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Outsider Women: Understanding Women's Roles in White Supremacist Deradicalization

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Abstract
Prior scholarship has suggested that women of color and other outsiders (i.e., those not affiliated with White supremacist hate groups) have significantly facilitated the deradicalization of White supremacist hate group members. However, few empirical studies focus on the lived experiences of outsider women who have helped hate group members disengage and deradicalize. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to explore the experiences of women who facilitated the disengagement and deradicalization of White supremacist hate group members. The first author conducted interviews among four women who had significant experience regarding the phenomenon of interest. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a methodological framework, the authors identified five themes from participants' rich descriptions of their experiences facilitating hate group exit: (a) identifying love as driving force behind exit facilitation, (b) developing their exit facilitation approach, (c) experiencing costs of helping others exit, (d) identifying areas for increased external exit support, and (e) offering recommendations for hate group exit facilitation. By examining this specific population, we hoped to gain insights into new avenues of development for disengagement and deradicalization interventions.

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Introduction

White supremacy represents a rising threat to the social and political fabric of the United States. For instance, more than 8,000 hate crimes were reported in the U.S. in 2020, the highest number in over a decade (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2023). In their most recent Homeland Threat Assessment, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2020) stated that White supremacist extremists represented the "most persistent and lethal threat in the homeland." President Biden echoed this sentiment in 2023, when he declared before Howard University's graduating class, "White supremacy … is the single most dangerous terrorist

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threat in our homeland" (Ewing, 2023). The Southern Poverty Law Center found that 29% of Americans know someone who believes that White people are the superior race (Janik & Hanks, 2021). This statistic points to the important notion that White supremacist views do not merely represent the perspective of a lunatic fringe. Rather, they reaffirm racist and gendered views that permeate American society (Feagin & Hernan, 2001; Perry, 2002).

Hate group members' decisions to exit are influenced by "push" and "pull" factors (Aho, 1988; Bjørgo & Horgan, 2009). Push factors refer to adverse organizational characteristics that lead members to re-evaluate their involvement with the group. Pull factors refer to features outside of the group that incentivize exiting (Windisch et al., 2016). Some typical push factors include unmet expectations, disillusionment with the actions of the group or its members, struggling to adapt to a clandestine lifestyle, incapacity to cope with the psychological and/or physiological effects of violence, loss of faith in ideology, and burnout (Altier et al., 2014). Common pull factors include desire to marry, family demands, and positive interactions with non-extremists (Altier et al., 2014). Our focus in the current study is on the pull factor related to connections with outsider women (i.e., those not affiliated with White supremacist hate groups).

Like the idea of push and pull factors, The Phoenix Model (Silke et al., 2021) also frames hate group exit by centralizing certain internal and external influences. The model is based on a review of disengagement and deradicalization literature from 2017 to 2020. The model comprises three sociological catalysts, or instigating factors, that helped initiate disengagement and/or deradicalization: (a) actor catalysts (e.g., family and friends and program interventions, formers), (b) psychological catalysts (e.g., disillusionment and mental health), and (c) environmental catalysts (e.g., prison). These catalysts' impacts can either be positively or negatively affected by a series of filters including (dis)trust, perceived opportunity, and security, which influence who will make it through the disengagement/deradicalization processes and who will not. For instance, the degree to which the hate group member (dis)trusts those promoting disengagement/deradicalization affects the actor catalysts. If the hate group member feels trust, there is a greater likelihood of disengagement/deradicalization. Furthermore, even if the hate group member is trusting, they will be less likely disengage/deradicalize if they are not provided with a credible, positive,

and sustained alternative to hate group membership. The model suggests that hate group members go through gradual identity transformations throughout the disengagement/deradicalization process.

Prior scholarship has demonstrated that both women of color and non-extremist White women have been influential in facilitating hate group exit (e.g., Blazak, 2004; El-Amraoui & Ducol, 2019; Khan, 2018; Liguori & Spanierman, 2022; Mattsson & Johansson, 2019). However, few studies have focused explicitly on the phenomenological experiences of outsider women during the deradicalization facilitation process (e.g., Schewe & Koehler, 2021; Sikkens et al., 2017, 2018). For example, after conducting an extensive review of existing family-centered preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives, El-Amraoui and Ducol (2019) suggested that women serve as pivotal actors for the prevention of radicalization leading to violence. More specifically, they explained that women, particularly mothers, because of their role in the family and the community, facilitate family resilience to radicalization and prevention of radicalization. In another example, after recording the life histories of five former racist skinheads, Blazak (2004) discovered that their relationships with outsider women had a positive effect on exiting their hate groups. Fisher-Smith et al. (2020) described these kinds of relationships as "transgressive," in that they violate "the normative standards of the White supremacist organization and symbolically represent the participant's explicit means of moving away from the group" (p.18). Liguori and Spanierman (2022) also found that outsider women significantly influenced White supremacists to exit the movement. Notably, Blazak's (2004) and Liguori and Spanierman's (2022) participants were White supremacist men and non-binary individuals who reflected on their experiences with outsider women. As such, their research did not directly explore accounts of the women who facilitated hate group exit. While some studies included women who facilitated hate group exit (e.g., Mattsson & Johansson, 2019; Schewe & Koehler, 2021; Sikkens et al., 2017, 2018), the central focus of these investigations was not to understand women's experiences as such. In these studies, women's perspectives were subsumed under the broader category of family members of radicalized loved ones. For example, Schewe and Koehler (2021) focused on family members' motivation to engage in P/CVE, while Sikkens and colleagues (2017, 2018) sought to understand parents' reactions to their children radicalizing.

Romantic Relationships

Connecting romantically with women of color or outsider White women has influenced hate group members to leave the movement and deradicalize (Blazak, 2004; Gadd, 2006; Liguori & Spanierman, 2022). Based on findings from interviews with two former neo-Nazis, Mattsson and Johansson (2019), for example, discovered that encountering a romantic partner created new opportunities for members of extremist groups. Often, romantic partners provided a deeper and more genuine sense of trust than one's fellow hate group members, which allowed hate group members to express vulnerability and accept help. Liguori and Spanierman (2022) found that such romantic relationships also led to cognitive dissonance between members' White supremacist ideologies and their love for the person they had been taught to hate. For example, four of nine former White supremacists interviewed for their study described falling in love with Black or Jewish women, which ran directly counter to their racist ideologies. All four ultimately left the movement to pursue relationships with those women.

Maternal Relationships

Mothers of hate group members also influenced members' decisions to leave their hate groups. For example, through 82 in-depth interviews with adolescents and young adults who held extreme ideals, Sikkens and colleagues (2018) found that parents of young adults with extreme ideals reacted in four possible ways: (1) rejecting, (2) applauding, (3) ignoring, or (4) discussing the extreme ideals of their children. Most parents struggled to cope with radicalization and did not know how to navigate it properly. To assist parents, the P/CVE field now has a variety of prevention and intervention initiatives to strengthen family resilience in the face of radicalization (El-Amraoui & Ducol, 2019). The scholars noted that women, especially mothers, are at the center of many P/CVE intervention training models. For instance, Fempower (UK), Sisters Against Violent Extremism from Women Without Borders (Austria), and WomEx (Germany) propose a gender-oriented P/CVE approach and equip women with knowledge and skills to drive resilience and prevention in their communities. While some women have the benefit of training, others have had to figure out their own P/CVE approach with loved ones. For example, Jeanette Manning with her daughter, Lauren,

wrote an autobiographical account detailing Lauren's journey in and out of White supremacy, as well as the experience of being a mother trying to deradicalize her daughter without resources (Manning & Manning, 2021). While trying to navigate her daughter's deradicalization on her own, Jeanette decided to no longer allow Lauren to live in her house because of her racist beliefs. Yet, she continued to be involved in Lauren's eventual deradicalization. Jeanette explained that even though she had asked Lauren to leave her home, she remained open to the possibility of her daughter changing her beliefs and returning to the person she was before entering the movement.

It appears that openness, compassion, and forgiveness are essential elements that allow outsider women to effectively explain to extremists why White supremacy is illogical and harmful. This insight parallels Brown et al.'s (2021) findings, which explained that when educating youth about radicalization, teachers should emphasize compassion and sensitivity. Schewe and Koehler (2021) found empirical support for this compassion-focused approach in biographical-narrative interviews with four former right-wing extremists and four relatives of jihadist foreign fighters, all of whom were engaged in P/CVE work. As one former extremist who now helps others leave far-right extremist groups explained, "I felt it was so necessary as part of my life's journey to make up for the damage that I had done to humanity by inspiring people not just to follow my footsteps out but to inspire people in general to have more compassion and forgiveness for themselves and everyone else" (p. 162). Blazak's (2004) participants also described how openness and compassion helped change their minds on racism. For example, after finding racist material in his bedroom, one participant's mother initiated a discussion about his harmful beliefs. Instead of admonishing her son for his racism, she remained open enough to have a conversation about why his philosophy was incoherent and damaging. As a result, he reconsidered his racist philosophy and began spending more time with people of color. This vignette parallels research suggesting that compassion and related skills are trainable (Kanov et al., 2004; Klimecki et al., 2012). In both cases mentioned above, mothers made use of openness and unconditional positive regard to effectively create space for their children to realize the incompatibility and damaging nature of their belief systems and actions.

Platonic Relationships

Platonic relationships made similar impacts on hate group members' exit processes. For instance, Williams et al. (2015) found that those best positioned to notice early signs of individuals considering acts of violent extremism were often those individuals' friends. Their research also revealed that sometimes these friends hesitated to reach out to countering violent extremism (CVE)-relevant service providers (e.g., law enforcement agencies, religious officials, family members) because they feared potential repercussions. Liguori and Spanierman (2022) also found that platonic relationships were instrumental when friends chose to intervene. For example, making personal contact with outsider women of color and hearing their stories compelled hate group members to confront the fact that their ideology was hurting the innocent people sitting across from them. These interactions personalized and actualized the effects of their ideology. Participants also recalled how being forgiven and accepted by outsider women of color was deeply moving, cathartic, and catalytic in their decisions to begin exiting from the movement.

Listening to the experiences of male formers, Blazak (2004) found that outsider women were able to leverage the fact that they themselves, as white women or women of color were victims of White supremacy. This approach alerted hate group members to the potential that their own racist and sexist beliefs could hurt women for whom they cared. It also appears that modeling critical thinking and independence of thought inspired members to reject their racist ideologies. For instance, one former White supremacist credited his teacher with helping him turn away from his White supremacist beliefs. He recalled how she encouraged him to be responsible for his future, which inspired him to leave the skinheads behind. The teacher acknowledged his struggle for a simple worldview (i.e., victimhood narrative), as well as the anomie he was using the group ideology to subdue. She then encouraged him to create his own future as opposed to relying on irrational ideology (Blazak, 2004). This teacher was not only able to turn the student's attention towards how sexism operates both systematically and personally, but also to empower him to abandon the ideology responsible for that sexism.

Current Study: Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of the current study was to explore the experiences of women who have facilitated the disengagement and deradicalization of White supremacist hate group members. By examining the lived experiences of outsider women directly, we hoped to gain insights into new avenues of development for disengagement and deradicalization interventions. With notable exceptions (e.g., Schewe & Koehler, 2021; Sikkens et al., 2017, 2018), few studies have focused directly on the experiences and perspectives of outsider women. Hearing from these women's voices directly has the potential to extend the literature and broaden our understanding of women's contributions to hate group exit. Incorporating insights from outsider women's experiences is essential if researchers and practitioners intend to create comprehensive and efficacious hate group exit interventions. As such, the current study features the voices of women who have helped White supremacists disengage and deradicalize. Research questions included:

1. Why and how do outsider women help White supremacists exit their hate groups?
2. What are the lived experiences of outsider women who help White supremacists exit their hate groups?

Method

Qualitative approaches have been used broadly across deradicalization research (e.g., Fisher-Smith et al., 2020; Latif et al., 2019; Simi et al., 2017). For this study, we employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA was well-suited for research exploring content that is multidimensional, contextual, novel, and related to identity, as was the case for the current investigation (Osborn & Smith, 2006). As IPA recognizes that researcher positionality can facilitate and/or interfere with understanding of participants' lived experiences, we identified our biases before and during data collection and throughout data analysis (Smith et al., 2009). We addressed our positionalities through self-reflection, cyclical bracketing, auditing, and member-checking to remain faithful to participants' intended meanings (Levitt et al., 2017, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Smith et al. (2009) explained that “there is no right answer to the question of . . . sample size” when conducting IPA research (p. 56). Individuals who have facilitated hate group exit outside of an exit program are difficult to access as they are few and oftentimes are not mentioned in media coverage of the formers whom they helped disengage. As such, we followed Noon’s (2018) recommendation that IPA studies have 4-10 participants. We interviewed four participants for the current study (See Table 1). All self-identified as cis-gender women. Two participants identified as White, one as Black, and one as biracial (See Table 1). To participate in the study, participants had to meet three criteria: (1) they must have been at least 18 years or older (ages ranged from 35-59); (2) they must have been in a relationship with a White supremacist whom they helped disengage from a hate group; and (3) they must not have been a part of a White supremacist group at the time they connected with the White supremacist who exited. No participants were ever affiliated with any hate groups.

Regarding their relationships with the White supremacists, one participant, Melissa, married a man who joined the movement while they were married, and helped him exit several years later. Jay’s daughter became a White supremacist when she was 17 years old. Another participant, Catherine, met a former White supremacist before he was radicalized, and hired him as a bodyguard to protect her from neo-Nazis who were harassing her. He infiltrated the neo-Nazi group and became radicalized in the process. It was at this point that Catherine attempted to disengage and deradicalize him. Finally, Taylor became friends with a White supremacist after meeting him in a parking lot while he was skateboarding. The two began to communicate and ultimately felt drawn to each other. After participating in a newspaper interview together, Taylor decided to work with the White supremacist to facilitate his hate group exit.

Data Sources

The data sources for the current study comprised a demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interview protocol, designed based on scholarly literature pertaining to IPA.

Demographic Questionnaire

Each participant was given the opportunity to record their age, marriage status, income, employment status, level of education, religious affiliation, and ethnicity.

Interview Protocol

In line with IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2009) and recommendations for interview approaches (Kvale, 1996), the interview protocol comprised broad, open-ended questions and follow-up probes to gather information about participants' lived experiences facilitating hate group exit. First, we asked participants about the nature of their introductions to and relationships with the people whom they helped exit. Second, we asked why and how they were able to help White supremacists leave their hate groups. Third, we asked what their experiences were like after the White supremacists with whom they worked left their hate groups. We strove to use language in the interview that was consistent with the participants' language (Kvale, 1996).

Researcher Positionality

According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), it is important that researchers using IPA detail their own cultural backgrounds and understand how certain aspects might affect their interpretations in terms of trustworthiness and methodological rigor. Thus, we provide details regarding our positionalities. The first author identifies as a White, heterosexual, cisgender, liberal arts-college-educated, American man of European descent, who was raised in an upper-class Los Angeles neighborhood. He is aware that these characteristics are championed by the White supremacist movement. He also understands that even though he rejects racist ideologies and associated violence, he has benefited from the outcomes of a White supremacist, male-dominated sociopolitical hierarchy (Daniels, 1997; Feagin, 2013). The second author is a White, Jewish, cisgender, heterosexual, American woman and professor of counseling psychology. For more than two decades, her research has focused on White people's racial attitudes. Prior to this study, she had not conducted research with White supremacist women and was eager to learn from participants' perspectives. Both authors have

conducted prior research with former White supremacist men and non-binary participants (see Liguori & Spanierman, 2022).

Trustworthiness and Methodological Rigor

We attended to best practices for trustworthiness and standards for methodological rigor in qualitative research (Levitt at al., 2017, 2018). First, we addressed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To increase credibility (i.e., the degree to which results reflected participants' realities) we used the semi-structured interview (Shenton, 2004), described our positionality as a research instrument (i.e., how our assumptions and biases may have affected data collection and analysis and how we managed them; Levitt et al., 2018; Morrow, 2005), and conducted an internal audit of the findings to reduce biased interpretations (Levitt et al., 2017, 2018). We addressed transferability by keeping detailed interview notes, which included information regarding research context, processes, participants, and researcher–participant relationships (Levitt et al., 2018; Morrow, 2005). Consistent with qualitative research, we do not imply generalizability to other populations or settings (Levitt et al., 2018; Morrow, 2005). To address dependability, we maintained a detailed chronology of research activities, emerging themes, and analytic memos (Levitt et al., 2018; Morrow, 2005). To emphasize confirmability, the first and second author systematically reviewed notes and the second author's feedback on the first author's themes and write-ups.

We also addressed the two criteria set forth by Levitt et al. (2018): fidelity and utility. To emphasize fidelity (i.e., maintaining allegiance to the phenomenon under study; Levitt et al., 2018), we interviewed participants of different ages, nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic conditions. We also recognized and articulated the influence the first author's perspectives and positionality might have had on data analysis and attempted to limit that influence. For utility (i.e., the selection of procedures that answer the research questions and address the purpose of the studies; Levitt et al., 2018), we included demographic information about participants, created a flexible semi-structured interview protocol, conducted in-depth interviews that lasted between one to two hours, and explained differences within the study's findings (i.e., coherence among findings). Although participants in this

study had different experiences, IPA allowed us to cluster findings within broader themes. As such, superficial differences were absorbed by more general categories.

Procedures

After receiving IRB approval from the home institution, we identified the participants via internet research and snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019). For those who agreed to participate, we sent and reviewed the informed consent form and answered any questions concerning the study. Next, the first author interviewed participants via Zoom (n = 3) and telephone (n = 1). The interviews lasted between one to two hours. The first author engaged in a dialogue with each participant, following the semi-structured protocol, and employed follow-up probes according to the participant's responses. This flexibility allowed us to examine the unique experiences of hate group exit facilitation expressed by each participant. After conducting the interviews, we engaged in several steps. First, the first author transcribed the audio interviews verbatim. Then, the first author emailed the participants their transcripts and invited them to make any changes. No participants chose to edit their transcripts. Next, the first author invited interviewees to participate in follow-up interviews to hear about their experiences during their initial interviews and to see if there was anything about which they would like to speak that had not been covered.

Two of the four participants chose to pursue a follow-up interview during which they reflected on their experiences during the initial interviews. Catherine discussed feeling relieved to explain her side of the hate group exit facilitation story, as much of the media and academic attention had formerly been focused on her husband. Melissa explained that she was glad to be able to speak to other women who were also going through the hate group exit process with loved ones.

Data Analysis

We followed Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2014) IPA recommendations for data analysis. First, we analyzed transcripts individually, identifying themes and generating thematic connections. As guided by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), the first author closely read each transcript several times. While reading the transcripts or listening to the audio recordings, the

first author recorded observational and reflective notes about the interview experience. He then followed Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2014) suggestion of transforming notes into emergent themes. Next, he developed concise descriptive phrases that captured the essential characteristics identified within his notes. The second author subsequently audited the first author's initial themes to ensure agreement on theme designation. For instance, we moved participant descriptions of feeling burdened and abandoned/being the lone person facilitating the exit process from the "Identifying areas for increased external exit support" theme to "Experiencing costs of helping others exit."

After this step, the first author created a superordinate theme list from across transcripts. Adhering to Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2014) recommendation that the researcher look for conceptual similarities between emergent themes, he clustered themes together and labeled each superordinate cluster according to its content. He then provided a definition for each theme with links to illustrative quotations in the manuscript and prepared a preliminary table. The second author again audited the information in the table to ensure agreement on theme designation. The second author recommended combining less salient themes under more general thematic categories. For instance, we integrated "Delivering an ultimatum" and "Understanding roots of hate" into the broader "Developing a compassionate exit facilitation approach." Finally, we translated the superordinate theme table to write up the findings (See Table 2).

Findings

Five themes emerged from participants' descriptions of their experiences facilitating hate group exits among friends and loved ones. Themes include (a) *identifying love as driving force behind exit facilitation*, (b) *developing a compassionate exit facilitation approach*, (c) *experiencing costs of helping others exit,* (d) *identifying areas for increased external exit support,* and (e) *offering recommendations for hate group exit facilitation* (See Table 2). We present each theme in order of salience with illustrative quotations from the participants. We address participants either by their self-selected pseudonyms (n = 2) or their legal names, by which they explicitly asked to be identified ($n = 2$).

Identifying Love as Driving Force Behind Exit Facilitation

Outsider women participants identified love as a compelling component of the exit facilitation process. For example, Melissa, a White participant, described how her love for her White supremacist husband helped her understand his psychological situation, which in turn pushed her to fight for his exit and deradicalization:

> Love is literally the only thing that got me through this process, because love is a lot stronger than hate. And I knew that if [my husband] hated himself, I had to love him through it so he could love himself. And to me, I just felt like, I was his backbone, whenever he couldn't stand straight.

Love was also a driving factor for outsider women who were attempting to pull White supremacist men out of organized racism. Catherine, a Black woman, for example, expressed her love through prayer. She prayed for the man she was helping to "turn his life around. Because I was in love with him." Although Taylor, a biracial woman, was not in a romantic relationship with the man whom she was hoping to extricate from the movement, she also felt an intense love for him. She noted that when they first met, "there was, like, an intense closeness between he and I . . . I felt this intense amount of just, love for him." She knew that opening up to him was risky, but she decided to do so anyway. She explained that he would either receive her love or reject it. But she emphasized that either way she would retain her ability to love herself. As a mother, Jay, a White woman, demonstrated yet another type of love for her daughter, who she desperately wanted to leave the movement. She explained how keeping her home open to her daughter was an expression of this love, and she hoped it would facilitate her daughter's exit:

> You feed those little kernels, and you wait until there's a crack, and then those kernels kind of squeeze in and say, "I love you and I'll still love you no matter what you do." They [her daughter] sit there and when there's a little crack, they whisper, "Well, maybe this movement isn't what I thought it was." And, "Don't forget, you have a family that loves you. Don't forget."

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Developing a Compassionate Exit Facilitation Approach

Participants described cultivating a hate group exit facilitation approach rooted in compassion. To facilitate the exit process of the men about whom they cared, participants first explored and identified the roots of the men's racism. The central understanding participants articulated was that racist hate stems from emotional pain. As Melissa explained regarding the foundations of her husband's racism:

> Hurt people hurt people . . . And that's what [my husband] was doing, and [he] was hurting. He was hurting from all the trauma that he dealt with overseas [as a soldier in Afghanistan]. He was hurting from the trauma he had built up as a child, and he was going to . . . hurt anybody that hurt him in any way, shape, or form . . . whether it was physically or mental. He was going to hurt.

Taylor developed a similar conceptualization of hate. She offered a way to approach these cases with a certain type of awareness: "I see people that are hateful … And I just know that it's pain. It's not personal. You know? It's just pain. And so, we can observe it."

After identifying the role of emotional pain in these formers' worldviews, participants developed meaningful communication strategies with them. These communication strategies were based on empathy and compassion. As Jay explained, cultivating a communication approach with her daughter was not easy. Yet her empathy allowed her to communicate with her daughter in a new and refreshing way:

> Those [communication] patterns for me, were slow to change . . . Those first little bits of changing the communication style came when she said to me, "Oh, my friend died. He was killed." I really didn't know him, and I didn't know what to ask, but I said, "I'm really sorry." And that was an entirely different answer from what she'd had from her boyfriend and from the group. And so, it was a breakthrough for her seeing that I could be sympathetic, empathetic to something in her life even if I didn't like what she was involved in. I could still be empathetic as a person.

Taylor found that being openly compassionate was both healing for her and for the man whose exit she was facilitating. She felt this compassion so strongly that it superseded any negativity she felt towards his racist views. As she articulated:

> For me, it was like this sign of like deep healing that I could . . . . be your [neo-Nazi's] friend and you could still have your beliefs, but I wouldn't take it personal. Like, that was a big step for me.

Catherine used a communication strategy that incorporated her pastor to facilitate the exit process. Her pastor visited the man whom she was trying to extricate, talked with him about his involvement in the movement, and offered to pray for him in church along with the entire congregation. By involving the pastor in her communication strategy, Catherine employed the compassion of both him and the congregation to help reach the man she was trying to extricate. She also spoke directly to the man she was attempting to help: "When he was in the hospital, I said, 'You're gonna get better. But you . . . have to leave the movement.' 'Cause I was, like, praying, and crying, you know, for the Lord to bring him back . . . get him out of the movement." Finally, Melissa explained to her husband that she was going to have to leave with her children because of the danger that he had put them in by participating in his hate group: "I'm literally at the point to where I don't want to leave you … I did love him. And I loved him through every step of the way." At this point, Melissa felt the only way she could communicate with her husband was to clarify that he would have to choose between movement and his family. Unfortunately, the communication strategy did not work at first. Melissa left her husband for a period of time to protect both herself and her children, while also attempting to pry her husband away from the KKK.

Experiencing Costs of Helping Others Exit

Participants identified negative consequences that came with facilitating their loved one's exit process. They explained that extricating members of White supremacy groups took an emotional toll on them. For instance, Taylor discussed how, as a biracial woman, trying to deradicalize a neo-Nazi caused her own racial trauma to resurface. She described how the process brought up feelings from her childhood of being abandoned by the White side of her

family because of her race. Taylor remembered being so overwhelmed by her emotional reactions to these memories that "right before he [neo-Nazi friend she was extricating] came over to record that interview, I was um, out of the blue, in the fetal position, bawling my eyes out."

In addition to re-traumatization, participants described feeling anxious and exhausted as additional costs of this work. For instance, Jay described how the emotional pain of trying to extricate her daughter forced her to compartmentalize her life. She explained having to "put all of that [pain] in the back of my head . . . That's how I survived." Melissa felt defeated in her attempts to save her husband not only from White supremacy, but also from his drug addiction: "I felt defeated . . . I'm tryin' to save everything. I'm tryin' to keep my family together. And this is just not working. Like, he's not gonna give in. He's not gonna break." At the same time, she feared for her husband's safety: "I was like, 'I'm gonna lose him. I'm going to lose him either to the addiction, or somebody's gonna kill him.'" Catherine also worried about the physical security of the man she was trying to help leave White supremacy. The fact that she was falling in love with this man complicated those emotions further. She kept her feelings to herself because she feared hate group members would hurt the man she was trying to extricate if they found out about her connection to him because of her race.

Participants also explained they felt abandoned by people close to them and by society. They described feeling burdened as the lone facilitators of the exit process. Melissa detailed the desperation she experienced after trying unsuccessfully to get external help for her husband:

> I had nobody. Because everybody had turned their back . . . I had nothing, or nobody that I could turn to. Because I felt like if I was to try to reach out, and try to get help, and try to get counseling, then nobody would accept me because I stood by him [and his racist views]. And I literally would just, whenever you see people talkin' about screamin' into their pillow, or cryin' whenever nobody was watchin', that was me.

Melissa's frustration soon turned to anger. She felt betrayed by those who she had expected to be there for her and her husband, such as her family members. When they came back into her life after she successfully removed him from the KKK, she described feeling

disappointed with them: "'*Now* you're here?' . . . But whenever I was at the point to where I could have lost everything, nobody was there. I had cried so many nights. I had screamed so many, just so much anger." Taylor also described feeling abandoned by social support systems:

> I could get nothing to support him. And so, it was heavy. I mean, I felt abandoned in a way. I felt like, [sniffle] and not just abandoned, like me personally. But, like abandoned by a society that says they believe in one thing, but, like, can't support it. It sucked. It was lonely. I mean, it was lonely. It was heavy. It was like . . . "I can't let this person drown and he's drowning. But I don't have the capacity to be the only one to rescue him . . . I can barely keep my own head above water right now in working through what I need to work through. And yet I still can't let him drown. Because he's a fuckin' human being."

Identifying Areas for Increased External Exit Support

In response to feeling a lack of support, participants identified external resources that would have benefited their efforts to facilitate the exit process. Jay explained that when she was trying to find help for her daughter, there were no resources available: "In my case in the beginning [2010's], there's nothing to research online. Not having any webpages nor anybody to tell me anything." Taylor noted that an organization dedicated to the hate group exit process would have been beneficial:

> What would have been great would have been a resource . . . that I could have been like, "Hey . . . lemme drive you [former whom she helped exit] over to this place . . . like a safe house, you know? Where like abused women go, 'cause these people [formers] aren't any different than other people that are abused. They have deep layers of frickin' abuse in their lives, and pain and trauma. Like, they need a safe place where they can go and reside while they're transitioning. Like, while they're reframing their thoughts. And reprograming their minds and their brains. And like, learning how to trust society, trust themselves, trust their instincts.

Melissa recalled that her experiences trying to get mental health professionals to help her husband were disheartening. She noted that the counselors to whom she brought her husband were not adequately trained to work with individuals attempting to leave a hate group: “Do [counselors] know what it's like to have an addiction of hate? Do they know what it's like to have the mentality of a person that is just angry because of something that they've been through, now they're going to go to hate?”

Offering Recommendations for Hate Group Exit Facilitation

Drawing from their experiences, participants offered insights to others trying to extricate their loved ones from hate groups. Melissa directed her message toward women who are dealing or have dealt with the trauma associated with facilitating a loved one’s hate group exit. She noted that whether their loved one is addicted to hate or drugs, the addictions stem from a similar source: “It’s hate for their self, because they’re battling something. And they hate their self. So, they’re gonna use something else to numb that pain.” She also encouraged women to reach out to these resources that did not exist previously: “Now that there is more things out there to help women . . . you can reach out and you can talk to somebody and they will have people like [my husband, a hate group exit specialist] now to help with people that battles the same thing that he did.” Jay spoke about the power of accepting a loved one back after they leave their hate groups: “Keep the door open . . . Don’t do what I did and give your kid an ultimatum [laughs]. Don’t shut the door.” She recommended a three-part intervention strategy for others hoping to extricate loved ones from hate: (a) open lines of communication, (b) ask hard questions, and (c) listen to the answers. She also espoused the utility of asking those involved in hate groups about their reasons for participating:

> Ask those hard questions: “What’s drawing you into this [hate group]? What are you getting from this? Why do you feel the need to be involved in this? Who in your life has made you feel unimportant or less than enough? What in yourself are you feeling uneasy about or insecure about?”

Finally, Catherine, who had enlisted her pastor's support, recommended a spiritual practice for helping remove loved one's from hate. She suggested, "Ask the Lord. Pray to the Lord to get them out. 'Cause there's a better life than that."

Discussion

In the current study, we relied on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four outsider women (i.e., women of color and outsider White women) to explore their hate group exit facilitation experiences. We employed a phenomenological approach to learn directly from their lived experiences. Participants explained how they approached White supremacists with openness, love, and compassion in an effort to understand them. They also described that by doing so, they opened themselves up to experiencing significant psychological distress. They lamented the dearth of resources available to them during the hate group exit facilitation process and recommended support they could have used. Below, we synthesize and connect their lived experiences to the extant literature. We also identify limitations of the study and provide directions for future research. We conclude with implications for deradicalization interventions.

Openness, Love, and Compassion

Throughout their interviews, participants identified elements of openness, love, and compassion as the factors that most deeply influenced their engagement in the exit facilitation process. Despite the White supremacists' racist ideology they encountered, participants remained open to the men as human beings. Their openness expressed itself in the form of a love that reached beyond the White supremacists' personae. This finding is consistent with prior research that suggested that encountering unconditional love outside of the movement was a significant factor in White supremacist disengagement (Blazak, 2004; Liguori & Spanierman, 2022). Being open and inquisitive allowed these women to circumnavigate the racist ideologies that barricaded these men from human connection. By remaining open to men embedded in White supremacist ideology, these outsider women might have helped these men to see themselves as fundamentally valuable. Perhaps by providing this new perspective,

participants opened a psychological avenue that was closed off previously. It might be the case that by offering formers an image of themselves as loveable, these facilitators were able to unlock a version of reality in which formers could imagine their emotional needs being met and begin to heal from their pain.

Supporting prior scholarship (Schewe & Koehler, 2021), our findings emphasized the prominent role of compassion and empathy. Participants drew on empathy to help them understand the underpinnings of White supremacist men's hatred. Instead of rejecting these men for their racist beliefs, participants used empathy to explore the roots of their racism. They imagined what it might be like to have come from the backgrounds of these formers and entertained the reasons why these formers might subsequently act in such racist and violent ways. As such, the participants were able to understand these ex-White supremacist men for who they were underneath their ideology: traumatized individuals recklessly using racism to express repressed emotional pain. Grasping that these ex-White supremacists' racism was based on fear and self-hatred, a fact born out in previous research (Liguori & Spanierman, 2022; Lowery, 2023), outsider women participants were able to communicate in a more sensitive and compassionate way. Instead of battling their counterparts' ideological positions, participants developed communication strategies centered around understanding them. Subsequently, the participants also acted as support systems to reify these new positive notions, which may have helped formers slowly develop more prosocial identities.

Significant Psychological Distress and Recommendations for Bolstering Exit Facilitation

Also supporting prior research, we found that facilitating hate group exit resulted in significant psychological distress for outsider women. For example, all participants described experiencing painful emotions connected to the exit facilitation process. They noted feeling fearful, anxious, defeated, and re-traumatized. This finding suggests that engaging with White supremacists, whether they are active or deciding to leave the movement, can be emotionally taxing. This effect appeared to be true particularly for participants who identified as Black and biracial, as they shouldered the additional burden of racial tension and re-traumatization. The fact that they were people of color directly challenged White supremacists' ideologies, which forced them to choose between their connection with an outsider or the movement. This

finding echoes Liguori and Spanierman's (2022) findings that Black and Jewish women were instrumental in facilitating White supremacist men to leave the movement. Yet even in successful cases, findings from the current study suggest that bringing a person out of a hate group individually can be overwhelming and exhausting for outsider women. Participants were tasked with helping formers leave dangerous situations, process trauma, overcome addictions, create new identities, and reintegrate into society.

In addition to experiencing emotional distress from the exit facilitation process itself, participants also felt abandoned by the systems they expected to help them. They were left stranded by friends, family, and mental health professionals. Consequently, participants felt betrayed and burdened with the responsibility of single-handedly pulling these White supremacists out of their hate groups. This finding suggests that extricating a White supremacist from their hate group might benefit from involving a team of professionals rather than individual citizens. As Simi et al. (2017) found among 89 former White supremacists, surrendering hate group identities can be experienced as a struggle against addiction. As such, weaning formers off hate may necessitate professional intervention.

Although these outsider women suffered during hate group exit facilitation, they gained insight into ways to improve deradicalization work. Participants stressed that people should approach exit facilitation with an understanding of the roots of White supremacists' racist ideology, emotional pain, and trauma. This approach appears to mirror compassion-focused therapy, which has proven to increase levels of self-compassion, decrease self-criticism increase, and increase self-reassurance (Millard et al., 2023). Based on their experiences, participants offered suggestions on how practitioners might treat people in the process of leaving White supremacist hate groups: instead of rejecting them or trying to convince them of their obvious moral transgressions, inquire into their experiences and practice active listening. According to participants, such an approach appears to help White supremacists feel heard and understood beyond their racist ideologies. This experience, in turn, seems to allow White supremacists to reconnect with their humanity. Findings from the current study suggest that by practicing compassion and empathy towards someone whose ideology they abhor (i.e., White supremacists), participants offered a behavioral template for the men with whom they worked. Perhaps these ex-White supremacists learned how to

practice tolerance and curiosity for outsiders and for themselves by mimicking participants' actions. Providing a social model for ex-White supremacists appears to have been instrumental in formers' hate group exit and rehabilitation processes.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While the current study offers important insights into the phenomenological experiences of outsider women who have helped facilitate the hate group exit process, there are some limitations. The participants comprised only four women; thus, it is important that future researchers identify and interview more participants to increase the transferability of findings. For instance, Liguori and Spanierman (2022) found that Jewish women were also instrumental in extricating White supremacists from hate groups. Future research could investigate how connecting with individuals from religious minority populations facilitates hate group exit. Additionally, future research could examine the experiences of individuals who were *adjacent* to exit facilitators (e.g., children, friends, and family). Their perspectives might enable a broader understanding of how hate group exit facilitation affects family and social systems, which could have implications for exit facilitation. While prior research studied members or groups of which women were part (e.g., family members, parents), , our study explicitly focused on the experiences of women who facilitated deradicalization. their lived experiences. Future research could take a dyadic approach and explore their experiences simultaneously. Synthesizing perspectives of formers and outsider women might offer a more comprehensive portrayal of the hate group exit facilitation process. In the current study participants reported on support and resources needed *during* the hate group exit facilitation process. Future research could also investigate what kind of support outsider women need *after* extracting their loved ones from their hate groups. Finally, because none of the participants were professional counselors or deradicalization practitioners, readers should not consider participants' recommendations regarding hate group exit interventions as clinically applicable. That said, participants' suggestions might influence research efforts to test the efficacy of approaches guided by those individuals who lived them.

Implications for Practice

Based on these outsider women's experiences, we identified several potential implications for disengagement and deradicalization interventions. Because the outsider women in this study talked at length about the costs they incurred as a consequence of trying to disengage White supremacists, it is important that practitioners are aware of the emotional tension that exists for a client whose loved one is in a White supremacist group. At one end, these outsiders are horrified by the racism in which their loved ones are engaged. At the other, they still love the extremists to whom they are connected and are fighting to extricate. In participating in this struggle, the outsider women may be viewed as choosing the side of a White supremacist rather than being viewed as supporting someone they love. Keeping this dynamic in mind might help clinicians appreciate the emotional and social complexities of clients in the process of removing loved ones from hate groups.

Participants also recommended different approaches for engaging in White supremacist deradicalization. Unlike when they were involved in the hate group exit facilitation process, today there exist numerous exit programs in the United States dedicated to extricating and rehabilitating former White supremacists (e.g., Life After Hate and Parents for Peace). There are also programs dedicated to working with families whose loved ones have been radicalized (e.g., MothersforLife and Families Against Violent Extremism). Those with loved ones in hate groups can now connect with these groups for support and assistance in trying to remove their intimates from hate groups. Furthermore, practitioners can partner with these programs to design collaborative approaches to help extricate and rehabilitate hate group members. The communication approaches offered by participants in this study might inform clinical interventions. For instance, practitioners might first address the fundamental roots of White supremacists' racism and offer them alternative cognitive and emotional frames through which to perceive themselves within the world. Then, they could help guide formers in the practice of living according to these newly developed frames. Practitioners can also offer professional support to those attempting to remove their loved ones from the movement.

Finally, participants highlighted important aspects in their experiences extricating White supremacists from their hate groups. They noted that their loved one's racial hatred was rooted in self-hatred. As such, intervention efforts might focus on tracing racist expressions back to their psychological and often traumatic roots. Following the lead of our participants, instead of assuming a combative stance towards White supremacists, those concerned with deradicalizing extremists might approach such individuals with a sense of curiosity and compassion. Although the approach may sound morally repugnant to some, this approach seems to allow the facilitator to engage with White supremacists on an emotional, rather than ideological, level. In doing so, it appears that the facilitator can connect with the White supremacist from the perspective of her basic human experience. Experiencing such a connection may outweigh the White supremacist's ideological commitments and provide an incentive to leave the movement.

Conclusion

Outsider women in the current study described unique experiences facilitating hate group exit of people for whom they cared. They identified love, empathy, and compassion as driving forces behind their engagement in facilitating hate group exit. Subsequently, they articulated a compassionate approach to their exit facilitation practices. At the same time, they noted how a lack of external support left them emotionally drained. Moreover, they subjected themselves to emotional exhaustion, re-traumatization, and feelings of abandonment by facilitating hate group exit. Consequently, they requested increased resources for hate group exit. Drawing from their experiences, participants offered suggestions to those trying to remove loved ones from hate groups. By learning from these outsider women's experiences, researchers can hone future investigations that might guide the development of hate group exit interventions designed for White supremacists.

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Appendix

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Education	Income (Thousands)	Job Status	Marital Status	Race	Religion	Relationship to Former
Catherine	NR	Some High School	50-75	Retired	Married	Black or African American	Christian	Spouse
Jay	59	Associate degree or some college/ Trade School	NR	Full-time	Widowed	White	Christian	Mother
Melissa	35	High School	35-50	Part-time	Married	White	None	Spouse
Taylor	43	Bachelor's degree	NR	Full-time	Not Married	Black or African American/ White	Spiritual	Friend

Notes: Participants are addressed by either self-selected pseudonyms or their legal names (by which they explicitly asked to be identified). Income is reported in thousands of dollars. NR = no response

Table 2
Participant Themes

Themes	Definitions
Identifying love as driving force behind exit facilitation	Participants described feeling love towards formers and identified love as a driving component of the exit facilitation process.
Developing a compassionate exit facilitation approach	Participants explored and identified roots of former's racism. Following this exploration, some participants were able to communicate empathetically and compassionately with formers directly or through intermediaries during the exit process.
Experiencing costs of helping others exit	Participants identified negative emotional consequences that came with facilitating their loved one's exit process including re-traumatization, feeling defeated, emotional pain, and fear/anxiety. Participants explained that they felt burdened and abandoned being the lone person facilitating the exit process.
Identifying areas for increased external exit support	Participants illustrated what kinds of resources were not available and would have been helpful during their exit facilitation process.
Offering recommendations for hate group exit facilitation	Participants offered advice to others trying to extricate their loved ones from hate groups.

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