant themself. This feature of qualitative analysis is what separates it from a conversation or from journalism and what gives it the degree of objectivity characteristic of a science (Churchill & Fisher Smith, 2022; Churchill et al., 1998).

In our qualitatively informed model and in this case study, the developmental core need is the important background psychological driver of radicalization and deradicalization, uniting these processes but not as a simple mirror reversal. Indeed, we see exit in particular as a highly problematic process, in which a subject deconstructs identity subsequent to disengagement. By deconstructing identity, we mean that subjects often experience their identities as increasingly fragmented during the process of disengagement, leaving subjects uncertain about who they are apart from the extremist group. In the face of this deconstruction or fragmentation, subjects attempt to reconfigure or reconstruct identity post disengagement. Only for some does exit result in an accomplished new identity. For others, as we will see below, the process may become caught up in what we will call temporal loops and various stop-gap measures. To better understand this idiosyncratic process, however, identifying the developmental core need is crucial.

Our paper is divided into four sections. We begin with a brief overview of the literature on the relationship between radicalization and deradicalization, a summary review of the developmental psychology of attachment, and the role that development has taken in terrorism research. Next, we describe our methodological approach and procedure. We then discuss the findings of the case including a detailed qualitatively informed analysis. Finally, we provide a discussion of the findings and some thoughts regarding the implications of the case for the therapeutic arm of disengagement and deradicalization programs (DDPs).

The relationship between radicalization and deradicalization

While radicalization, disengagement, and deradicalization are related processes, *how* these processes are linked to each other continues to be a challenging question for researchers (Reiter et al., 2021). Indeed, understanding these links is important for shedding light on each of the individual processes themselves (Altier et al., 2021). As Daniel Koehler (2017) argues,

> Understanding deradicalization requires a theoretical concept accounting for the different psychological mechanisms involved in driving a person towards violence (i.e. escalation or radicalization) and vice versa (i.e. de-escalation or deradicalization). … [O]ftentimes the reasons for ending a radical career are closely connected with the motivations to join. (p. 65)

In spite of this recognition of the importance of radicalization to deradicalization, and vice versa, scholarship tends to approach these areas of research interest as separate phenomenon. The result is that there are often independent literatures for understanding why individuals join terrorist organizations and for how and why individuals choose to 'walk away' (Vergani et al., 2020; Kruglanski et al., 2019; Barrelle, 2015; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Horgan, 2009; Bjørgo, 2009; Moghaddam, 2005).

Important advances have emerged on both sides of this research spectrum – for example, identifying a push/pull framework and its impact on both entry and exit (Altier et al., 2017). In terms of entry, push factors were those that distanced subjects from mainstream institutions and civil society including economic marginalization, social isolation, or family dysfunction. Pull factors were those that attracted subjects to extremist groups and violent action. They ordinarily included the easy accessibility of the extremist group in the community or on the internet and the promise of adventure and status. The push/pull framework was also important to exit (Windisch et al., 2016). Disappointments with the membership of extremist groups, disagreements with group leadership, and varieties of burnout were among the most commonly reported push factors, while getting married, having children, or changing jobs were among those factors that pulled subjects towards more socially accessible affiliations (Altier et al., 2014).

Some researchers have challenged what they view as the limitations and 'underdevelopment' of the push/pull framework by integrating and extending the framework with other models from psychology and sociology. For instance, in one case, Altier et al. (2014) understood the exit decision as a function in which net costs to continuing participation in the extremist group were balanced against the sunk costs of past participation and the alternative opportunities available to the subject, elaborating a more rudimentary approach to push/pull factors by taking account of social role commitment. Other

researchers have attempted to address radicalization and deradicalization more directly. For Kruglanski et al. (2014), the road to radicalization began with the arousal of a general 'quest for significance' (p. 73). This quest for significance is a basic desire for recognition and to matter or to be someone (p. 73). Radicalization entails the subject's identification of violent extremism as the best available means to significance, and a commitment shift to these means. Deradicalization entails a commitment shift to alternative means to significance. In this way, radicalization and deradicalization are mirror images of each other. In a similar emphasis on the radicalization–deradicalization dialectic, Koehler (2017) offers the possibility that radicalization processes are best understood as 'processes of de-pluralization' in which political concepts and values narrow in combination with an ideology that denies human freedom and rights to others (p. 81). Deradicalization represents the opposite process of a 're-pluralization' or broadening of political concepts and values and a loosening of the ideology (p. 81).

Finally, the 'arc framework' of Horgan and Taylor (2013) elaborates the connectedness between radicalization and deradicalization by engaging Ebaugh's (1988) work on voluntary role exit. Ebaugh (1988) traced a four-stage process in which a period of doubting and a period of evaluating alternatives eventuated in a decision to exit and a period of creating the 'ex-role' in which the exiter must meet the challenge of incorporating the 'residual' or vestige of the former identity into a new social role. For Horgan and Taylor (2013) however, Ebaugh's stages were, in the final analysis, too static and linear. Horgan and Taylor (2013) saw push and pull factors working in varying combinations inscribing a dynamic trajectory or arc of *involvement, engagement, and disengagement* (IED). As Horgan et al. (2017) note, 'Within this "arc", why an individual leaves terrorism is path dependent and logically linked to the prior phases of involvement and engagement' (p. 4).

While the research that addresses the link between radicalization and deradicalization also recognizes the complex context and idiosyncratic nature of entry and exit decisions (Barrelle, 2015; Horgan, 2009), persistent questions remain about the psychological mechanisms that drive the individual's trajectory through the involvement–radicalization/disengagement–deradicalization sequence. This is where we believe an appreciation for psychological development and the developmental core need is helpful, as it unites the radicalization–disengagement–deradicalization continuum as a gestalt and helps unravel the complicated relationship between these fraught processes.

The role of psychological development

Attachment theory

In our research, while the developmental core need emerged as the primary background driver of the subject's entry and exit, the core need also had to be grounded and understood within the broader context of human psychological development, particularly attachment and emotional security. But, what do we mean by 'psychological development' and 'attachment?' In broad terms, attachment refers to the adaptive behaviors, cognitions, and affect of infants and young children which lead them to seek out the comfort and safety of their caregivers when they feel stressed or fearful (Fearon, 2017). Bowlby (1973, 1969/1982) elaborated the concept and function of the attachment bond

between infant/child and caregiver, noting that when the child's caregiver is sensitive, available, and responsive to the child's attachment behaviors (e.g. proximity seeking behavior toward the caregiver), the child often forms what ultimately came to be described as secure attachment. Bowlby (1969/1982) viewed successful attachment as 'secure base' development (p. 236). Alternatively, children whose caregivers failed to respond to them or who responded inconsistently often resulted in children who were generally fussier and less easily comforted. Such children came to be described as 'insecurely attached' (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Bowlby later argued that the secure base relationship provided the foundation for the child's 'internal working models' for subsequent identity development, future relationships with others, and expectations for interactions with the world (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). As Pittman et al. (2011) elaborate,

> Preverbal toddlers 'represent' the [secure base] relationship at a sensorimotor level, and the 'model' must be instantiated (by returning from exploration) on a regular basis, but older children (and adolescents or adults) retain an internal working model, or representation, of the secure base, and can refer to that internal model rather than physically return to the attachment figure for nurturance or support. (p. 34)

What is particularly important for our research purposes is that Bowlby introduced a co-constructed relational and internalized working model of self and other/world that has its roots in either secure or disrupted early attachments, with cascading impacts on later adolescent and adult development. In short, the internalized working model of self and other/world informs a range of motivations and behaviors relevant to the social and relational context across the life span.

Contemporary attachment theorists have developed Bowlby's and Ainsworth's early research and argued that early attachment styles (whether secure or insecure) impact later adult relationships (Bartholomew, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). For instance, a large body of research supports the link between early secure attachment and quality of adult relationships, particularly romantic relationships (Levy & Davis, 1988; Holland et al., 2012). Conversely, those with insecure attachments – particularly relational avoidance and anxiety –tend to have lower levels of connectedness, support, and relationship satisfaction, and greater likelihood of conflict (Li & Chan, 2012). What became important in our research was identifying and elaborating not only the unique developmental core need of the subject, but also its relationship to these basic principles of attachment and emotional security. The subject's description of their early development is also a description of early attachments and the subject's concomitant tacit internal working models of self and other/world. This description, then, provides an important background context for understanding the role of the core need (as a figure against ground).

Life course, pathways, and journeys

What role has psychological development occupied in the terrorism literature? In our view, *psychological* development has largely played an indirect to marginalized role in the terrorism literature. Theories and concepts that ground developmental psychology are rarely used as a lens for understanding terrorism. One major exception to this general pattern arises from an application of research in criminology to an understanding

of violent extremism. For instance, Simi et al. (2016) utilizes a life course criminology framework and in-depth life history interviews of former violent extremists to examine how developmental variables such as 'childhood risk factors and adolescent conduct problems are part of a cumulative and age graded set of environmental adversities that precede the onset of VE [violent extremism]' (p. 3). In this case of a criminological developmental framework, while developmental variables are examined, they are also operationalized as empirical, antecedent causes and developmental risk factors that are used predictively to estimate one's 'risk' for engaging in violent extremism. While this research is developmental from a strict life span perspective – that is, the risk factors identified are those occurring in childhood and adolescence – psychological developmental theory itself is not utilized as a framework for *understanding* the data.

Another exception is the research of Sieckelinck et al. (2019), which sought to build on the emphasis that Horgan (2008) placed on 'individual pathways' into terrorism. Sieckelinck et al. (2019) specifically adopted a biographical and life course approach in their interviews with 34 former extremists 'to see what role the upbringing climate and developmental challenges' had on participants' pathways into and out of extremism (p. 3). Importantly, they presented the radicalization and deradicalization processes as two aspects of the same journey and understood the ideal-typical journeys that they had identified in their analysis as each a 'sequence of troubled social and emotional transitions from childhood to adulthood' (p. 13). In short, entry and exit were connected as two stages of the same developmental process.

We agree with this emphasis on the subject's psychological journey or transition, particularly as this relates to psychological development. These transitional challenges or turning points entail what the developmental psychologist Erikson (1968) describes as a developmental 'crisis,' used not in the sense of 'catastrophe,' but rather to denote the individual's 'crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential' (p. 96). The point is that from a psychological perspective, human development is characterized by a series of challenges that define the basis for growth and potential, and it is this perspective that has been largely overlooked in the terrorism literature.[1] But where the analysis of Sieckelinck et al. (2019) interpreted radicalization as a journey in which the subject's 'transitional social-emotional tasks of adolescence' are essentially unmet, either through the subject's disappointment and disillusionment in society's institutions or in the subject's family for example, they did not explicitly elaborate the potential role that psychological development has on the adolescent in this context (p. 12). For instance, how do specific life-stage challenges such as the adolescent crisis of identity interact with the 'social-emotional tasks' of adolescence that the authors refer to, and how is the extremist group specifically attractive to the adolescent in the context of the disillusionment they describe? Developmental psychology is poised to help provide a deeper context for these social-emotional tasks that the authors note but fail to explore in an intensive way.

Methodological approach

What follows is a rich, detailed, and thick description of a single case of voluntary disengagement from one of the nation's most established and violent neo-Nazi organizations with which our participant affiliated for almost twenty years. The transcribed textual

interview data for this case study was analyzed according to the qualitative thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006). We adopted this methodology for its six-step procedural rigor, which includes the identification of textual extracts (segments of narrative text), the coding of these extracts (a process of identifying important features of the narrative text), and the establishment of themes (an interpretive process of linking codes and identifying patterns of meaning in and across the narrative data). The result was a coherent and over-arching thematic narrative of the data set as a whole (Fisher Smith et al., 2020). What emerged in this case study (and what was also reflected in the data set as a whole) was a complex and developmentally informed model of voluntary disengagement and deradicalization of individuals formerly affiliated with far-right extremist groups.

The fundamental markers of this disengagement and deradicalization thematic process centered around the deconstruction and reconfiguration of identity and included superordinate themes of Deconstructing Identity, Reconfiguring Identity, and Transformed Identity. These themes will serve as markers through the following case study. The developmental core need will be crucial to an understanding of this case, as it shaped the participant's trajectory through entry and exit. Our findings will suggest that there is no linear sequence across entry, radicalization, disengagement, exit, and deradicalization. Rather, it is a non-linear, recursive process, characterized more by fits and starts, and even reversals. For instance, while the participant in this case *disengages* from the far-right extremist organization, they never seem to completely deradicalize, becoming trapped in different aspects of re-building their identity post-exit.

We have published a detailed account of our participant selection and data analysis methods elsewhere (Fisher Smith et al., 2020), and note that the study received ethical approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (#201462). Regarding the case study – the in-depth interview with the participant – to whom we are giving the pseudonym Tom – lasted approximately 120 min and was conducted face-to-face. The lead researcher and another member of the research team met with Tom in a neutral (publicly accessible), but quiet location to conduct the interview. Our research team had already developed semi-structured interview questions which were themselves grounded in our own sensitivities to the disengagement and deradicalization literature as well as Ebaugh's model regarding role exit. However, as we established working relationships with our research participants, our interview questions organically developed and evolved. Additionally, the semi-structured format of the interview is itself open-ended, with the participant co-constituting with the interviewers the direction the dialogue might take. We should note that it seemed important for Tom to establish with the researchers that he had been, and potentially continued to be, a physical threat. For instance, upon meeting the interviewers, he mentioned that he thought it would have been 'stupid' of the female researcher to have reached out to him to conduct the interview alone given his history of violence. In the participant's view, the female researcher had made the right decision in enlisting the assistance of a male colleague to ensure her own safety. Several other times during the interview, Tom would return to the theme of his continuing potential for violent intimidation.

Analysis

Entry and radicalization

Tom's initial encounter with members of an extreme-right organization occurred when he was eleven years old. He noted that his biological father passed away during this time, and although he described himself as close to his mother, he also explained that he was an unruly pre-adolescent who was exploring the punk rock scene. It was in a punk-rock 'club' that Tom first passively observed what he described as 'Nazi skinheads' 'rallying the troops' using 'hand gestures,' in order to confront and use violence to challenge a rival group. While a bystander to this initial encounter, Tom remembered it clearly as a moment of transformative recognition and identification. As he recalled the progression of events, he noted his strong reaction, 'Holy shit! That's what I need to be. *That's respect*. Those guys are bad-ass. And [from that point forward], I actively seeked [*sic*] it out' (emphasis added).

Tom was evoked in a profound way by how the group used its power to dominate others and by what he construed as the group's ability to command 'respect.' In other words, gaining respect for Tom was frequently conflated with asserting power and dominance. Indeed, as Tom related how he worked to ultimately become a full-fledged member of a neo-Nazi group, he emphasized how he more and more identified as a violent intimidator. And he imagined the 'respect' that resulted:

> you don't mess with that guy [member] 'cuz he's gonna [*sic*] shoot you, stab you, kill you, put you, like, in the movie, put your teeth on the curb and stomp you [*sic*] skull into it, you know? … I liked that people feared me … I liked it when people saw me coming, they crossed the street.

In our analysis, the extremist group met Tom's fundamental core need for respect. But of course, not everyone who affiliates with such extremist groups is evoked in a similar fashion. For instance, we interviewed other participants who did not describe respect as an important factor in their initial encounters with extremist groups, but who described other factors such as brotherhood and camaraderie, recognition, validation, and even celebrity-status. In other words, how is it that Tom resonated with the extremist group's ability to command respect, and not something else? We think that Tom's resonance with respect was only understandable in light of his unique developmental history – including an attunement to his attachment history – and his particular path through it.

Developmental core need

When initially asked about his family, Tom noted that he grew up as the 'only white family in the projects' in one of the largest cities in the United States. By emphasizing his 'whiteness,' Tom meant that his family was one of the few white families in a predominantly Black, but impoverished, community. He explained that as a child, he had 'a lot of Black friends,' but he noted that, as time went on, he felt that he was held accountable for the prejudiced behavior of 'all whites,' particularly law enforcement. While Tom understood that the Black community's concerns regarding white prejudice and discrimination by law enforcement and others was legitimate, he nevertheless came to resent what he viewed as a growing racial accountability being focused on him individually, and 'after a

number of years, I just – it started turning for me – and I started turning hateful towards them [Blacks].' Hence, Tom was attuned in a lived and experiential way to structural and economic inequalities in his community. Yet in the face of these inequalities, he felt victimized by the Black majority around him, with the outcome being his own externalized and projected racial hatred and discrimination.

In addition to his feelings of social and racial alienation, Tom's home life was characterized by conflict. He described his biological father as hard-working but largely absent. Tom noted, '… there wasn't a lot of communication with him [his father], except for when we [Tom and his brother] got in trouble.' Tom described his father as a former Navy-man, who was a physically abusive disciplinarian. (Tom described being given 'twenty-five to thirty spanks with a big-ass leather belt' by his father for relatively minor infractions and childhood pranks.) From the vantage point of the present, Tom emphasized that he did not 'blame' his father for the childhood physical abuse, recognizing that his father was only recapitulating 'what he grew up with' and 'what he knew [growing up] for discipline.'

In light of these disrupted or inconsistent early attachments in Tom's unique developmental history, his core need for respect emerged as a defense against his own feelings of social and racial alienation and his tacitly perceived awareness of structural inequalities embedded in the social and cultural fabric around him. Growing up, he had felt marginalized and victimized in his community. He also felt equally marginalized and powerless in his family and was compensating for feelings of powerlessness and impotence in relation to his father. Hence, his social identification and group identity upon entry and affiliation with the neo-Nazi group seemed to offer a way to ensure that he would not feel marginalized and powerless again. Indeed, he imagined he could command a sense of respect from others as a violent intimidator through his affiliation with the extremist group.

The core need itself was foregrounded at entry given Tom's psychologically vulnerable state. That is, at the point of initial encounter and involvement with the neo-Nazi extremist group, Tom was a pre-adolescent, and in the throes of a critical developmental transition, moving toward the normative challenge of identity development. Indeed, most developmentalists view pre-adolescence and adolescence as a critical period for initial identity formation (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1993). Hence, Tom was primed for the social identification process that seemingly unfolded vis-à-vis his encounter with the group. The upshot is that the neo-Nazi group to which Tom ultimately affiliated *seemingly* met his core need of respect at entry and throughout the process of radicalization with the organization. We emphasize 'seemingly,' because the core need helps the self establish a sense of security and equilibrium in the same way that one's strategies for securing relational attachments provide security (albeit tacitly) (Bowlby, 1973). And, if the core need is only partially met or met in a maladaptive manner, then negative consequences erupt for the individual, including a fragmented self-identity and loss of equilibrium over time (Pittman et al., 2011). Recall that attachment histories inform internal representations or working models that, in turn, inform images of the self and social relationships across the life-span (Bowlby, 1973, 1969/1982; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Waters et al., 2000). Ultimately, the over-riding purpose of the attachment bond(s) and their resultant internal representations is to establish a sense of security and safety for the self, linking one's attachment history to the foundations of identity, much of which is sabotaged in the case of disrupted attachment (Kobak et al., 2016). We will see this ultimate disruption

and fragmentation in Tom's identity at the point of disillusionment and disengagement from the neo-Nazi group.

Core need complexity

Tom's trajectory across entry and exit was complex in part because his developmental core need for respect was lived out in antithetical expressions which were sensitive to the social or relational context. For instance, Tom's core need for respect was not only met through his social identification with the extremist group and displays of intimidation and dominance over others. Interestingly, in specific relational contexts, particularly that of his immediate family, Tom's core need for respect emerged in a new form, not as *intimidator*, but as *nurturer*. For instance, Tom specifically described how he valued his family relationships, particularly his relationship to his mother. Tom noted his mother's loyalty to the immediate family: ('My mom was there every bit of the way') and he described his mother as 'the strongest woman I know.' Given this reportedly close relationship, Tom explained how he had willingly 'taken care of' his mother after she was diagnosed with breast cancer and throughout her arduous treatment. In the context of his close maternal relationship and its importance, Tom recounted how he ultimately set aside his white supremacist and neo-Nazi group loyalties when he was in the company of his mother and step-father, particularly, because they

> always looked down on me for what I believed. You know, especially once the tattoos started coming. I mean, once you get Hitler tattooed on you, and you're in a family that has lost family in World War II fighting the Nazis, yeah, you quickly become the outcast.

In this context, Tom capitulated, and simply 'quit talking race' when he was with his family in order to preserve those relationships, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to preserve a sense of respect within his family.

It would have been inconceivable for Tom to have become an 'outcast' among his nuclear family (i.e. his mother and step-father) or to have experienced his family's contempt. Securing the respect of his family members was crucial. Hence, he was willing (in their presence) to 'quit talking race' and to downplay aspects of his extremist identity, that, in other social contexts, would likely have been fully exposed. In our analysis, it was important to keep Tom's early developmental history in mind in the context of Tom's reported closeness to his mother as well as his loyalty to his mother and step-father. His early development had included inconsistent or disrupted attachment, with a family history of conflict with an emotionally distant, strict, and harsh disciplinarian for a (biological) father.

In the face of such caregiving failures or inconsistency, older children and adolescents develop what attachment theorists have described as 'controlling strategies' to manage threats to caregiver responsiveness and to better regulate their own feelings of fear and confusion (Lecompte & Moss, 2014; Solomon & George, 2011). Attachment researchers have identified two types of controlling strategies in caregiver-child interactions: a 'controlling-hostile pattern' and a 'controlling- caregiving pattern' (Kobak et al., 2016, p. 32). By taking account of Tom's early developmental history from an attachment perspective, Tom's core need for respect emerges figurally as antithetical expressions of power and dominance on the one hand, and nurturance and care on the other hand,

in the same way that the attachment control strategies are expressed as either hostile or caregiving. In other words, when Tom is with his family, the core need of nurturance and care predominates (mimicking the control strategy of caregiving); when he is with the extremist group, the core need of power and dominance over others predominates (mimicking the control strategy of hostility). In this way, the core need is not uni-dimensional, but rather multi-dimensional and sensitive to social relational contexts.

Disengagement: deconstructing identity

Tom's decision to disengage from the neo-Nazi group occurred after a series of disillusionments regarding the group members and what he considered to be their failure to uphold the group's standards as well as Tom's increasing realization of inconsistencies in the group's ideology regarding race. Put in terms of Tom's core need, he began to perceive that this failure to uphold the group's standards depreciated the respect he was seeking from them even as he began to discern the value of respect from the racial enemies of the group. For instance, regarding the latter, Tom came to the realization that diverse immigrants in his occupational setting

> worked just as hard as I did, so that 'lazy wetback thing' – nah [*sic*]! I couldn't buy into that anymore! Not just that, I could see the guy standing in Home Depot parking lot, begging for work, ya know? … and it, uh, just got me thinkin [*sic*].

Over time, Tom became insightfully aware that non-white immigrants were not 'lazy' as the extremist group's ideology had insisted. Additionally, these experiences were reinforced by Tom's formation of a *transgressive relationship,* or 'breaking' relationship, with a Black 'cowboy.' Tom had been asked by a close friend to help the Black man find work at his place of employment, and the man had impressed Tom with his work ethic, fearlessness, and determination. In short, Tom respected him, and began to value the respect he received from him. This transgressive relationship, by definition, violated the normative standards of the neo-Nazi group, and helped Tom 'break' or begin to sever ties with the group, and ultimately assisted in unraveling the group's ideology.

However, Tom's disengagement from the group occurred slowly. He described trying to 'get out' of the group several times, but finding himself 'sucked right back into it.' As time wore on, Tom found himself caught between his rising dissonances and disillusionments with the group and its members, and the parallel feeling of being trapped. That is, Tom wanted to leave the group, but fears about who he was apart from the group, and fears of retaliation from group members, kept him locked in place ('if you want out, you're a race traitor'). When Tom lost his stepfather to a terminal illness and a close friend (another group member) to violent murder within two weeks of each other, he was thrust into crisis. These crisis events coalesced with his growing internal conflict surrounding the neo-Nazi group, resulting in a *catalytic moment* or tipping point. In other words, throughout these overlapping and often simultaneous processes of *dissonance, disillusionment*, the *transgressive relationship*, and the *catalytic moment,* Tom found himself in the throes of *identity deconstruction*.

By identity deconstruction, we mean that Tom's group-based identity started to crumble and he simply did not know who he was. He had relied upon the neo-Nazi group for almost two decades for the foundational markers of identity, and yet these

foundations were collapsing. Tom stated, 'I couldn't, I couldn't deal with, you know, almost sixteen years of beliefs, letting them, having to let em [*sic*] go, because I knew they weren't right; I *didn't know how to make that transition. It was too much*' [emphasis added]. In the face of this intense identity vacuum and identity crisis, the core need re-emerges as a foreground structure, given the demands on the participant for identity reconfiguration. This is not to suggest that the participant recognizes the core need explicitly, but to suggest that the core need emerges as a dominant motivating force during the initial exit crisis (similar to its emergence at entrance), to direct behavior in a tacit manner that, in most cases, probably goes unrecognized by the participant Additionally, because the core need is a reflection of one's early development, one's identity is already at stake, because attachment bonds 'yield representation(s) of the self and other[s] … that later shape the organization of identity' (Pittman et al., 2011, p. 33).

The challenge of reconfiguring identity

Stop-gap measures

Tom recognized that in the face of the identity crisis, he was 'on a destructive path,' neither committed nor uncommitted to the neo-Nazi group – in a no-man's land of identity loss. In the face of his inability to 'make that transition,' out of the group and in the face of his inability to cope with the immediate losses he had suffered, he 'made up my mind to, uh, kill myself.' Suicide seemed the only plausible solution when he could neither move forward to establish a new identity and a new sense of respect nor move backward to re-affiliate with the group. He described a plan that included loading a gun and 'drinking beer.' However, thinking 'right now's not the moment,' he left home to purchase 'more beer.' Upon his return, he surprisingly discovered a 'little kitten sittin [*sic*] there [on the steps to his home].' He noted the kitten was

> 'meowin' [*sic*] really loud; it was annoying, so I took it in and gave it some tuna. And I kept it. And my thought was, 'I can't kill myself and let this cat starve. I can't let this cat just die. No one's gonna [*sic*] know.' So, that stupid little Minx-Siamese cat saved my life.'

The emergence of the kitten in Tom's narrative is extremely important because it served as an impetus to move Tom out of his identity crisis and his inability to resolve it, reversing his suicidal intent and beginning the process of identity reconstruction. However, the identity reconfiguration facing Tom could not occur ex-nihilo. In this case and in others in our research, it is not unusual for the inchoate identity narrative to have lacunae which require *stop-gaps* or temporary place-holders which allow the participant to continue to develop other aspects of the identity narrative. We have identified several stop-gap measures but focus on one strategy here in particular – the use of a *composite symbol*.

In Tom's narrative, the kitten served as just such a *composite symbol*. If the kitten powerfully evokes Tom towards identity reconfiguration, it does so only due to its multi-layered, polysemic nature. On the one hand, Tom's core need of respect plays a foregrounding role in this process as Tom's interaction with the kitten ultimately summoned his role as nurturer, while also providing him with elaborations of his nurturing capacities as a caretaker (e.g. Tom ultimately provided for the kitten by adopting it, extending his caretaking role). By enacting nurturance and establishing himself as a

caretaker, Tom regained a sense of self-respect, meeting his developmental core need, and establishing a sense of identity security and equilibrium that was not only crucial to interrupting his suicidality, but also decisive in the beginning reconfiguration of his identity (Kobak et al., 2016).

On the other hand, the kitten also served as a symbolic foil that allowed Tom to maintain a hyper-masculine self-image grounded in power and dominance. It would be unacceptable for Tom to be seen as a coward or as fearful in any way – or alternatively – for him to view himself in this light. Recall that he enjoyed being viewed by others as threatening. Recall that he liked it when others crossed the street when they saw him coming. The kitten as foil is important in this regard because it is the kitten who interrupts Tom's violent intent against himself, thereby keeping Tom's reputation as a fearless intimidator (and his core need for respect) intact and unscathed.

As we intimated earlier, the antithetical modes of power and dominance on the one hand, and nurturance and care on the other, are bridges to Tom's attachment history in terms of control strategies for managing fear and confusion in the face of insecurity (Kobak et al., 2016). From a developmental perspective, Tom's antithetical symbolic response to the kitten is somewhat unsurprising given the fear, confusion, and identity insecurity he was experiencing as he was disengaging from the extremist group. In other words, Tom's antithetical response to the kitten mirrors attachment-based control strategies used in similar situations of confusion and insecurity (Solomon & George, 2011). Hence, Tom's core need of respect is best understood in relation to his unique developmental history, but also in relation to the more general principles of development and attachment. Thus *for Tom*, the kitten is a multi-faceted symbolic image that simultaneously represents the antithetical modes of realizing his core need of respect. Others will have different core needs that are contingently related to their own unique attachment histories.

Temporal loop

As participants confront a loss of identity at the moment of disengagement from the group, and the new challenge of identity reconfiguration through stop-gap measures, they must also invariably come to terms with the past. There is an increasing temporal divide that now stretches between one's previous identity as an extremist and one's new alternative and developing identity. The problem, according to our analysis and model, is that some participants get stuck in a *temporal loop*, re-living their past narratives in various ways rather than moving toward a new future and a transformed identity (Fisher Smith et al., 2020). This is also another point at which participants' core need becomes particularly salient, emerging in this moment of identity crisis to direct behavior. Of course, participants were not aware of a core need per se, but rather, their immediate struggles to make sense of the past.

Tom's case provides a particularly good example of how the temporal loop works, because in his effort to begin reconfiguring his identity apart from the neo-Nazi group, he found himself caught recapitulating his past perpetrations and violence toward others. As he explained,

> it's something that always stuck in my mind that I did. I can honestly tell you every crime that I've ever committed, every beating I've ever given; I have nightmares about 'em [*sic*] …

> People that, you know, P.T.S.D.'s huge in the military community; for those of us who've gotten out, on our own accord, from the skinhead movement, I'd say that P.T.S.D. runs rampant.
>
> [Interviewer: It's still a combat kind of environment, isn't it?]
>
> I have dreams about it. It doesn't affect my day-to-day being; I don't dwell on it – but I – I remember everything I did. If you gave me a picture of every victim I ever had, I guarantee you I could pick them out.

Not only is Tom's past haunted by previous perpetrations, but it is also in his view 'traumatized' as he characterizes himself as a wounded soldier, scarred by his alliance with the neo-Nazi group and their activities. In this way, Tom is paradoxically close to his past and yet simultaneously distanced from it. On the one hand, he cannot escape his victims (and his past) – they are literally in his dreams and he carries his 'crimes' against his victims with him. On the other hand, he attempts to distance himself from the burden, guilt, and responsibility of the enacted violence against his victims by now configuring himself as a victim or wounded soldier. In this manner, he tries to escape his past which has become a locus for self-described trauma. Tom's entrapment in the temporal loop (i.e. being haunted by his past and his inability to escape it) is itself a reflection of his core need, mirroring both antithetical modes of gaining respect including his capacity for violent intimidation on the one hand and nurturance and care on the other.

For instance, in the face of his burden and guilt, Tom lives his present as opportunities for reparation with former victims as a means of securing their respect. He described fortuitously meeting 'two gay people that I beat' during his period of affiliation with the neo-Nazi group, but after walking up to the two men peaceably in the present day, Tom 'started crying and apologized' for his past assaultive behavior. For Tom, the moment was 'life-changing,' because the two men accepted his apology. Tom's inability to escape the haunting visions of his previous victims and his need for reparation not only betrayed his stuckness in the past, but also revealed the manifestation of his core need. Tom longed to achieve respect, particularly from those whom he previously wronged. Hence, he wanted to demonstrate (to his victims) that he is someone who is capable of nurturance and care. In the same way that Tom's antithetical mode of nurturance and care emerged in his interaction with his family and in his adoption of the kitten, Tom extends the meaning in his interaction with victims to reparation and forgiveness. The temporal landscape was further complicated by Tom's mistrust and paranoia regarding others' motives and agendas in the present, particularly 'formers' who sought his help trying to exit. When this occurred, Tom noted, ' … I didn't know how to deal with it. I didn't know – there's – I have trust issues with people, you know, and, uh, especially with people from my past.' Indeed, he viewed such 'formers' (seeking exit) as 'triggers' for his own defensive reactivity and paranoia. In the case of such 'formers,' Tom reacted in the antithetical mode of intimidator (i.e. power and dominance) as a means of satisfying his core need of respect. In these situations, it was important that he never let his guard down, and that he maintain vigilance, projecting an intimidating presence.

The upshot is that Tom's core need of respect continued to play a background role as he wrestled with any of the actors from his past. Whether these were victims of Tom's previous violence or 'formers' seeking exit – his attempts to reconcile or to maintain a

defensive posture were both related to the antithetical modes of caring nurturer or violent intimidator – both bridges to Tom's early attachment history and to the core need of respect. In either case, these encounters kept him looped and entrenched in the past. Being caught in this way in a temporal loop meant that Tom was less free to reconfigure a new identity that both integrated his previous extremist self and his previous neo-Nazi past, allowing him to come to terms with who he was as a previously violent person, while simultaneously forging a new future and a reconstructed identity.

Transitional relationships and deradicalization

Individuals in our research who successfully forged a *transformed identity* were those who were often on the way to deradicalization. In their efforts to grapple with the loss of identity following exit, participants relied upon additional strategies other than stop-gap measures and the temporal loop. For example, many participants established *transitional relationships* with other individuals, groups, or communities as they struggled to build a new identity. Transitional relationships provided a kind of bridging or scaffolding function which helped exiters link to new value systems, social roles, skills, purposes and goals – all of which provided a new framework for one's *reconfigured identity,* and in some cases, assisted exiters toward deradicalization.

Tom's most significant transitional relationship upon exit was the relationship he established with the woman who later became his wife. He noted his ongoing difficulties coping with his previously suppressed emotions and with the stresses of leaving the neo-Nazi organization until he met his future wife:

> yeah, when I got out, I wa – when I got out of it, I was still pretty reckless. I dra – I still drank a lot. When I moved up here, I – [coughs] I'd go to the bar with my little brother and get into fights. You know, it was nothing new. It wasn't racially motivated, you know … I'd say, about half the fights I got into, I was defending somebody else. Um, but, yeah, I was still pretty reckless, and then I met my wife.

Tom went on to describe his wife as his 'saving grace,' stating that he could 'easily still have gone to prison or wound up dead,' but she helped him 'calm down.' Tom also stated that when he and his wife had children, he felt 'completely changed,' and he wished his children 'would never know my past.' In many respects, Tom's wife and children – his immediate, nuclear family – became the organizing center of his new identity. However, rather than helping Tom bridge to other communities or groups to expand his multi-faceted social roles and better elaborate his post-exit identity, moving him toward identity transformation, Tom's family became a buffer from the outside world, resulting in isolation rather than integration.

For instance, Tom's family was a safe-haven not only against the extremist world and former identity he was leaving behind, but also against incursions of the former world into his present. When discussing 'formers' who sought him out for help with exit, Tom was decidedly cautious and defensive, and he vigorously emphasized the importance of his family over such 'former' members. He explained, 'I have a wife and two girls I want to go home to … So, I help people ['formers'] to a certain degree, but after a while, it's just, if it's a lost cause, it's a lost cause … ' Hence, Tom found himself hypervigilant and even literally 'armed to the teeth' (i.e. with a firearm) in his potential encounters with

'former' members, while his family remained his primary concern – a protected island against what he understood to be the dangerous influences around him.

We tend to interpret Tom's hypervigilance, his view of the world as threatening, and his one-sided alignment with his wife and family in light of his idiographic developmental history (i.e. disrupted attachment) and his core need. While on the one hand, Tom's one-sided alignment and tendency to isolate with his family is important during the early phases of identity reconfiguration when a participant needs such buffering for a newly formed identity, as time goes on, if this protective pattern continues, it can lead to alienation and insularity (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). This protective pattern is in contrast to someone with secure attachment whose internal working models might produce a confident and open self-identity and a view of the world as attractive and approachable (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Because his family became more of an isolated island rather than a bridge to new communities, Tom's thinking and behaviors remained partially connected to his neo-Nazi past. Tom elaborated, stating, 'that tendency's [for violence] still there' and he described the tendency turning on or off like a 'light-switch.' He also noted that it required great effort to keep his own knee-jerk tendencies toward violence 'in check.'

Not only was Tom still primed for violence, but his thinking remained grounded in dichotomous 'us' and 'them' formulations that were more reminiscent of his past extremism. These cognitive formulations and behavioral tendencies became more entrenched rather than loosened the more he buffered himself within his family, and he remained deeply suspicious of others' motivations. Only his family could be trusted. Of course, part of the reason Tom struggled with latent violence, eruptions of violence, and concrete formulations that divided him (and his family) against different Others, hinged upon the tacit antithetical modes through which he defined his identity and met his core need for respect. Tom was switching between the antithetical modes of vigilant and threatening intimidator on one side and nurturing provider and protector on the other side.

When Tom did seek out other social role affiliations in the community, they tended to reinforce this pattern of insularity and even intolerance. Tom emphasized several times during the interview that he was not an 'extremely liberal person' but rather a 'conservative person,' and he explained how his conservativism and even religious views had resulted in conflict between him and other 'formers,' because in their view, he was not tolerant enough of others, particularly others whom far right extremist groups had traditionally targeted (e.g. LGBTQ others, ethnically diverse others). In our research, the best transitional relationships helped the participant move away from insularity, and away from polarizing 'us' and 'them' demarcations and more toward tolerance of difference and a shared 'we' framework (Fisher Smith et al., 2020). However, Tom struggled with accepting different Others. Hence, he gravitated toward inverted group affiliations post exit that, on the one hand, maintained a socially acceptable face (e.g. attending church), but on the other hand, were structurally similar to his previous affiliation with the neo-Nazi group (e.g. religious fundamentalism). The upshot is that Tom was disengaged from his former neo-Nazi group and had taken steps toward identity reconfiguration, but he remained stuck, unable to move toward a transformed identity and complete deradicalization.

Discussion

The key to Tom's stuck-ness and his inability to fully reconfigure his identity and therefore deradicalize completely is best understood through the lens of the developmental core need. His entrenchment in the temporal loop including his haunted past, his need for reparation, and his paranoid present, as well as his tendency to view his family in insular terms and his struggle to bridge out into new communities and new ways of thinking and acting – lies in the background motivation of his core need for respect. In our model, the core need is the important driver of entry and exit, but also contextually situated within development and attachment history, as Tom's antithetical expressions of the core need (i.e. power/dominance vs. nurturance) demonstrate.

In our view, what much of the research regarding disengagement and deradicalization presents is a de-contextualized or partially contextualized self. Push and pull factors do help take account of how a participant is embedded in various social and group contexts and highlights the role of social role identities. Kruglanski et al.'s (2014) 'quest for significance' model emphasizes the impact of psychological motivation, while Ebaugh (1988) examines the importance of social role to personal identity in the process of voluntary exit. Koehler (2017) elaborates the 'processes of de-pluralization' and 're-pluralization' with respect to radicalization and de-radicalization in an effort to capture the psychological mechanism driving the sustained commitment and later loss of commitment to an extremist group and ideology. What we believe needs to supplement these models, however, is an understanding of *psychological* development. Our intention is not to discount the importance of any of the other models mentioned above. Indeed, we view all of these models to be usefully descriptive from their own methodological and disciplinary perspectives. We only emphasize that the context of psychological development has been overlooked, and in being recognized for its full impact, might help to unify these myriad perspectives on the entry and exit process.

Attending to the developmental core need contextualizes the subject *all the way down* so that we can better understand the idiographic and dynamic nature of what Horgan and Taylor (2013) describe as the arc of extremist *involvement, engagement, and disengagement* (IED) – or how the subject traverses entry and exit. This is why asking about development, including the subject's early developmental context and family life, which points to attachment history, is potentially so fruitful. This early development and attachment history is important, because it informs a subject's working model of self and other/world which continues into adulthood. Hence, the intersection between early development, attachment history, and an individual's unique historical circumstances are where and how the core need is established, and what accounts for differences in core needs across subjects. As we have already emphasized, not all subjects expressed a core need of 'respect' as did the subject of this case study. Identifying and attending to the subject's core need helps us follow the idiosyncratic disengagement/deradicalization trajectories of subjects, making better sense of the arc of entry and exit, and allowing for more contextually sensitive and holistic viewpoints that unite radicalization and deradicalization processes, rather than keeping them dichotomous and disparate.

Focusing on psychological development and the core need may also be helpful to therapists already engaging client/participants in various disengagement and deradicalization programs (DDPs). We recognize that these programs vary widely in scope and scale

(see Koehler (2017) for a comprehensive typology of DDPs). For instance, some programs are government sponsored while some are not; some programs target the subject's ideology while some do not; and some programs actively recruit subjects while some do not. Irrespective of these differences, many programs rely on counseling and the therapeutic relationship as an important initiator of change (Koehler, 2017). For those programs that prioritize counseling, we view a developmental perspective as helpful in two ways. First, utilizing a psychological developmental perspective and being aware of the subject's core need assists the therapist in understanding the client/participant's attachment based *self* and *other/world* internal representations. This is particularly relevant to counseling in a DDP context in that it assists the therapist in locating the client/participant along the arc of engagement and disengagement. As we have emphasized throughout, we see entry and exit as inextricably linked. Ultimately, identifying the core need helps the therapist understand *how* the client/participant may approach the identity loss associated with disengagement and the emerging task of identity reconfiguration – but this *how* is contingent on assessing and understanding the core need as figure against the ground of the client/participant's attachment history. Whether the client/participant has an experience of self as secure or insecure and whether the world and others are experienced as inviting or threatening is in part a function of the client/participant's attachment history and their own unique path through development, both of which provide an embedded context for better understanding entry and exit.

Second, at bottom, counseling or psychotherapy is a relationship, and as a relationship, it is positioned to be both therapeutic and the center of change (Hubble et al., 2011). For instance, regardless of therapeutic orientation or technique, the psychotherapeutic relationship and alliance building through empathy, collaboration, and other therapeutic skills are crucial to positive therapeutic outcomes (Castonguay & Hill, 2017; Norcross & Lambert, 2018). In the context of counseling in a DDP environment, the therapeutic relationship and alliance building are likely equally important, and from our perspective, a psychological developmental framework is particularly useful for providing the therapist with the client/participant's developmentally informed relational stance in the world.[2] In the case of Tom, his core need was expressed through the antithetical modes of power/dominance and nurturance/care, and these modes remained largely divided as separate ways of relating to the world and others. The developmentally informed therapist, aware of the attachment history and core need of a client/participant such as Tom, can respond more appropriately within the therapeutic relationship itself in order to maximize the curative contribution of the therapeutic alliance. The point is that the therapeutic alliance provides an opportunity for someone like Tom to work toward a more fully transformed identity and deradicalization by providing the relational space to enact a more integrated and open identity that could move toward difference and diversity rather than remaining in an isolating space of sameness and toward the integration and tolerance of ambiguity rather than an insistence on the certainty, and illusory safety, of absolutes (Soto et al., 2019). We view the psychological developmental framework and the core need as a valuable addition, both theoretically and potentially therapeutically, to understanding the complex trajectory across entry and exit.

Notes

1. We recognize the importance in psychological development of both attachment and lifespan approaches. The latter emphasizes changing developmental challenges across the lifespan vis-à-vis changing psychosocial and maturational contexts of significance. While we view both approaches as important, we only emphasize attachment in this article.
2. Of course, psychotherapy is inextricably embedded within the cultures in which it is practiced, and so we do not assume that the therapeutic relationship unfolds in the same manner in all cultural contexts.

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