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Introduction to the Special Issue on Terrorism

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As noted by several scholars, there has been a massive growth in research related to terror and extremism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Federal agencies have invested millions of dollars in funding to understand violent extremism, particularly through the use of quantitative assessments of behavior. As a result, there are several widely recognized databases of terror and extremist violence against targets in the US and abroad.

These studies provide invaluable insights into the nature of extremist activities, though it should be noted that much of the foundational literature established before the 9/11 attacks involved qualitative research methods. Scholars generally used interviews of extremists and actors, as well as media analyses to understand the framing of these issues in various outlets. These methods are still applied today, and are a vital component of research, regardless of whether data have been developed from traditional sources or information acquired from online sources.

This special issue was developed to reflect the scope of terrorism research utilizing qualitative methods, with pieces that highlight a diversity of data and viewpoints, ranging from case studies developed from larger data sets to traditional interview methods to mixed qualitative and quantitative models. These works also demonstrate the diversity of theories that can be applied to this form of crime, whether social learning theory to examinations of affect. I must thank the authors whose work appears in this issue as their scholarship demonstrates the diversity of knowledge and state of the art in the field of terrorism research. I would also like to thank Dr. Vieraitis for her careful management of this issue. I hope you enjoy this issue and benefit from the insights of the scholars appearing here.
ANGER FROM WITHIN: THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN DIENGAGEMENT FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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Abstract

There is growing recognition about the similarities between generic criminality and violent extremism. Using data derived from a unique set of in-depth life history interviews with 40 former U.S. white supremacists, as well as previous studies of criminal desistance, we examine the emotional valence that characterizes actors' descriptions of the disengagement process. More specifically, results suggest that negative emotions (i.e., anger and frustration) directed toward the extremist group and oneself function as a catalyst for disengagement. Negative emotions become a source of motivation in re-evaluating the relative importance of the group as it relates to the individual. Ultimately, the reevaluation of the group is essential to the decision to disengage from violent extremism.

Keywords: disengagement, extremism, terrorism; hate; white supremacy

INTRODUCTION

Despite claims that violent extremism is fundamentally different from generic criminal offending (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2001; Silke, 2014), other observers point to important similarities between the two phenomena (Clarke & Newman, 2006; Fahey & LaFree, 2015; Mullins, 2009; Rice, 2009). While various criminological frameworks have recently been utilized to study violent extremism vis-a`-vis subcultural theory (Pisoiu, 2015), rational choice (Perry & Hasisi, 2015), displacement and diffusion (Hsu & Apel, 2015), social disorganization (Fahey & LaFree, 2015), routine activities (Parkin & Freilich, 2015), and deterrence (Argomaniz & Vidai-Diez, 2015), few studies employ a life course criminological approach (see for exceptions Hamm, 2013; Simi, Sporer, & Bubolz, 2016). This is an unfortunate omission as
violent extremism involves a range of issues life course criminology is well suited to examine such as onset and persistence as well as disengagement and desistance. In addition, a life course approach provides an opportunity to assess the commonalities and differences between violent extremism and generic criminality and potentially expand the scope of a framework that according to some scholars represents the central and most pervasive theory within criminology (Cullen, 2010).

Violent extremism is a growing field of study with a substantial focus on how individuals and groups become mobilized for ideological violence and, more recently, what types of intervention can be used to counteract such processes (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014; Bjørgo, 2011; LaFree & Miller, 2008; Sageman, 2014). Although the process of disengagement from violent extremism has begun to receive more attention in recent years (Bjørgo & Horgan, 2009; Gadd, 2006; Horgan, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014), no study to date has examined disengagement from violent extremism by relying on life course criminology and studies of criminal desistance. Horgan (2009), for example, concludes the ideological dimension of violent extremism limits the conceptual value of criminal desistance to explain disengagement. Yet, the field lacks systematic empirical evidence to support this assessment. Further, existing studies of disengagement from violent extremism are typically focused on international samples of extremists, with less attention directed toward domestic extremists in the United States (see for exception Aho, 1994; Blazak, 2001; Bubolz & Simi, 2015a) and thus the idea that extremism and generic crime are completely distinct may be unwarranted (Simi, Sporer, & Bubolz, 2016).

As such, this article builds on previous studies of extremist disengagement by drawing from the criminal desistance literature to examine a sample of former U.S. domestic extremists (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich, 2007; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). The comparison of generic criminal desistance to disengagement from violent extremism is important because, unlike individual offending, criminality related to violent extremism, at times, involves attachment to a highly emotive collective or group identity with varying levels of ideological commitment. Caution should be taken, however, about assuming one point of distinction means violent extremism and generic criminals share nothing else in common or that disengagement and desistance are fundamentally different.

In fact, recent empirical studies point to considerable similarities between the two populations in terms of the presence of childhood risk factors (Simi, Sporer, & Bubolz, 2016); the disproportionate rates of criminal activity committed by young males (McCauley & Segal, 1987; Russell & Miller, 1983), participation in non-ideological, generic offending (Ezekiel, 1995; Hamm, 1993) and adherence to an ongoing organizational structure (Maguire & Pastore, 1996; Short, 1997). In addition, violent extremists and various serial offenders are not defined by a single act but rather by the amalgamation of multiple violent crimes over the course of that individual’s criminal career (LaFree & Dugan, 2004). In the next section, we discuss several key concepts that guide our analysis.

LIFE COURSE CRIMINOLOGY, DESISTANCE, AND EMOTION

In general, life-course criminology (LCC) is concerned with how the unfolding nature of life events shape criminal offending (LeBlanc, 1997; Moffitt, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1993).
One of the most prominent areas of study within LCC has been investigating the desistance process or the cessation of criminal activity (Giordano et al., 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001, 2004; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Much of this literature has focused on the changing nature of micro-structural aspects that occur during a person’s life course, such as finding employment, marriage, and entering the military (Elder Jr., Gimbel, & Ivie, 1991; Farrington, Gallagher, Morley, St. Ledger, & West, 1986; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Uggen, 2000). Despite the importance of these findings, much of this research neglected the cognitive and emotional aspects of criminal desistance, which involve the “agentic moves” individuals pursue to desist from criminal activities (Giordano et al., 2007).

To address these deficiencies, several studies focused on the cognitive and emotional components related to desistance (Maruna, Lebel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2006). Giordano and colleagues (2007) argued that life course transitions (e.g., marriage, joining the military) are embedded with emotion. More specifically, Giordano and colleagues (2007) proposed that anger and frustration increase the likelihood of experiencing setbacks when individuals attempt to leave a criminal lifestyle. As such, an important part of moving away from offending involves developing the ability to cope with these negative emotions. Emotional changes play an important role in the desistance process and provide needed details about how life transitions are connected to decreases in antisocial behavior.

Along these lines, Giordano and colleagues (2007) stressed the reduction of anger helps individuals restructure the importance of their priorities toward personal aspirations and interests unrelated to antisocial behavior. This restructuring sparks the change process and reduces the likelihood of future criminal offending. Giordano and colleagues’ (2007) research, however, focuses on individual-level offending as opposed to disengagement from a group-level context. Leaving an extremist group, as opposed to desisting from generic criminality, may involve a different process because the person must shed his or her attachment to the ideology and group in order to disengage.

Relying on a rational choice model, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) developed a theory of desistance by incorporating the concept of a “feared self” (p. 1119). Within this framework, fear and anxiety related to the individual’s future possible self-motivate desistance from antisocial behaviors. While Paternoster and Bushway’s (2009; also see Bushway & Paternoster, 2013) model offers significant insight regarding the criminal desistance process, their theory pivots on the notion of a “crystallization of discontent” but stops short of specifying how and under what circumstances discontent emerges. In addition, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) do not link discontent to emotional processes such as anger in terms of generating and clarifying a person’s sense of disillusionment.

In light of this oversight, Bubolz and Simi (2015b) recently argued that in terms of disengagement from street gangs, the presence of anger provides members with important motivation to seek disaffiliation and begin the change process. The experience of anger helps members solidify their feelings of discontent with the incongruence between expectations and realities of gang life. We elaborate on Bubolz and Simi’s (2015b) theory of gang exit by presenting an empirical analysis of disengagement from violent extremism focused on the role of
emotion. Given the role emotions may play within the disengagement process, a relevant theory to explore disengagement is the circumplex model of affect.

**CIRCUMPLEX MODEL OF AFFECT**

In recent years, the study of emotion has become increasingly central within sociology and criminology (Agnew, 1992; Braithwaite, 1989; Collins, 2004; Giordano et al., 2007; Hochschild, 1979; Katz, 1988; Nagin, 2007; Polletta, 1998; Turner, 2000) and to a lesser extent terrorism studies (Rice, 2009; Rice & Agnew, 2013). The renewed emphasis on emotion within sociology and criminology reflects a desire to move beyond mechanical models of behavior that treat rational (cognitive) and irrational (emotion) as mutually exclusive or rely on overly structural models divorced altogether from emotional context (Freeman, 2000; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001; Hochschild, 1979; Lively & Heise, 2004; Van Gelder, Elffers, Reynald, & Nagin, 2014).

Historically, research focused on emotion has viewed affective states as discrete, such as anxiety, sadness, tension and elation (Chipperfield, Perry, & Weiner, 2003; Izard, 1972; Tomkin, 1963). Recently, however, the idea that affective states are independent of one another has been challenged (Posner, Russell, & Peterson, 2005; Russell, 1980). An emerging consensus suggests that emotions are overlapping experiences that lack distinct boundaries (Erbas, Ceulemans, Koval, & Kuppens, 2015; Posner et al., 2005; Russell & Fehr, 1994; Saarni, 1999). Individuals do not experience or recognize emotions as isolated events, but rather report their emotions as overlapping experiences (Saarni, 1999). Individuals rarely report feeling a specific emotion without also reporting other emotions, so one possible approach to understanding the overlap of emotional affect is through the application of the circumplex model of affect (CMA).

The CMA has become one of the most widely used models of emotional affect (Huelsman, Furr, & Nemanick Jr., 2003; Remington, Rabrigar, & Visser, 2000) and was originated by Schlosberg (1952) and later elaborated by Russel (1980). In the CMA, emotions are arranged in a circular structure characterized by two poles: 1) intensity (i.e., activation or deactivation); and 2) valence (e.g., pleasant or unpleasant). The CMA assumes that affective states are related by their distance from one another. For instance, excitement, pleasure, and contentment should have positive correlations between one another, whereas pleasure should be negatively correlated with misery, distress, and depression. The latter emotions may be especially prominent during periods of high stress or disillusionment, such as disengaging from violent extremism.

We rely on a systematic content coding system derived from the CMA to identify overarching themes, specific events, and markers of emotion expressed by participants during intensive life history interviews. Specifically, we examine the emotional valence that characterizes actors’ descriptions of the exit process. Our central argument is that negative emotions (i.e., anger, frustration) directed toward the extremist group and oneself function as a catalyst for disengagement. These negative emotions become a source of motivation in re-evaluating the relative importance of the group as it relates to the individual. Ultimately, the reevaluation of the group is essential to the decision to disengage from extremism. Our study builds on previous studies of criminal desistance and extremist disengagement by utilizing a
theoretical framework that offers greater precision for understanding the impact of cognitive and emotional processes as they relate to a person’s decision to leave these types of groups.

PRIOR RESEARCH ON EXTREMIST DISENGAGEMENT

Disengagement is “the process whereby an individual no longer accepts as appropriate the socially defined rights and obligations that accompany a given role in society” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 3). In this sense, disengagement is a type of role exit that typically occurs as individuals transition from one stage in life to another (Simi, Blee, DeMichele, & Windisch, 2017). For instance, disengaging from a street gang typically accompanies a shift in behavior as these individuals internalize a new role in society (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, Jr., 2013). For these individuals, disengagement from the gang lifestyle requires them to shed their “gangster” role and adopt the new role of “former gang member.” As part of the disengagement process, these individuals may decrease their level of “embeddedness” within the gang by de-identifying as a gang member (e.g., altering their appearance or changing the way they respond to conflict) (Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero, 2013).

Similar to criminal desistance, disengagement from violent groups occurs in two forms. First, the individual may alter his/her level of participation in the group such as avoiding violence or reducing the amount of time they spend with other members (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). In these situations, the individual remains a member but reduces his/her level of investment (e.g., time, energy and risk of injury/arrest) with the group. Second, disengagement may entail the individual leave the group entirely. This is the typical scenario envisioned and often involves a complete separation from extremist activities. In terms of the current study, we emphasize the latter form of disengagement in which an individual completely severs his/her involvement with violent extremism.

Studies that focus on disengagement from violent extremism identity multiple social factors that contribute to this process (Windisch, Simi, Ligon, & McNeel, 2016). These factors include the positive role of significant others (Aho, 1994; Gadd, 2006), the inability to maintain employment (Bjørgo, 2011), violence (Blazak, 2004; Gallant, 2014) and incarceration (Horgan, 2009; Bubolz & Simi, 2015b). Disengagement from violent extremism may also occur as activists “mature out” of the movement and desire a lifestyle that is more conventional (Bjørgo, 1997, 2011).

In terms of psychological factors, disengagement may be the result of burnout or disillusionment that stems from differences between expectations and reality (Aho, 1994; Bubolz & Simi, 2015b; della Porta, 2009; Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Kimmel, 2007). Disillusionment results from dissatisfaction with the activities of the group, a lack of loyalty among members of the group, and the way that younger members are manipulated by veterans (Bjørgo, 2011). Gadd’s (2006) study of a British far-right extremist found that identification with different individuals (i.e., children, romantic partner, and community) led to a recognition of dissatisfaction with far-right extremism. Part of the dissatisfaction may also result from a moral uneasiness with movement ideology and participation (Bjørgo, 1997).
Although scholarship on disengagement has advanced in recent years, the varied explanations do little to describe the complex interactional process by which structural, emotional, and cognitive factors interact as part of an individual’s decision to exit from his/her role as a member of a violent extremist group. Further, previous studies of disengagement or desistance have not typically incorporated a structured theoretical and methodological approach to assess the emotional markers embedded within individual narratives (for an exception see Latif, Blee, DeMichele, and Simi, 2018). The current study addresses this gap by utilizing CMA to specifically focus on the role of anger during the disengagement process. In the following section, we introduce the methodology followed by data and theoretical implications.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Sampling Procedures**

Long-term ethnographic fieldwork with far-right extremists provided the basis for initial contacts with interview participants. The study also relied on contacting former extremists who have written books about their experiences, shared their stories on websites, or have spoken publicly about their extremist involvement. Each of the initial participants was asked to provide referrals to other former extremists who might also be willing to participate in an interview. This snowball sampling process produced contacts that otherwise would not be accessible using traditional means of sampling, such as mailing lists (Wright, Decker, Redfern, & Smith, 1992). Multiple individuals were used to generate unique snowballs, and thus participants were often not acquainted with each other. Substantial rapport was established and maintained through regular contact via telephone, email, and social media.

**Participants**

Our sampling method resulted in life history interviews with 40 former members of U.S. white supremacist groups. The current sample included 5 female and 35 male participants whose aged ranged from 24 years to 63 years of age. Regarding socioeconomic status, 6 participants described themselves as lower-class, 13 as working-class, 17 middle-class, and 4 described themselves as upper-class. The wide distribution of socioeconomic status is consistent with previous studies of white supremacists (Aho, 1990; Blee, 2002). In terms of education, 9 individuals earned less than a high school diploma, 8 earned a high school diploma, 11 attended college, and 12 earned some form of college degree. The level of group involvement for members included 4 individuals who founded a white supremacist group and 36 participants who were either core or peripheral members. Participants’ length of involvement ranged from 1-22 years.

A large portion had extensive histories of criminal conduct including property offenses such as shoplifting, vandalism, and other forms of property destruction and a variety of violent offenses such as murder, attempted murder, street fights, violent initiation rituals, and bomb making. Of the 40 participants, 27 reported a history of violent offending, 34 reported a history of delinquent activity, and 18 had spent time in prison All names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms to conceal the identities of our participants.
Data Gathering

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol in private settings such as hotel rooms and residential homes and public settings such as restaurants and coffee shops. Participants were asked to describe their childhood experiences as an initial starting point. The interviews included questions about broad phases of the participant’s extremism such as entry, involvement, and disengagement, with probes to encourage participants to elaborate on aspects of their life histories. While participants were periodically asked direct questions to focus on specific topic areas, the interviews relied on an unstructured format intended to generate unsolicited data embedded in their personal narrative. We view the elicited narratives as instructive in terms of assessing how individuals make sense of their lives (Blee, 1996; Copes, Hochstetler & Forsyth, 2013; Giordano, Johnson, Manning, Longmore, & Minter, 2015; McAdams, 2013). Each interview concluded with more structured questions and scale items to collect comparable information across interviewees in terms of risk factors (e.g., history of child abuse, mental health problems, etc.), demographic information, and criminal histories. The interviews lasted between four and eight hours and generated 4,578 pages of transcripts, which indicate the level of detail provided by the life histories.

Data Preparation and Coding

Two graduate students trained in the psychology of violence, ideological extremism, and life narratives read the interview transcripts line-by-line. The initial coding process examined all phases of our participants’ life-histories including childhood, extremist involvement, and exit. The unit of analysis for the current study, however, is the ‘disengagement event,’ which refers to a specific episode that generated doubts and/or movement away from extremist affiliations. In situations where raters identified multiple, unique disengagement events, each extract was weighted according to prominence (i.e., fluency of discussion) and proximity to the participant’s departure. If the same disengagement event was discussed at different times throughout the interview, separate extracts of text were combined for the purpose of analyses. After all the interviews were coded, raters selected each participant's most influential disengagement event for further analyses.

Once extracted, raters thematically analyzed the participants’ disengagement event at a broad level by noting holistic, emergent reasons as to why participants disengaged (e.g., drugs, family, incarceration). These codes were considered ‘disengagement themes,’ which refers to the underlining motif (e.g., disillusionment, exposure to diversity) conveyed during the participant’s departure. While raters selected the most pervasive disengagement event for each participant, there were no restrictions regarding the number of disengagement themes that may characterize a participant’s exit. Disengagement themes were coded dichotomously as present or absent for each participant. The coding process was iterative, ensuring that each participant’s disengagement event was reviewed whenever a new disengagement theme emerged. Raters compared and contrasted disengagement themes, noting features between them, and moving back and forth between first-level data and general categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once all participants were coded, final ratings were discussed and reviewed among all authors for quality assurance. Overall, 12 distinct disengagement themes were identified (see Appendix for description disengagement themes).
In addition to the disengagement themes, raters also relied on a content coding system derived from the CMA to identify markers of emotion expressed by participants during their disengagement event (see Table 1 for a complete list of the circumplex affect variables). Raters coded each disengagement event and identified as many affective markers that could be coded using the circumplex affect codebook (Posner et al., 2005; Russell, 1980; Yik, Russell, & Steiger, 2011). While the retrospective nature of the life history interviews raises questions about the temporal order related to emotions and disengagement, raters were careful to note subtle expressions (e.g., “was”; “started getting”; “became”) that participants used to describe disengagement events. As such, raters tried to capture what participants said they were feeling at the time of disengagement. After researchers completed the CMA coding process for each participant, frequencies for all twelve circumplex affect variables were summed and recorded. Because the narratives were embedded with emotions like hatred, anger, and frustration, the CMA offered a structured coding system to examine each participant’s behavioral, cognitive, and affective markers as described in their disengagement events. The CMA also allowed us to determine whether disengagement events evoked positive or negative affect as well as the intensity in which the participant experienced these emotions.

RESULTS

Circumplex Affect Results

Two affective markers were identified as the most common throughout our sample: activated displeasure and displeasure. Both of these affective markers tap into an overall emotional state related to anger (Berkowitz & Heimer, 1989; Yik et al., 2011), which supports our central argument that negative emotions (i.e., anger and frustration) directed toward the extremist group and oneself function as a catalyst for disengagement. These negative emotions are a source of motivation to re-evaluate the relative importance of the group vis-à-vis the individual’s lived experience within the group.

Table 1. Circumplex Affect Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circumplex Affect Variables</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Number of Formers Who Expressed Theme</th>
<th>Mean Number of Expressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Activation</td>
<td>0.42 (1.26)</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0 – 7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Pleasant Activation</td>
<td>0.57 (1.01)</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>0 – 4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Activated Pleasure</td>
<td>1.25 (1.75)</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>0 – 7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Pleasure</td>
<td>1.05 (1.30)</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0 – 4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Deactivated Pleasure</td>
<td>0.83 (1.63)</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>0 – 7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Pleasant Deactivation</td>
<td>0.05 (0.22)</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0 – 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Deactivation</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0 – 0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Unpleasant Deactivation</td>
<td>0.60 (1.28)</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>0 – 6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) Deactivated Displeasure</td>
<td>0.90 (1.93)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>0 – 9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) Displeasure</td>
<td>3.53 (2.92)</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0 – 11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11) Activated Displeasure</td>
<td>4.08 (4.46)</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>0 – 18</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) Unpleasant Activation</td>
<td>1.37 (1.64)</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0 – 6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The most common circumplex affect variable identified was activated displeasure. Activated displeasure represents agitation, annoyance, fearfulness, frustration, hostility, irritability, and tension (e.g., “Knowing the fact that they [fellow group members] are not there for you... They want you to take a bullet, but they don’t want to support you.” - Mark, Interview 29, 2014). In terms of activated displeasure, participants exhibited an average of 4.05 (SD = 4.46) expressions, ranging from 0-18. Participants attributed their anger and frustration to numerous factors such as inadequate organization and leadership and interpersonal relationships characterized by substantial conflict.

The second most common emotion identified among our participants was displeasure, which encompasses several related emotional states such as dissatisfaction, unhappiness, troublesomeness, and discomfort. For instance, one participant described the moment he realized displaying a swastika was offensive: “I knew it was offending people, but for the first time I felt bad for offending someone with it” (Dillon, Interview 12, 2013). In terms of displeasure, participants exhibited an average of 3.53 (SD = 2.19) expressions, ranging from 0-11. Overall, disengagement events that led participants away from an extremist lifestyle were characterized by general unhappiness, frustration, and dissatisfaction with group behaviors. These affective states create interruptions in the identity cycle, which, in turn, produces social stress and, a high degree of anger toward the extremist group (Stets & Tsushima, 2001). Individuals who leave violent extremism respond to these negative emotions by reducing the relative importance of their extremist identity, which begins the process of disengagement.

Disengagement Theme Results

Each participant exhibited an average of 2.88 (SD = 1.18) disengagement themes ranging from 1-6 themes in his/her central disengagement event. These results broadly suggest that disengagement from ideological extremism can occur for a variety of reasons and that people disengage based on a complex constellation of situational and personal factors. Figure 1 shows the number of participants exhibiting each disengagement theme. Although not exhaustive, the following section illustrates the three most common disengagement themes: 1) disillusionment, 2) violence, and 3) familial and peer relationships. In doing so, we focus particularly on how anger directed toward the self and the extremist group contributed to disengagement processes.

![Figure 1. Number of Former White Supremacists Who Expressed Each Disengagement Theme](image)
**Disillusionment.** There are numerous motivations for participation in extremism. Broadly speaking, people join extremist groups for acceptance and belonging as well as a desire to fulfill personal achievements (Bjørgo, 2011; Schafer, Mullins, & Box, 2014). In terms of disengagement, by far the most common theme expressed across the sample involved disillusionment, which is best understood as the realization that a consistent incongruence exists between idealized expectations and the everyday realities associated with those same expectations (Casserly & Megginson, 2008; Ebaugh, 1988). In this sample, 26 participants (65%) were identified as experiencing disillusionment. For instance, the following participants described their dissatisfaction with the lack of loyalty and integrity among group members.

> It’s a whole bunch of hypocrites, back stabbing, and the whole movement is kind of a joke. There’s no such thing as fucking white power; some of these dudes might fully believe it’s “white pride, white power.” You learn at some point, it’s all just a joke. It’s a fucking scam. (Bradly, Interview 7, 2014)

> I was starting to have doubts ... Over the years, you start looking at the people who are preaching white power and doing drugs. Okay, I drank a lot. [But] they are doing hard drugs. You watch a guy with a needle in his arm and he was out there preaching today about drugs and then in here with a fucking needle in [his] arm. You start seeing things and you just start getting really discouraged... you are looking at a cause that is full of fakes. I felt I was a fake. (Seth, Interview 3, 2014)

Each example illustrates individuals who experienced disillusionment in response to hypocrisy and “back stabbing.” Disillusionment often leads to a disconnection between prior expectations and reality, which is manifested when the individual comes to see the group as illegitimate. This disconnection can produce distrust (Windisch, Ligon, & Simi, 2018), stress (Burke, 1991) and anger (Stets & Tsushima, 2001) directed toward the extremist group and fellow members. In turn, the individual’s anger toward extremism creates definitional clarity or the “crystallization of discontent” (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) by focusing on extremist involvement as an undesirable investment of the person’s time and energy. As such, the emerging definitional clarity provides an impetus for disengagement from extremism. From this perspective, anger is an essential motivational or energizing emotion (Collins, 2004; Katz, 1999). In the next section, we discuss how violence influences disengagement.

**Violence.** For fourteen participants (35%), negative experiences with violence were identified as an important factor leading to disengagement. Violence in relation to disengagement events can take one of two forms. First, violence typically involved interpersonal conflicts among group members over romantic relationships, money or respect; a finding consistent with the study of conventional street gangs (Decker & van Winkle, 1996; Fleisher, 1998; Jankowski, 1991). According to several participants, consistent in-fighting among members reduced the legitimacy of the group and produced frustration with the inability of leaders to manage group dynamics.

Second, violence also involved witnessing or participating in aggressive action directed toward bystanders such as children, the elderly, inter-racial couples, or members of the LGBTQ community. In some cases, participants described a general unwillingness to commit violence...
against people the group considered a target. These findings support previous research that examines “thresholds” for the level of violence an individual is willing to tolerate before disengaging from the group (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Reiner, 1992). Participants also described substantial guilt and emotional burden when violence was carried out against members of outgroups. For instance, the following participants explained how violence contributed to their exit from violent extremism:

Women are thrust into conflicting roles. You’re to be a mother. You’re to pop out babies. That’s your biggest achievement, that’s the only important thing really you can do. At the same time, you are supposed to be able to fight, to survive and to protect. I’m supposed to cherish a child’s life, but be willing to take it… when I saw the [Oklahoma City Bombing] and put that image together with what the expectations were for me. I don’t know if it was seeing a child in that state, or the realization that I could be the person causing that… It was like hitting a brick wall. (Abby, Interview 22, 2013)

My last hate crime happened about a month after my son was born. I’d beaten that guy with a hatchet… The butt. It was a small, pocket hatchet that I carried around… So when that incident happened, I felt guilt in a way I’d never felt it. I’d always felt it. I would commit a crime, drunk usually. It would be so bad for ten minutes. After I got away, I would be throwing up from the stress. For years that’s what happened. So I experienced guilt this time differently. That was it, I was done. (Doug, Interview 31, 2014)

In both instances, the individuals described an incident that crossed a threshold that became pivotal to redirecting their anger toward the group. In Doug’s case, the violent incident and the ensuing guilt became a breaking point and his feelings of anger and guilt motivated him to completely sever his ties with extremism.

At other times, violence may occur internally among members of the same group. These violent interactions may spark a period of reflection where the individual questions the group’s political agenda. For instance, Kevin described how he felt following an encounter with a fellow member who was beaten by the group:

It was probably around the holidays, with stuff that happened with George. Yeah we hurt him bad. His buddies, right, his bros shattered his jaw. Doesn’t compute. That’s a wrong idea of a buddy or a bro, “My buddies just kicked my ass.” I mean it left me… I see him walking down the street he’s got his jaw wired shut. It was stuff like that. I think it all kind of built on each other. (Kevin, Interview 17, 2014)

As Kevin’s experience illustrates, anger, frustration, and guilt can be directed inward toward the participant’s own behavior as well as toward group activities. Violence—both internal and external—can reduce one’s commitment to the group’s ideological beliefs by producing feelings of guilt, paranoia, and betrayal. Additionally, individuals may begin to burn out because of the demanding lifestyle and extreme emotions produced from engaging in violence (Bjørgo, 1997; Kimmel, 2007). Adverse emotional reactions to violence stem from discrepancies between an
individual’s expectations and actual lived experiences related to violence. These findings underscore the potential for violence to have a physical and emotional strain on some individuals. We now discuss another common source of disengagement identified within our sample: family and peers.

**Familial and peer relationships.** For eighteen participants (45%) in our sample, the presence of a positive familial or peer relationship represented a major disengagement theme in their extremist careers. Familial relationships include children, intimate partners, and distant relatives (e.g., uncles, grandparents). By peer relationships, we mean friendships and acquaintances close to the participant such as childhood friends or coworkers. Obligations to these relationships outside of the movement created a conflict between loyalty to the group and responsibilities to their families and friends.

In line with previous findings (see Bjørgo, 2011), children were identified as the most common type of familial relationship (n = 7) related to disengagement from extremist activities. Most research that focuses on parenting and desistance has found mixed results. For instance, several studies have found that maternal and paternal roles acted as motivators that changed the individual’s future orientation, outlook and sense of responsibility (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Edin, Nelson & Paranal, 2004). Alternatively, parenting has also been identified as a source of stress as the individual balances their role as a parent with their prior criminal identity (Farrington & West, 1995; Massoglia & Uggen, 2007; Rand, 1987).

The current analysis found evidence in support of the positive outcomes related to parenting. Specifically, parental roles functioned as a turning point away from extremist behavior because these individuals had fewer opportunities to participate (see also, Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009). In fact, several participants indicated that their extremist lifestyle was no longer compatible with their new role as a parent. Disengagement events involving familial relationships were less likely to involve anger than other sources of disengagement. Anger, however, did play a role in a small portion of these events. In these cases, participants experienced anger which was directed internally. For these individuals, the presence of family and peer relationships provided an opportunity to redefine their orientation toward the group by crystalizing discontent in terms of their group affiliation (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

Previous research also finds significant others outside of the extremist group provide important reference points and sources of motivation during the change process (Aho, 1994; Gadd, 2006). For example, significant others may teach an individual that a hateful ideology is counter-productive (Blazak, 2004). For example,

I was still living a fucked up life as far as the ugly things but my heart was coming back. I started to care about others… So, me and my mother were never good… I think she found out she was alone after my dad died. And I was alone the minute he died. But like I said she found out I was in Iowa, she got me to come over, eat some food and we started talking. I started drying out a little bit. She had to move me [into her house]. I still kept the beliefs and finally one day she said, “can you come here a second?” and I’m like “what?” She said, “Your dad, taught you better than this. Time to get it together son.” (Blake, Interview 35, 2014)
As Blake’s feelings of antipathy toward himself grew, he relied on family support until all ties with extremism were severed. In this way, the family functioned as an escape from the “fucked up life” that encouraged his anti-social behavior. Indeed, evidence suggests that the role of exhaustion as a consequence of engaging in violent behavior is an important factor of the exit process (Gallant, 2014).

Peer relationships also contributed to several (n = 9) of our participants’ disengagement. In some cases, participants reported developing new friendships outside of the group. Over time, these relationships became more prominent than those centered on extremism. At other times, participants reported a desire to leave once their friends in the group left. In the following example, Brian described experiencing doubts about the movement, but he did not leave until his friends also decided to quit. In this respect, Brian's exit reflected a “block defection” (McCauley, 2008) where multiple members of a group disengage simultaneously:

I had doubts in the back of my head, but I was staying because I got all my friends involved. Then, when they were out, I was like, “Well, I’m not staying. I was just staying in because I got all of you guys in. So, I’m out, too.” We all stayed friends for a while… Within three or four months, they ended up joining a similar crew, which I wanted nothing to do with… They were drawing a line saying, “If you go to their concerts and all this stuff, then you’re written off.” I was like, “Don’t tell me what to do.” That’s how everything fell apart. (Bryan, Interview 15, 2014)

Brian’s experience underscores our central argument in which anger directed towards the group functions as a push factor away from group activities. Similar to Brian, several participants (n = 13) indicated they had previously experienced doubts regarding their involvement in extremist activities but continued to “go along with it.” In these situations, family and peer relationships were a source of escape from their extremist lifestyle.

Overall, participants who reported familial and peer relationships as their main source of disengagement from violent extremism shifted their focus away from extremist activities toward those relationships. As a result, this shift diminished previous commitments to violent extremism and replaced them with commitments to children, romantic partners, and peers. For the majority of our participants, anger directed toward the group allowed them to create distance between themselves and their collective identity by recognizing the potential dangers and contradiction of their actions.

Generally, participants encountered a broad range of experiences that contributed to their eventual disengagement from violent extremism. The themes we identified represent environmental and organizational obstacles toward achieving goals related to extremist involvement. At least 12 broad themes related to disengagement were identified across our sample, suggesting there is no single reason as to why white supremacists disengage. Across these broad themes, however, we found the presence of anger and frustration consistently directed toward the group and oneself. Disillusionment represents the most common theme expressed among the participants in our sample followed by familial and peer relationships. Violence directed internally or externally was the third most common theme.
CONCLUSION

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study takes one of the first steps to underscore the relative importance of anger related to an individual’s decision to leave extremism. While Giordano and colleagues (2007) found the reduction in anger contributes to an individual’s desistance from crime, our study of disengagement from violent extremism discovered alternative findings: the emergence of anger, specifically active anger, can promote disengagement from a violent group. This finding refines Giordano and colleagues’ (2007) original argument and points to one potential point of distinction between generic criminal offending and involvement in violent extremism. That is the presence of group membership may result in slightly different mechanisms and alter how social processes unfold. Alternatively, Giordano’s findings may point to a different temporal phase of the desistance process. The reduction of anger may occur at a later point that is initially preceded by a crystallization of anger directed toward an existing criminal lifestyle including criminal peers or in our case an extremist group.

The identification of how people feel about certain factors related to exit has important implications in terms of interventions aimed at accelerating disengagement from extremism. As we have illustrated with our empirical data, disillusionment, familial and peer relationships, and violence are important factors contributing to the naturalistic unfolding of disengagement processes. We suggest that these findings may also be beneficial for intervention programs, specifically initiatives aimed at developing counter-messaging strategies. As an alternative to narratives designed to challenge the accuracy of a group’s ideological belief system—narratives that may unintentionally reinforce extremists’ attachment to the ideology rather than highlight inaccuracies (Aly, Weimann-Saks, & Weimann, 2014)—we suggest focusing on techniques to amplify the various sources of disengagement illustrated in our findings. In particular, counter-messaging strategies could underscore the hypocrisy among group leaders and other members. In addition, these intervention strategies could accelerate negative emotions toward the group by highlighting the high rates of intra-group violence as well as the negative impact involvement in violent extremism is likely to have on family and peer relationships.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study worth noting. First, the retrospective nature of the life history interviews raise questions about validity and reliability due to memory erosion, distortion, and selective recall (Baddeley, 1979). The practice of remembering is a reconstructive process where memories of events are typically reinterpreted during each recall (Bridge & Paller, 2012). Despite these concerns, the rich life history accounts provide important insight from the participants’ perspectives. Second, due to the relatively hidden nature of this population, the sample was derived through snowball techniques and, as a result, is not representative. Although snowball sampling minimizes the generalizability of the results of this study, the goal of qualitative research is the identification of social processes, conceptual elaboration, and describing causal mechanisms. Third, the sample was predominantly male, which may have yielded data subject to gender biases. Finally, our sample primarily included individuals who
joined white supremacy during adolescence, potentially neglecting differences in disengagement among individuals who entered during pre-adolescence or adulthood.

**Future Research and Conclusion**

The results of this study provide further insight into the disengagement process in several ways. First, the methodology offers one of the first studies in criminology to examine the overlap of emotions by employing the CMA to study the disengagement processes. Although there are limitations in the ability to generalize these findings, the life history data gathered from former US extremists provides information inaccessible through other methodological techniques. Second, the conceptual framework we used elaborates on previous studies of criminal desistance and disengagement from extremism by offering greater precision in terms of understanding the impact of cognitive and emotional processes as they relate to a person's decision to leave extremism.

Although the results highlight the importance of disillusionment, future research should focus in greater detail on the different types of disillusionment and whether different types of disillusionment represent unique pathways toward to disengagement. Future research should also consider applying Giordano and colleagues (2015) concept of “learning curves” to the issue of disengagement from violent extremism. Traditionally, criminal desistance has been treated as singular experiences such as getting married, gaining employment, and enlisting in the military. Recently, however, Giordano and colleagues (2015) have focused on the processual dimensions of desistance. Along these lines, the authors argue that specific events are unlikely to sustain desistance without proper “anchors” that help develop fundamental relationship adjustments (Giordano et al., 2015, p. 9). While the current study highlights several anchors related to disengagement from extremist groups, future research should examine the unique conditions in which these anchors fail to curb extremist activities. By understanding more about these mechanisms, and others as well, we may not only understand disengagement more deeply, but we can also appreciate how different phenomena may derive from common underlying processes.

**REFERENCES**


**Pete Simi** is Director of the Earl Babbie Research Center and an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Chapman University. For the past 20 years, he has been studying the development, persistence, and transformation of violent identities by conducting extensive fieldwork with active and former members of extremist movements and conventional street gangs. He is a Principal Investigator at the National Consortium of Studies of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, and his research has also been funded by the Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Defense, Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Science Foundation. His co-authored book, *American Swastika: Inside the White Power Movement’s Hidden Spaces of Hate*, received a 2010 CHOICE Outstanding Academic Book Award.

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Table 1. Disengagement Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disillusionment</td>
<td>Feeling otherwise let down by the movement or its members in some way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and Peers</td>
<td>Being influenced by familial and peer relationships (e.g., wife, child, friend)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Witnessing, perpetrating, or being a victim of physical aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to Diversity</td>
<td>Positive experiences with ethnically or racially diverse individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Job-related activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarceration</td>
<td>Imprisonment or being jailed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Seeking personally-satisfying escapism (e.g. music concerts or parties)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>Consuming alcohol or drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Finding religion or embracing previous religious beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Receiving a formal education or educating others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate Relationship</td>
<td>Being influenced by a romantic relationship</td>
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A MIXED METHOD EXAMINATION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT INVESTIGATORY STRATEGIES USED IN JIHADI AND FAR-RIGHT FOILED TERRORIST PLOTS BEFORE AND AFTER 9/11

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Abstract

Empirical research on the law enforcement strategies used to prevent terrorism has increased since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Yet, few studies have examined how these preventative approaches vary based on terrorists’ ideological affiliations and across time. This study thus explores the similarities and differences in law enforcement investigatory strategies used to thwart global jihadi and far-right terrorist violence prior to and since the 9/11 terrorism events. Employing a convergent parallel mixed method research design, our study analyzes both quantitative and qualitative data on 86 terrorism enterprise investigations from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB). The quantitative data analyses examine patterns relating to how investigations are initiated, the agencies involved, and the roles of human intelligence in foiling terrorist violence. Complementary qualitative case narratives are then used to explore in more detail the investigatory process for a subset of cases. We discuss several noteworthy findings that have implications for both law enforcement practitioners as well as future scholarly research.

Keywords: terrorism, prevention, mixed method, far-right, jihadi

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2001, homeland security efforts in the United States have understandably been oriented toward disrupting global and homegrown jihadists and preventing the next 9/11 terrorist attacks. After 9/11, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) made thwarting terrorist attacks its top priority and state, local, and tribal (SLT) law enforcement were asked to become active participants in the national counterterrorism mission. Nonetheless, it is invariably the terrorist attacks that come to fruition and are successfully executed which capture the attention of media and policymakers. Despite a dramatic increase in empirical terrorism studies published since 9/11, few scholarly studies highlight the characteristics of terrorism plots and almost no work explores what law enforcement do to foil them. Consequently, little is known about the general attributes of terrorist plots, such as the agencies involved and the strategies used, or about the nuanced investigatory processes encompassing how plots are initiated and unfold. Further, research has yet to explore how the nature of investigations may have changed over time, specifically since 9/11, and differ by the type of terrorists being investigated. In other words, how might investigations of jihadists since 9/11 compare to those of far-right terrorists who were increasingly active during the 1990s and have reemerged as a serious threat to the U.S.?

We address these questions by examining 86 violent terrorist plot investigations from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), an open-source project that contains systematically codified data as well as thousands of pages of raw information for each plot (Freilich, Chermak, Belli, Gruenewald, & Parkin, 2014). While interested in overall patterns of terrorism investigations, we also compare the similarities and differences in how law enforcement agencies foil terrorist plots involving far-right and global jihad terrorists before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Employing a convergent parallel mixed-method design, we utilize quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the investigatory strategies used by law enforcement to thwart terrorist attacks in the U.S. Quantitative, descriptive analyses are conducted to uncover general patterns of plot investigations across time and terrorist ideology. We also conduct complementary qualitative analyses to develop a more comprehensive understanding of dynamic investigatory processes – including sequenced interactions between law enforcement, terrorists, and their situated environments – involved in foiled terrorist plots.

BACKGROUND AND PRIOR RESEARCH

Law enforcement practices were significantly impacted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Davis, Pollard, Ward, Wilson, Varda, Hansell, & Steinberg, 2010; Gruenewald, Klein, Chermak & Freilich, 2016), but little is known about if and how relevant changes have impacted the strategies used to foil terrorism plots. Key changes, for example, include the FBI altering its reactive, crime-fighting focus to make preventing terrorism its top priority (Bjeloopera, 2013) while expanding domestic and international counterterrorism efforts. Other significant post 9/11 changes within the FBI include the hiring of a large number of agents and intelligence analysts, restructuring of the organization, revamping training strategies, and attempts to improve engagement with the intelligence cycle (Cumming & Masse, 2004). In addition to these organizational changes, revisions to the U.S. Attorney General Guidelines in 2002 and 2008 removed restrictions to provide the FBI with more discretion to proactively initiate long-term investigations on persons suspected of plotting terrorist acts against the U.S. (Berman, 2011). At
the same time, the passage of the USA Patriot Act gave agents more power to conduct secretive searches, monitor modern forms of communication, and access third-party records to intercept terrorist plots (Bjelopera, 2013). Identifying sharing gaps across the nation’s fragmented law enforcement structure, policies and procedures were changed to significantly expand the role of SLT law enforcement agencies, fundamentally changing how information is shared both horizontally and vertically between agencies (Carter, Carter, & Chermak, 2013; Carter, Carter, Chermak, & McGarrell, 2017). In response, many SLT law enforcement agencies have since expanded their intelligence gathering practices, and there have been fundamental changes in the national, state, and local information sharing infrastructure.

American SLT law enforcement agencies remain concerned about affiliates of both far-right extremism and jihadism (Chermak, Freilich, & Simone, 2010; Freilich, Chermak, & Simone, 2009; Levitt, 2017). Findings from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) reveal that supporters of Al Qaeda and affiliated movements have committed over 50 homicide incidents that have claimed over 3,000 lives since 1990. Far-right terrorists have committed over 210 ideologically motivated homicide events claiming over 450 lives in this same period (Freilich et al., 2014). Strom et al. (2017), who studied terrorism plots foiled between 1995 and 2012, conclude that both jihadists and far-rightists accounted for the majority of actors planning to attack the U.S. and that each ideological movement engaged in a similar number of the identified plots.

Importantly, though, scholars have yet to investigate whether distinct investigatory strategies are utilized for intercepting terrorists who are driven by different ideologies. Extreme far-rightists and jihadists have attacked, or have planned to attack, a diverse list of targets using various strategies (Drake, 1998; Kaplan, 2012; Legault & Hendrickson, 2009; Lemanski & Wilson, 2016; Gruenewald et al., 2016). While some attacks are carried out by multiple offenders associated with formal groups, far-right and jihadi lone actor events are also of major concern and may be on the rise in the U.S. (Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013; Michael, 2012; Pantucci, 2013; Spaaij, 2010; Strom et. al, 2017). Law enforcement must be concerned about both international and homegrown threats, including "foreign fighters" who travel abroad and return to the U.S. better trained and more motivated for violence, including suicide attacks (Bergen, 2016; Freilich, Parkin, Gruenewald, & Chermak, 2017; Silber, 2012).

Prior Relevant Research

Though limited, there is some research examining terrorist plots in the U.S. that can provide a framework for the current study and highlight the importance of building upon what has already been discovered (Bjelopera & Randol, 2010; Brooks, 2011; Carafano, Bucci, & Zuckerman, 2007; Dahl, 2011; Diño, 2010; Gruenewald, et. al, 2016; Jackson & Frelinger, 2009; Jenkins, 2011; Klein, Gruenewald, & Smith, 2017; McCleskey, McCord, Leetz, & Markey, 2007; McNeil, Carafano, & Zucker, 2010; Mueller, 2016; Muslim Public Affairs Council, 2012; Oots, 1989; Sandler & Scott, 1987; Sharif, 1995, Silber, 2012; Strom, Hollywood, & Pope, 2017). One of the few studies that relies on empirical data and focuses on investigatory tactics is McCleskey et al. (2007) who completed eight case studies of attacks on passenger rail or commercial aviation facilities. They concluded that plots are most likely to be foiled during the pre-execution stage. The key factors associated with foiled plots included poor terrorist operation
security, an observant public, effective law enforcement/security services, terrorist profile indicators, and law enforcement intelligence and information sharing. The researchers also found that public tips and leads played an important part in these investigations.

Similarly, Dahl (2011) examined 176 terrorist plots against American targets that have occurred in the last 25 years. Dahl specifically explored whether human intelligence, interrogation, chance encounters with police, signals intelligence, overseas intelligence, other law enforcement actions, and public threats or announcements contributed to an attack being unsuccessful. He concluded that most terrorist acts fail because of law enforcement intervention, usually through some form of human intelligence, but he did not explore variations in strategies across ideological types.

Difo’s (2010; see also Hamm, 2007; Strom, Hollywood, & Pope, 2017) analysis of 32 thwarted terrorist attacks occurring since 9/11 also found that in most cases “traditional” policing techniques, such as actions taken by regular citizens and police surveillance, played an important role in foiling a terrorist plot. In over 20 percent of cases, proactive contributions from civilians helped to thwart plots. This report concluded that law enforcement efforts to prevent terrorism should develop “multi-layered strategies and resist overemphasizing individual counterterrorism methods or policies [and] continue to support local law enforcement in their efforts to develop community-derived intelligence and informants” (Difo, 2010, p. 2). Bolstering their conclusions, another study published by the Muslim Public Affairs Council (2012) found that almost 40 percent of Al Qaeda related plots in the U.S. were thwarted because of assistance provided by the Muslim American community.

Strom et al.’s (2017) more recent analysis of 150 Al Qaeda and far-right attempted and completed attacks found that most were foiled due to law enforcement’s investigative work or because of help from the general public. The use of information from perpetrators, suspicious activity reports, and intelligence analysis were also identified as initiating an investigation that lead to a foiled plot. The researchers also concluded that almost all of the plots identified needed significantly more investigative work once identified, but surprisingly initial reports were rarely able to be linked to other known terrorist operations. In most cases, there were no additional clues that were received in advance, and the plot was foiled in a reactionary manner (Strom et al., 2017). While this study helps us to begin to understand the types of investigative work contributing to foiled plots, it does not address how the results might vary across time or by terrorist ideology.

Despite clear evidence that law enforcement agencies play a critical role in keeping the nation safe (Dahl, 2011; Difo, 2010; Gruenewald et al., 2016; McCleskey et al., 2007; Strom et al., 2017), there has yet to be a comparative study of law enforcements’ investigatory strategies used to prevent far-right and jihadi terrorism plots before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. One explanation for this gap could be the unavailability of data as, until recently, there was no data source capable of simultaneously providing quantitative data on violent plots and rich qualitative accounts of investigatory processes. As a result, existing research has generally relied on theoretical or case study analyses, examined only a small sample of cases, only looked at post 9/11 cases, examined mostly Al Qaeda and ISIS plots while excluding similar far-right plots, and has tended to overlook investigative strategies (Mueller, 2016; Muslim Public Affairs Council,
As such, the current study seeks to contribute to the literature on terrorism investigations by filling these gaps in research.

THE CURRENT STUDY

This mixed method study extends prior research by integrating quantitative and qualitative data to comparatively examine similarities and differences in investigatory strategies between terrorists’ ideological affiliations before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. We begin by exploring whether changes in the law enforcement and intelligence community’s mission and organizational structure following the attacks impacted investigations associated with foiled terrorism plots. On one hand, we might expect significant changes as the amount of resources devoted to new personnel, intelligence analysis, and training should lead to innovative investigatory strategies. Some prior research indeed finds that the number of foiled terrorism plots has increased, and that law enforcement has been more successful at thwarting attacks since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, validating the expenditure of governmental resources (Muslim Public Affairs Council, 2012; Strom et al., 2017). However, terrorism was not ignored prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and one of the best predictors of future behavior could be what has happened in the past. As law enforcement was expected to do more to effectively respond to terrorism, one would expect them to rely on proven strategies and techniques from their past investigations. That is, law enforcement might utilize investigatory strategies relied upon in the past while honing them to new terrorism environments.

We also examine whether investigatory strategies used to disrupt extreme far-right and jihadi plots are significantly different. We agree with Strom et al. (2017, p. 468) who suggest that, "learning from thwarted plots and unsuccessful attacks and including all ideologies and motivations can prove to be highly valuable in understanding and replicating what counterterrorism measures work best and how policies and resources can be used to collectively improve security." Past research indicates that, while terrorists are generally more likely to engage in planning activities and to commit preparatory crimes compared to traditional criminals, patterns of preparatory behaviors vary by type of terrorist group (Cothren, Smith, Roberts, Damphousse, 2008; Smith, Cothren, Roberts, & Damphousse, 2009). For example, domestic far-right terrorists are more mobile than international terrorists (including jihadist extremists) and tend to commit crimes farther from their homes. In contrast, international terrorists – including jihadists operating in the U.S. – live, plan, and commit their acts closer to the intended target than other types of terrorists. Far-rightists also tend to operate in rural areas, while far-leftists are more likely to carry out their activities in urban locations (Smith, 1994). By identifying patterns in how terrorists plan and carry out terrorist activities, prior research points to the possibility that law enforcement may use different strategies to respond.

Other research also reveals different patterns of terrorist activities by ideological affiliation. For instance, Chermak and Gruenewald (2015) found that jihadist extremists are significantly more likely to commit terrorist acts as lone wolves compared to far-rightists. In addition, Hamm (2007) finds that international jihad terrorists are statistically more likely to commit aircraft violations, motor vehicle crimes, violations of explosions, and some types of firearms violations. In contrast, domestic far-right terrorists are more likely to commit crimes including mail fraud, racketeering, robbery, burglary, and violations of destructive devices. He
stresses that both international jihad groups and domestic far-right terrorists come into contact with SLT law enforcement in the normal course of criminal investigations. Hamm concludes that these “different crimes require different skills and opportunities and identifying these differences may take law enforcement a step closer to prevention” (p. 19; see also Clarke & Newman, 2006; Freilich & Newman, 2009; Freilich, Gruenewald & Mandala, 2018).

It is also possible that we will discover little variation in investigative strategies used for terrorists with differing ideological backgrounds. Successful investigations are likely to be contagious, such that strategies shown to successfully foil a particular terrorist plot will breed an expectation about what strategies work more generally. Moreover, some may argue that the targets of terrorists and the strategies needed to carry out terrorist acts are not substantially different. For example, the extreme far-right frequently targets racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, while anti-government extremists target government buildings and public officials (e.g., law enforcement officers). Supporters of jihadi groups, Al Qaeda and ISIS have also attacked both religious and other minorities (e.g., Jews and gays) and government interests, such as military bases or recruitment centers, as well as iconic civilian targets. Both terrorist types primarily target people rather than places, with guns being the weapon of choice to commit violent crimes, and suicide-attack strategies have been used to accomplish ideological objectives for far-rightists and jihadists (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015; Freilich, Parkin, Gruenewald, & Chermak, 2017; Gruenewald, Klein, Chermak, & Freilich, 2016). Although jihadist perpetrators are somewhat more likely to be lone attackers, there are many examples of far-rightists who attack as loners as well (Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013). The point here is that while there may be some variations in the types of offenses and tactics used by far-rightists and jihadists, such differences might have little impact on law enforcement strategies.

In sum, by studying how the nature of investigations may have changed over time, specifically since 9/11, and differ by the type of terrorists being investigated, this study contributes to criminological knowledge of counterterrorism in several ways. First, we systematically document variations in investigatory strategies across time, which can provide future scholars and practitioners with critical insights into (a) which strategies have been utilized most often over the past 25 years, (b) those specific counterterrorism practices and investigatory tools that have been most effective, and (c) how terrorism investigations can be enhanced to more efficiently thwart future attacks. Second, by examining how the methods to fight terrorism might differ by ideological background, our study can also provide law enforcement with critical knowledge on whether specific investigatory strategies are equally effective in preventing terrorism with differing motivations as well as inform practitioners on whether and how vital counterterrorism resources can be tailored to specific terrorist environments and threats. In the following sections, we describe our research design and sources of data used to address these research aims.

**Mixed Method Design**

To understand how law enforcement responds to planned terrorist attacks perpetrated by jihadists and extreme far-rightists, and whether these investigation strategies vary across time, this study uses both qualitative and quantitative analytic strategies. The utilization of mixed method approaches to address research objectives has recently increased in the social sciences.
(Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), and in the field of criminal justice specifically (Maruna, 2010; Brent & Kraska, 2010; but see also research from Decker, 1996; Meithe & Drass, 1999; Weisburd et al., 2006). The key advantage of mixed method analysis lies in its pragmatic utility, as it provides researchers with the necessary methodological latitude to more comprehensively study social phenomena by simultaneously drawing on the strengths of qualitative and quantitative procedures (Campbell, Shaw, & Gregory, 2017; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In essence, mixed method approaches can afford us the tools for understanding complex criminal justice processes more completely.

Our study employs a convergent parallel mixed methodology (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark; 2011), which allows for the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data while placing the collection and analysis of all data types on equal footing. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011, p. 77), this design is most appropriate for research objectives seeking to “…synthesize complimentary quantitative and qualitative results to develop a more complete understanding of a phenomenon…” under a single empirical study. Due to the multifaceted and dynamic nature of policing terrorist crimes in the U.S., we believe this design is the best means for providing a more comprehensive picture of the strategies used to successfully thwart acts of terrorism. Indeed, this approach not only allows us to make generalizations about common law enforcement practices but also to uncover the nuanced ways in which terrorist investigations materialize and end. In the remainder of this section, we describe our mixed method approach by discussing the data sources used, as well as our case inclusion criteria, and then explaining our quantitative coding and measures. We then describe our complimentary qualitative analytic procedures.

Data

We use data from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), an open-source, relational database that houses event- and offender-level information on criminal activities of jihadi and far-right terrorists, along with the strategies law enforcement employ to investigate these crimes (Freilich et al., 2014). Sources of information originate from publicly available records, such as print and Internet news media accounts, advocacy group reports, scholarly publications, in addition to government reports, court documents, and correctional system reports. The database provides a unique opportunity for conducting a mixed method study because the diverse array of open-sources offers rich, detailed descriptions of terrorists’ criminal activities and law enforcement investigative responses from which quantitative variables can also be operationalized and measured. The EDCB has been shown to be a valid data source for studying violent and non-violent American terrorism and extremism (Chermak, Freilich, Parkin, & Lynch, 2012; Chermak, Freilich & Suttmoeller, 2013), including past studies that have used these data for quantitative (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015; Gruenewald & Pridemore, 2012; Parkin & Freilich, 2015), qualitative (Freilich & Chermak, 2009; Freilich, Chermak & Caspi. 2009; Kelley & Gruenewald, 2015), and mixed method research (Gruenewald, Dooley, Suttmoeller, Chermak, & Freilich, 2015). For the current study, we analyze 86 law enforcement investigations into planned ideologically motivated violent incidents perpetrated by individuals who adhere to
elements of jihadi\(^2\) (n=51) and far-right\(^3\) (n=35) extremist belief systems inside the U.S. between 1990 and 2014.\(^4\)

**Case Inclusion Criteria**

The ECDB’s case identification process occurs in several stages (see Freilich et al., 2014; Parkin & Freilich, 2015). First, various open-source online newspaper articles, reports, and publications – such as the Southern Poverty Law Center’s (SPLC) *Intelligence Report*, Anti-Defamation League reports, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the FBI’s Terrorism in the United States annual reports, and academic publications – are used to identify ideologically motivated violent crimes. Such crimes include offenders officially charged for committing a homicide, attempted homicide, or plotting to carry out a violent crime\(^5\) between 1990 and 2014 in the U.S. Researchers then systematically apply important indicators of jihadi and far-right extremist ideologies to all terrorism incidents for inclusion in the database.\(^6\) Next, more than 30 open-source search engines and online databases are used to exhaustively collect all publicly

\(^2\) Jihadi extremists “believe that only acceptance of Islam promotes human dignity. Islamic extremists reject the traditional Muslim respect for “People of the Book” (i.e., Christians and Jews). They believe that “Jihad” (i.e., to struggle in God’s path like the Prophet Muhammad) is a defining belief in Islam and includes the “lesser Jihad” that endorses violence against “corrupt” others. Islamic extremists believe that their faith is oppressed in nominally Muslim Middle-Eastern/Asian corrupt governments and in nations (e.g., Russia/Chechnya) that occupy Islamic populations. The U.S. is seen as supporting the humiliation of Islam, and exploiting the region’s resources. They believe that America’s hedonistic culture (e.g., gay rights, feminism, etc.) negatively affects Muslim values. Islamic extremists believe that the American people are responsible for their government’s actions and that there is a religious obligation to combat this assault. They believe that Islamic law—Sharia—provides the blueprint for a modern Muslim society and should be forcibly implemented (Freilich, Chermark, Belli, Gruenewald, & Parkin, 2014, p. 380).”

\(^3\) Far-right extremists are “fiercely nationalistic, anti-global, suspicious of federal authority, and reverent of individual liberties, especially their right to own guns and be free of taxes. They believe in conspiracy theories involving imminent threats to national sovereignty or personal liberty and beliefs that their personal or national “way of life” is under attack. Sometimes such beliefs are vague, but for some, the threat originates from specific racial or religious groups. They believe that they must be prepared to defend against this attack by participating in paramilitary training or survivalism (Freilich, Chermark, Belli, Gruenewald, & Parkin, 2014, p. 380).”

\(^4\) The 51 jihadi cases represents the “universe” of enterprise investigations housed in the ECDB between 1990 and 2014. However, data on far-right plots are still being collected and verified. Thus, the sample of 35 far-right enterprise investigations are those currently included in the ECDB, though we have no reason to believe they are not approximately representative of all far-right investigations.

\(^5\) Violent terrorist plots (or planned attacks) fall under two categories. *Failed plots* are those violent terrorism incidents that are set in motion and stopped either through suspect failure or law enforcement action during the final stages of the planned attack. *Foiled plots* are those violent terrorism incidents that are stopped before the final stages of the planned attack either through suspect desistance or law enforcement action.

\(^6\) Such indicators include (a) offender self-admission to police, parents, friends, or other extremist of their affiliation in the jihadi or far-right extremist movement, (b) verbal or written evidence of the offenders’ membership in an established jihadi (ISIS, al Qaeda) or far-right extremist group (KKK, Aryan Nations, Racist Skinhead or neo-Nazi), (c) verbal or written evidence of the offenders’ involvement in non-violent jihadi or far-right extremist movement activities, (d) tattoos, clothing, or other body markings or attire signifying jihadi or far-right affiliation, and (e) evidence of possession of extremist manuals, books, music, or other literature.
available information on the characteristics of each crime, offender, victim, and government response. In the final stages, all open-source materials for each case are comprehensively reviewed to verify that incidents meet the ECDB’s inclusion criteria.

The unit of analysis for our study is the terrorism enterprise investigation. We use the term “enterprise investigation” loosely, defined in this context as a formal law enforcement inquiry into one or more planned ideologically motivated violent crimes targeting the U.S. and committed by one or more supporters of jihadi and far-right extremist ideologies. Several criteria must be satisfied for a case to be included in this study. In particular, the terrorism enterprise investigation must (1) involve one or more planned violent crimes that target a specific or general person or location inside the U.S.,\(^7\) (2) be a discrete scheme of interrelated criminal acts that work toward accomplishing a specific terrorist goal and involve the same individual or group of offenders, (3) lead to a law enforcement response in which criminal charges are brought, (4) only involve plots that are prevented through law enforcement actions,\(^8\) and (5) be committed between 1990 and 2014. For every terrorism enterprise investigation included in our study, we coded quantitative variables relating to law enforcement investigation practices and, in addition, constructed complimentary in-depth narratives on a subset of 13 select enterprise investigations to provide a more complete understanding of how federal, state, and local law enforcement investigate and prevent planned acts of terrorism in the U.S.

**Quantitative Coding and Measures**

Based on our review of the literature, and past evidence on how law enforcement disrupts and thwarts far-right and jihadi terrorist activities, we focus on several variables to capture how investigatory strategies are utilized by federal, state, and local (FSL) police. Our first set of measures relates to the temporal attributes of terrorism enterprise investigations. To capture variations in investigations across time, we dummy code investigations occurring pre- and post-September 11, 2001 as (1) post-9/11 investigations (2001-2014) and (0) pre-9/11 investigations (1990-2000). Also included is a variable for the investigation length, measured as the number of days between the first evidence of law enforcement engaging in investigation activities related to the prevented plot and the capture or arrest of the terrorists.\(^9\)

\(^7\) Specific targets include those in which the source material identifies a precise person, or the location or the target or individual victim. General targets are those in which the source material identifies a target, but it is not precise enough to identify a specific person or location.

\(^8\) We exclude enterprise investigations that involve homicide events, successfully completed terrorist bombings or arsons, attacks that are attempted but fail due to suspect failure, and plots that are abandoned by the terrorists prior to law enforcement involvement (suspect desistance).

\(^9\) The first evidence of law enforcement engaging in investigative activities related to the planned attack was typically found in criminal complaints, indictments, or affidavits in which law enforcement or prosecutors identified the beginning of the investigation. For some cases, other open source materials (e.g., news media, government reports, scholarly reports) identified an approximate start date of the investigation. When the date of investigation was approximated by month, the 15th day of the month was coded. If only information on the year was available, we coded the mid-point for that year. If information like the season or general time of year was known, we coded the mid-point of that season/year. Additionally, for individual terrorists who were being investigated for general terrorist-related activity over a long period of time (e.g., watch-list terrorists or most wanted terrorists), we coded the date that law enforcement became aware of the unsuccessful plot as the start of the investigation. Unsuccessful plots
The next group of variables captures the characteristics of how the investigation is initiated, or how the terrorists’ criminal activities are brought to the attention of FSL law enforcement. Our first variable measures whether the investigation involved reports or tips from the public that assisted in the investigation as (1) evidence of a public tip or (0) no evidence of a public tip. Second, we measure whether the unsuccessful plot investigation originated from FSL law enforcement activities into another, unrelated criminal case as (1) investigation originated from other unrelated case and (0) investigation did not originate from other unrelated case.

Also included are a set of variables capturing the role of federal, state, local and foreign law enforcement in leading to the detection and arrest of terrorist plotters. The first variable measures whether federal law enforcement or intelligence agencies were involved in the investigation as (1) evidence of one or more federal agencies or (0) no evidence of federal agencies. A second variable captures whether state or local law enforcement were involved in the investigation, coded as (1) evidence of one or more state/local agencies or (0) no evidence of state/local agencies. The third variable is a measure of whether foreign government or intelligence agencies assisted in the investigation, which is coded as (1) evidence of one or more foreign agencies or (0) no evidence of foreign agencies. Next is a variable that captures whether multiple FSL agencies partnered during the terrorism enterprise investigation, which is measured as (1) evidence of multiple agencies or (0) no evidence of multiple agencies.

The final group of variables encapsulates the specific investigative strategies used by FSL law enforcement for thwarting planned terrorism incidents. First, we capture whether the investigation involved one or more federal undercover agents or operatives as (1) use of federal undercover agent and (0) no use of federal undercover agent, in addition to whether the investigation employed one or more federal confidential informants, coded as (1) use of federal confidential informant and (0) no use of federal confidential informant. Third, we include a variable that measures whether one or more undercover state or local law enforcement officers were involved in the investigation as (1) use of state/local undercover agent and (0) no use of state/local undercover agent. The final variable captures whether one or more state or local law enforcement confidential informants were involved in the investigation, which is coded as (1) use of state/local confidential informant and (0) no use of confidential informant.

Qualitative Analytic Procedures

We aim to present a more complete understanding of the different aspects of law enforcement prevention and investigatory tactics. Thus, we complement our quantitative variables with in-depth qualitative case narratives on a subset of 13 terrorist enterprise investigations that are drawn from the 86 quantitative cases discussed previously. To select these

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that were uncovered by law enforcement the day of the incident were coded as 0 days. Unsuccessful plots occurring in prison were coded as missing.

10 State, local, or tribal law enforcement agencies that are members of an FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) are not considered as being involved in the investigation separately from federal agencies. For a homicide or unsuccessful plot to be coded as (1) evidence of state/local agencies, there must be evidence in the source material that a state, local, or tribal law enforcement agency was recognized as assisting in the investigation independent of FBI JTTF activities, or other federal agency activities.
narratives, we rely on a maximal variation sampling technique (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), which involves purposefully choosing enterprise investigations that represent a diverse array of situations and strategies used by law enforcement to foil planned attacks. These strategies include changes in investigatory responses across time, how investigations originate, the roles of FSL law enforcement, and the roles undercover agents and confidential informants play in intercepting violent acts of terrorism. Relying on maximal variation sampling offers many benefits over other purposive sampling strategies because it allows for sample representativeness as well as robust case diversity for investigating key theoretical comparisons (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The construction of case narratives relied upon information in publicly available court records – such as criminal complaints and indictments – augmented by journalistic accounts and watch-group (e.g., SPLC, ADL) reports. Our narrative findings are intended to contextualize the nature of investigatory approaches, providing a temporal arranging of events whereby the similarities and differences between jihadi and far-right investigations are illustrated.

**FINDINGS**

The presentation of our findings begins with a discussion of how the law enforcement investigation strategies compare across jihadi and far-right terrorists. Based on a series of bivariate statistical tests (Chi-square analysis), results from Table 1 suggest a number of noteworthy similarities and differences in law enforcement approaches to preventing terrorism. First, we find that investigations into far-right terrorist enterprises have remained relatively constant over the 25-year time period of our study. Yet, unsurprisingly, results suggest that investigations into jihadi terrorist activities are significantly more likely to occur after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as over 96 percent of thwarted jihadi violence occurred since 2001, compared to 54 percent of prevented far-right attacks. Our bivariate findings indicate no statistical differences in the temporal length of the investigation between jihadi and far-right terrorist enterprises, with the majority of investigations lasting six months or less.

| TABLE 1. Bivariate Statistics for Jihadi and Far-right Extremist Investigations |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Variables                       | Jihadi Extremist | Far-right Extremist |
|                                 | (n = 51)         | (n = 35)         |
| **Temporal Attributes**         |                 |                 |
| Time Period                     |                 |                 |
| Pre-9/11 Investigations         | 2 | 3.92 | 16 | 45.71 |
| Post-9/11 Investigations        | 49 | 96.08 | 19 | 54.29 |  ***   |
| Investigation Length            |                 |                 |
| 0-6 Months                      | 22 | 48.89 | 17 | 51.32 |  NS    |
| 6-12 Months                     | 12 | 26.67 | 3 | 9.68  |
| 1 Year or More                  | 11 | 24.44 | 11 | 35.48 |
| Investigation Origins           |                 |                 |
| Investigation Involved Public Tip| 16 | 35.56 | 20 | 71.43 | **     |
| Investigation Originated from Other Unrelated Case | 22 | 46.81 | 6 | 20.69 | *      |
In contrast, the findings from Table 1 show significant differences in terms of how investigations are initiated. We find that tips from the public are proportionately more likely to launch investigations into far-right activities than jihadi crimes. Evidence suggests that information from the public preempted just over 71 percent of foiled far-right plots compared to nearly 36 percent of thwarted jihadi attacks. Additionally, we find that jihadi investigations are proportionately more likely to originate from other unrelated criminal cases relative to far-right enterprise investigations. On average, nearly 47 percent of jihadi investigations stem from law enforcement inquiries into unrelated crimes compared to 20 percent of far-right investigations.

Our study is also interested in the role that federal, state, local and foreign law enforcement plays in uncovering and preventing planned terrorist attacks. Not surprisingly, we find that federal law enforcement, usually the FBI, is involved in investigating over 90 percent of all planned jihadi and far-right violence incidents. State and local law enforcement are involved in significantly fewer jihadi terrorism investigations compared to investigations into far-right terrorist crimes. In fact, around 51 percent of investigations into jihadi plots have state or local police involvement, while over 76 percent of far-right investigations include state or local police participation. We also find investigatory assistance from foreign law enforcement to be relatively rare across movement types. Less than 22 percent of jihadi investigations involved assistance from foreign agencies and, expectantly, no far-right investigations received help foreign police or intelligence organizations. Regarding across agency partnerships, findings suggest most terrorist enterprise investigations involve assistance from multiple federal, state, local, or foreign agencies.

A final key component of anti-terrorism investigations of interest is the role of human intelligence, namely the use of undercover agents (UAs) and confidential informants (CIs) to
prevent terrorist attacks. Interestingly, the results from Table 1 indicate no statistical differences between jihadi and far-right investigations. We find that the use of federal UAs and CIs, usually handled by the FBI, is a common investigatory practice across movement types. More specifically, findings reveal that over 40 percent of jihadi investigations rely on federal undercover agents, as do approximately 37 percent of far-right investigations. In addition, we find that even more investigations involved the use of confidential informants, specifically over 53 percent of investigations into jihadi crimes and more than 67 percent of far-right investigations. Lastly, state or local law enforcement use of UAs and CIs is a relatively uncommon practice. State or local UAs and CIs were involved in 12 percent and over 8 percent of jihadi investigations, respectively, while far-right investigations employed UAs in over 17 percent of investigations and CIs in nearly 3 percent of cases.

Qualitative Case Narratives

To complement these findings, we present case narratives on 13 enterprise investigations. Informed by the quantitative results, the presentation of qualitative findings is organized into several thematic foci, which include the (a) investigative strategies used to prevent attacks over time, (b) ways in which enterprise investigations originate, and (c) the utilization of federal, state, local, and foreign law enforcement in thwarting attacks. We note that because the roles of undercover agents and confidential informants are well represented throughout the case narratives, we choose not to include a separate section detailing the contribution of human intelligence for preventing terrorism. The aim of our qualitative analysis is not to present an exhaustive collection of all possible investigative approaches, but rather to contextualize the investigation process by demonstrating the similarities and differences in key counterterrorism methods used across time and terrorist movements.

Variations Pre- and Post-9/11. The first group of cases illustrates the idiosyncrasies in law enforcement responses to terrorism across time. We begin with a discussion of pre-9/11 investigations of which we then identify similarities and differences in post-9/11 investigatory strategies. For each time period, we also provide case narratives on the foiled plots of both jihadi and far-right terrorists to demonstrate investigatory discrepancies by ideological type. Our first case below represents a pre-9/11 thwarted jihadi attack that arose situationally from a chance encounter with police.

On December 14, 1999, U.S. Customs and Border Agents arrested a jihadist plotting to bomb the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). The suspect entered the United States at Port Angeles, Washington after crossing the U.S. border from Victoria, British Columbia. Prior to the suspect’s entry into the U.S., pre-clearance Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agents initially searched the suspect’s vehicle but found no illicit items, so he was permitted to board the ferry for passage into America. Upon entry into Port Angeles, a U.S. customs agent grew concerned with the suspect’s hesitation and general nervousness to answering routine questions. The agent then ordered a search of the suspect’s vehicle, which revealed explosives hidden inside the trunk’s spare tire well. The suspect was later arrested after attempting to flee the scene, and an ensuing FBI inquiry
retrospectively uncovered that he was an al Qaeda affiliate who had been planning, with others, the LAX bombing since the summer of 1999.

This pre-9/11 investigation reveals how the intuition of a trained officer during routine screening procedures thwarted a terrorist attack in the U.S. This case also showcases the importance of the reactive side of law enforcement whereby investigators rely on situational evidence and opportunity, as well as police vigilance, to uncover and prevent forthcoming attacks. However, not all pre-9/11 investigations are reactionary in nature. In fact, the only other prevented jihadi incident during this time period resulted instead from undercover work conducted by the FBI and New York Police Department, which preempted the terrorists’ 1997 plot to attack the New York Subway system. Likewise, since at least the early 1990s, investigators have utilized proactive strategies to counter domestic far-right violence, as the following narrative illustrates.

In late July 1994, federal agents with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives agency (ATF), along with the Virginia State Police and Pulaski Police Department, intercepted a plot by a far-right extremist group (the Blue Ridge Hunt Club) to wage war against the American government. The investigation began when an associate of the Blue Ridge Hunt Club’s leader became concerned with his increasingly radical anti-government rhetoric and illegal manufacturing of weapons. The alarmed citizen first informed local police of these activities and was later linked with agents of the ATF, who ultimately enrolled him as a confidential informant (CI). During his time as a CI, he recorded the group’s numerous privately held meetings, as well as facilitated the group’s buying and selling of illegal firearms as part of their overall terrorist plot. As the investigation progressed, the CI and ATF uncovered the suspects’ aspirations to blow up bridges, airports, radio stations, telephone relay stations, and fuel storage lines, in addition to their openness to killing political figures, police officers, and U.S. troops. With this information and the evidence linking the group to illegal firearms transactions, ATF agents and local police detained the suspects in late July 1994 on various weapons charges, preventing their plans from ever materializing.

In this case, key strategies employed include the use of human intelligence and the vertical sharing of information between agencies. Also, a striking feature of this and other pre-9/11 far-right investigations is the prominent role of the ATF in subverting terrorist violence. Our data suggest the ATF is often the lead agency tasked with investigating planned far-right crimes during the 1990s; however, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks their role has become mostly secondary, relegated to providing operational and investigatory assistance to the FBI and other agencies.

The next two case narratives represent post-9/11 changes in investigatory practices. For the most part, we find congruency across time in that the use of human intelligence, law enforcement partners, and information sharing networks are still mainstays of counterterrorism investigations. However, some more recent strategies for preventing terrorist violence also seem to emulate the post-9/11 organizational and legislative changes (e.g., the 2002 and 2008 U.S. Attorney General Guidelines, the U.S.A. Patriot Act) that afford law enforcement greater discretion in the monitoring of modern types of communication. The following case narrative,
for example, demonstrates how investigators have come to rely upon online surveillance for the initial gathering of vital information on suspected jihadi terrorists.

The FBI was first alerted to the lone suspect in 2009 after he communicated in a FBI monitored online forum his intention to commit violent jihad inside the U.S. After several months of conversations with two undercover online FBI agents (UAs), the suspect continuously expressed his interest in conducting terrorist attacks on behalf of al Qaeda. Perceiving the suspect to be a legitimate threat, the FBI introduced him to a third UA posing as an operational soldier in an al Qaeda sleeper cell. The suspect and third UA soon began meeting in person at a Dallas hotel, during which time specific plans for attacking a financial target emerged. Upon conducting online and physical surveillance of multiple buildings with and without the UA present, the suspect settled on a high-rise bank building in Dallas, Texas. The plan was to remotely detonate a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) as it sat in a parking garage beneath the building. Unbeknownst to the suspect, the VBIED was inert, as FBI agents had rendered it inoperable. On September 24, 2009, the suspect, under FBI surveillance, parked the inert VBIED inside the building’s underground garage and subsequently got into the UA’s awaiting vehicle. The UA and suspect then drove to a location a safe distance away whereby the suspect attempted to remotely detonate the fake car bomb using a cellular phone. As he dialed the cell number, FBI JTTF agents immediately swarmed the suspect and placed him under arrest.

Similarly, the subsequent probe of a planned far-right attack also stemmed from secret law enforcement reconnaissance of terrorists’ online activity.

On January 23, 2014, the FBI began monitoring online chat discussions amongst a group of far-right extremists who expressed interest in carrying out attacks in the U.S. Two FBI JTTF confidential informants (CIs) participated in the suspects’ encrypted online conversations, as well as met in person with members of the group to report on their violent intentions. FBI JTTF agents also conducted surveillance of one suspect's home, in addition to employing mobile surveillance teams to further observe the group's criminal activities. During the investigation, the FBI cooperated with multiple local police agencies that provided operational and investigative assistance necessary to build a case against the suspects. Through these efforts, the investigators discovered that the group was planning to conduct a bombing campaign against power grids, water treatment facilities, local police vehicles, and other federal and local government targets in an effort to incite war against the U.S. government. It was eventually discovered that the suspects sought to obtain pipe bombs and thermite devices in order to execute their plans, and they

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11 Unfortunately, the source material does not specify how the cooperation between the agencies unfolded. In fact, in many cases, there is a dearth of open-sources on the information and intelligence sharing process across organizations. In most cases, the source material simply recognizes that multiple law enforcement agencies partnered to share information and investigate the crime, but provides little detail on each partner’s role in the investigation.
ultimately came to rely on the CI to attain these items. On February 15, 2014, the CI provided the suspects with the requested weapons, which were rendered inert by the FBI. Upon transferring the inert explosives to the suspects, FBI agents placed the group under arrest with assistance from local law enforcement.

While the clandestine monitoring of terrorists’ Internet communications is a unique feature of post-9/11 investigations, we find homogeneity in how strategies are used across ideological movements. Additionally, we find much overall stability in counterterrorism strategies across time for all types of investigations. As our case narratives show, and in corroboration with our quantitative findings, over the past 25 years or so jihadi and far-right plot investigations have mostly relied upon human intelligence, surveillance, multi-agency partnerships, and to some extent, routine police activities to subvert planned terrorist crimes.

**Investigation Origins.** In addition to identifying and monitoring suspected terrorists online, counterterrorism investigations originate from a variety of other sources, including tips from the public and other ongoing criminal investigations. In this section, we provide case narratives detailing some of the ways in which law enforcement become alerted to planned acts of violent terrorism. For example, the case below highlights the important contribution citizens play in uncovering jihadi terrorists’ suspicious activities.

On July 27, 2011, local police arrested a jihadi terrorist in Killeen, Texas, thwarting his plan to attack the Fort Hood military base. The arrest stemmed from a Texas gun store employee's tip that the suspect had bought an unusually large quantity of smokeless powder, multiple boxes of shotgun ammunition, and a magazine for a handgun. The employee grew suspicious of the suspect for his generally aloof behavior, as well as his ostensibly little background knowledge of firearms and the proper uses for smokeless gunpowder. After the suspect departed the store in a taxicab, the employee recorded the cab's license plate number and alerted the Killeen police department. Police later tracked the suspect to a hotel room and arrested him on an outstanding warrant. Upon searching his possessions, police found multiple weapons, bomb-making supplies and manuals, and jihadi materials. After sharing this information with the FBI, a federal investigation was initiated, and agents confirmed that the materials found could be used to manufacture a destructive device. FBI agents then interviewed the suspect, securing a confession that he planned to use a bomb to attack the Fort Hood military base, and subsequently charged him with possession of a destructive device.

Similarly, attentive private sector employees have also been involved in preempting jihadi violence. Consider the case below, for example.

On February 1, 2011, the FBI received a tip from employees associated with a biological supply company about a suspicious purchase of the chemical phenol, which along with a variety of legitimate uses, can be used to make the trinitrophenol (T.N.P) explosive. FBI agents began investigating the purchaser, conducting a physical search of his apartment in secret and launching an electronic surveillance operation of his online activities. The ensuing investigation retrospectively uncovered that the suspect had posted extremist messages online, conducted
research on potential targets and explosives, acquired materials for constructing an explosive chemical device, and was planning to conduct terrorist attacks inside the U.S. Due to this information, the FBI arrested the suspect on February 23, 2011, for attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction.

Indeed, tips from the general citizenry, such as store clerks, acquaintances, and other concerned individuals, are a prevalent theme across terrorist movement types. One observable difference between jihadi and far-right cases, however, is that the latter often involves public tipsters who are at least loosely associated with the extremist movement itself. Though not entirely absent in jihadi cases, we observe more far-right cases in which other extremist affiliates, independent of initial law enforcement involvement, informed on their comrades. Take the following case narrative, for example.

In March 1998, a concerned citizen approached the FBI with information regarding an individual who was affiliated with the extremist group known as the Republic of Texas (ROT). The ROT member had requested assistance from the citizen, who was a computer consultant, with the typing of ROT legal documents along with other secretarial matters. The citizen agreed to help but became increasingly troubled by the anti-government diatribes of the group, in addition to their requests for running illegal criminal warrant checks against ROT members. The citizen approached the FBI with this information, but they were reluctant to open an official investigation based on the available evidence. Between March and late April 1998, the citizen attended private ROT meetings, during which time the group expressed interest in conducting a biological attack against government targets. Again, the citizen relayed this information to the FBI, but agents maintained that there was insufficient evidence to warrant an investigation, though they did direct him to acquire more information about the ROT's proposed plans. After accepting an official position within the ROT a month later, the citizen obtained a written letter from other ROT members detailing a proposed biological attack as well as a declaration of war, which he provided to the FBI. Based on this information, the FBI subsequently opened an official investigation and employed the citizen to serve as a confidential informant (CI). The CI and FBI then began gathering evidence on the suspects' planned violence. As the progression of terrorist activity reached the point of attempting to manufacture a fatal biological device, FBI agents arrested the ROT members on July 1, 1998, for conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction, ending their proposed plan for war against the federal government.

Along with an observant public, we find that investigations are initiated through police work into other crimes. These can include receiving information and intelligence from foreign law enforcement partners or the military, stumbling across evidence in raids and searches of other terrorist suspects, and convincing already captured terrorist suspects to inform on their associates. The following case illustrates these latter circumstances.

The FBI was first notified of the jihadi suspect’s planned terrorist attack against a Columbus, Ohio shopping mall in the spring of 2003. At the time, an al Qaeda affiliate was under FBI scrutiny for providing material support to terrorists, a charge for which he was later convicted. To reduce his sentence length, the supporter
decided to cooperate with the FBI, providing information on al Qaeda’s intended terrorist activities inside the U.S. He advised the FBI that one of his former al Qaeda contacts had been preparing for an assault against an Ohio shopping mall since 2002. The FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) immediately launched an investigation into the suspected attacker, learning that he had a history of traveling overseas to train with jihadi militants, as well had plans to conduct an attack inside the U.S., corroborating the informer’s tip. Fearing the proposed plot was imminent, on November 28, 2003 JTTF investigators collaborated with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to arrest the suspect on immigration and material support to terrorism charges, foiling the intended attack.

Additionally, evidence indicates that terrorist plots can be foiled through more routine chance encounters with police. The far-right terrorism case below is one example.

In November 2002, Los Angeles County Sheriff’s officers arrested a far-right suspect after investigating him for an unrelated string of car thefts. Upon searching the suspect’s stolen truck, police discovered two pipe bombs in the back and consequently opened an additional investigation in partnership with the ATF. Local and federal investigators later found a cache of weapons and explosives stockpiled in the suspects’ storage facility, in addition to jet fuel, false identification documents, anti-government literature, and written plans for attacks against unnamed targets. Law enforcement later charged the suspect for possession of an unregistered destructive device.

Interestingly, some terrorist plots are foiled through a combination of an observant public and chance encounters with police, as indicated below.

Two far-right extremists were arrested on April 19, 2001, for attempting to pass a counterfeit $20 bill at an East Boston doughnut shop. When the store employee refused to accept the fake currency, they showed it to a local Boston police officer who happened to also be waiting in line. The officer immediately placed the suspects under arrest, and ensuing searches of the pair’s apartment revealed plans and materials to conduct a terrorist attack. Federal investigators, including the FBI, ATF, and Secret Service, soon became involved in the investigation and discovered that one suspect was affiliated with the White supremacist group called the White Order of Thule, and linked him to a Boston area bank robbery. Investigators determined that the pair of suspects had plans to conduct a series of attacks in order to instigate a race war.

Despite the disparity in investigation origins illustrated above, once the terrorists’ planned violence is unveiled to law enforcement standard investigatory practices tend to take over. Investigators often come to rely on ordinary police work to build evidence against the suspects, usually by employing human intelligence sources or retrospectively piecing together information on suspected terrorists’ past activities, which mirrors our quantitative results. Further, law enforcement will often collaborate to more effectively and efficiently collect vital information. The next section provides more detail on the contributions of federal, state, local, and foreign law enforcement partners.
Role of Federal, State, Local, and Foreign Agencies. As already discussed, federal law enforcement, usually the FBI, tend to be involved in the overwhelming majority of terrorist enterprise investigations. However, it is rare for federal agencies to work alone. Typically, they elicit investigative assistance from other federal, state or local, or foreign partners. Although frequently unspecified in source materials, operational aid can include assisting with arrest warrants, conducting searches, or sharing relevant background information throughout the course of the investigation. Other times, local law enforcement partners uncover a potential plot and subsequently turn the investigation over to the FBI, as the case below demonstrates.

The investigation of the suspected jihadist began on August 15, 2007, when he violated his parole agreement relating to prior aggravated assault and robbery charges. Upon searching the suspect's vehicle, parole officers discovered written material related to violent jihadism, including references to a letter that was penned to a convicted Taliban militant, and shared this information with the FBI's joint terrorism task force (JTTF). After the suspect was discharged from prison for a parole violation, JTTF agents, including a federally deputized Decatur police officer, interviewed him about the letter, later releasing him but not after opening a formal investigation. The JTTF agents and officer subsequently deployed a confidential informant (CI) who recorded conversations and meetings with the suspect over the next several months. As the suspect began expressing interest in receiving training to fight against Israel in the Gaza Strip, he was introduced to an undercover FBI agent (UA) posing as a low-level al Qaeda operative. After establishing an acquaintanceship, the suspect and UA began planning an attack inside the U.S. instead, which included the selection of targets and means of executing the incident. The suspect eventually settled on using a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) to blow up a Springfield, Illinois federal building. The FBI supplied the suspect with an inoperable VBIED, and on September 23, 2009, he made the final preparations for detonation. Upon parking the fake VBIED in front of the target, the suspect drove away in the UAs vehicle to a safe distance, dialed the remote cellular phone detonator, and was then arrested by JTTF personnel.

In addition to receiving support from local partners, a unique feature of jihadi investigations is that federal agencies often take advantage of overseas information sharing networks. In most cases, foreign law enforcement organizations, as well as U.S. agencies operating in foreign countries (e.g., CIA, military), provide intelligence on individuals suspected of engaging in overseas terrorist activities. As these suspects attempt to enter the U.S., investigators are then tipped off, and a counterterrorism investigation usually ensues.12 Contrastingly, federal probes into far-right violence tend to involve information sharing with state or local police, as illustrated by the following case narrative.

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12 We do not provide a case narrative on such investigations because the available information was often sketchy. Likely due to the secretive nature of the investigations, it was difficult to disentangle the precise contribution of the foreign agency partners. Instead, the source material simply mentioned that foreign partners played a part in providing information on the suspected terrorists to U.S. law enforcement, whereby investigators opened an investigation and utilized many of the same strategies already discussed to net the suspects.
Members of the FBI’s JTTF, along with the Tremonton Police Department, began investigating a lone suspect in February 2014 after receiving a public tip that he intended to blow up a local Bible study group. With the aid of a confidential informant (CI) developed by Tremonton Police, investigators discovered that he was an anti-government extremist who, instead of planning to assault the church had plans to attack local police targets in an effort to spark an anti-government revolution. Over the next four or so months federal and local police built their case against the suspect, utilizing CIs and an undercover FBI agent (UA) who reported on his criminal activities. During the undercover operation, the CI met with the suspect to discuss explosives, and eventually purchased a USB drive from him with instructions on manufacturing drugs, explosives, and booby traps. The CI then introduced the suspect to the UA, who was posing as a member of an anti-government militia group looking to recruit someone who could build bombs for the group. Believing he was the right fit for the role, the suspect began meeting with the UA to discuss his new bomb-making responsibilities. Later, the CI informed Tremonton police that the suspect had built an explosive device. Provided with this information, the CI and UA then set up a meeting with the suspect on July 10, 2014, at a local Tremonton restaurant. During the meeting, the suspect sold the UA a notebook with schematics on how to manufacture explosives and was subsequently arrested by investigating officers, ending his planned violence plot.

In this case, local officers play a more substantial role in conducting the daily operations of the investigation alongside agents with the FBI. However, occasionally local law enforcement will independently conduct counterterrorism investigations. We find evidence that in rare instances local police will investigate jihadi or far-right plots without the aid of the FBI or other police departments. The following far-right case is an example of this anomaly.

In August 2013, the Las Vegas Police Department (LVPD) arrested two sovereign citizens plotting to abduct and kill LVPD officers. The investigation was a culmination of several months of undercover work whereby a LVPD officer secretly collected evidence on the pair’s violent intentions. The suspects first came to the LVPD’s attention after investigators linked one of them to a series of crimes. When police made contact with the suspect, he voiced his sovereign citizen beliefs, maintaining that he was not subject to the laws of the U.S. To investigate further, LVPD officers then inserted an undercover officer who attended numerous meetings and training sessions with the suspects. During the operation, the officer discovered that the pair had plans to kidnap and murder police officers as means of gaining momentum for their sovereign citizen movement. As part of the plot, the suspects bought a vacant house and converted it into an improvised jail, which they intended to use as a holding cell for the abducted officers. With this evidence, LVPD police arrested the pair at a warehouse in August 2013, charging them with conspiracy to commit murder and kidnapping.

When considered together, the above case narratives illustrate that although federal organizations lead counterterrorism investigations, there is substantial heterogeneity in the contributions of state, local, and foreign police agencies in foiling planned attacks. However, a stable characteristic across cases is law enforcements’ reliance upon intelligence sharing.
networks, in addition to confidential informants and undercover agents, to detect and thwart planned acts of violence. Indeed, and as demonstrated throughout the qualitative findings, the utilization of human intelligence is a common proactive policing strategy that varies little by time or terrorist movement, and in many ways represents the modal investigatory response to terrorist violence.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the small but growing literature on investigatory strategies employed by law enforcement to foil terrorist plots in the U.S. before and after 9/11, and to examine how strategies might vary across terrorists’ ideological backgrounds. To begin, we found several consistencies across jihadi and far-right plots. In particular, law enforcement tends to rely on tested investigatory strategies that are most familiar to them, including a combination of reactive and proactive responses to terrorism regardless of terrorists' ideological orientation. Supporting prior research (Dahl, 2011), we found that terrorism investigations were generally led by federal law enforcement, usually the FBI, and relied heavily on human intelligence sources and surveillance to thwart terrorism regardless of time period or ideology of terrorists. The FBI did not usually work alone when intervening in terrorist plots but instead partnered with other agencies.

By integrating qualitative case narratives into our analysis, our findings helped illuminate the processes by which law enforcement identify possible plots and gather and share information during investigations of both far-right and jihadi terrorists. For instance, narratives revealed the increasingly important role of the Internet in identifying radicalized persons who may have an interest in carrying out an attack. Since 9/11, the FBI has used online forums and social media to lure jihadists and far-rightists further into sophisticated plots before arresting them. It appears that post-9/11 counterterrorism legislation (e.g., USA Patriot Act and 2002 and 2008 Attorney General guidelines) may have broadened law enforcement’s investigatory scope, enabling them to net would-be terrorist attackers. However, findings from this study suggest that although law enforcement has increasingly utilized the Internet as a tool in thwarting and investigating terrorism, substantive counterterrorism practices (e.g., the utilization of human intelligence and the mixture of reactive and proactive strategies) have remained relatively the same. As noted previously, the modal investigatory response to terrorism in the U.S. over the past 25 years involves federally-led investigations that stem from public tips and information, and intelligence gathered from confidential informants and undercover agents. Thus, it is possible that our findings here are just an artifact of advancements in 21st-century online technology, rather than a significant alteration to time-tested counterterrorism methods. As the Internet and social media have become more prominent in American society, it is plausible that law enforcement has simply integrated online intelligence gathering opportunities with more traditional proactive policing strategies to arrest would-be terrorists.  

While the overall consistencies observed in our qualitative and quantitative findings are generally supportive of much past evidence on patterns of counterterrorism investigations (Dahl,

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13 We thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this alternative view to our attention.
2011; Difo, 2010; Strom, et al., 2017), we also observed several notable differences in investigatory strategies across terrorist ideologies, such as in how investigations are initiated. In particular, case narratives suggested that persons close to far-right plotters tip off police, while this is less likely for jihadi plotters. These differences may have unique policy implications for investigators that are dependent upon terrorist ideology. Local law enforcement should continue fostering trust and keeping open lines of communication with individuals and groups on the extreme far-right. As most far-right extremists have no interest in committing acts of terrorism, they can serve as a key line of defense against the nefarious plans of their more violent confederates.

Our qualitative analysis revealed that jihadi plots involving public tips are usually not reported by confederates, but rather concerned citizens and private sector employees. This finding lends support to the utility of public awareness campaigns, such as “if you see something, say something,” as well as the advantages of building trust between the police and community-based business partners (Clarke & Newman, 2006). Perhaps even more important though is fostering healthy relationships with members of the Muslim American community, as it is they who may be in positions to see or hear something and notify law enforcement. Though not a leading factor in detecting terrorist plots in the current study, past research findings indicate that Muslim Americans are key contributors to reporting suspected terrorist activity (Muslim Public Affairs Council, 2012; see also Clarke & Newman, 2006). It remains critical to preventing future terrorism that law enforcement be viewed as allies to such communities.

Relatedly, we found that jihadi investigations are significantly less likely to involve local law enforcement partners than far-right investigations. This could be interpreted as federal investigators underutilizing their state and local partners in jihadi plot investigations. Involving local law enforcement in investigations in the future could help to set a precedent for continued inter-agency cooperation and the two-way, vertical sharing of intelligence. In fact, local law enforcement may be in the best position to cultivate relationships with American Muslims, as well as other community members and business partners. As our case narratives illustrated, local police were vital in relaying tips from the public to federal agencies, and in developing confidential informants, efforts which ultimately led to the prevention of several far-right plots. Investigations into suspected jihadi activity would do well to also incorporate such investigatory strategies.

It is worth reiterating that jihadi plots are less likely to be initiated by information from members of the public than far-right plots. Instead, jihadi plots are much more likely to be uncovered during the course of an unrelated jihadi investigation. Such discoveries have usually occurred after convicted jihadists were transformed into confidential informants for the FBI, though new queries arose out of ongoing investigations under other circumstances as well. Again, what these findings suggest more generally is that while law enforcement rely on traditional investigatory strategies and good police work to thwart terrorist plots, the specific investigatory tools believed to be most effective depend on the type of terrorist suspect.
Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Of course, our findings and implications for law enforcement practices should be considered in light of the limitations of our study. Specifically, despite the advantages of our mixed method design, our research relied solely on open-source data (e.g., court documents, media reports). As such, we were unable to fully explicate the process of sharing intelligence between federal, state, local, and foreign law enforcement partners. Case studies based on information from official investigations would undoubtedly help fill the gaps in what is known about investigatory processes. A critical avenue for future research is to perhaps rely on interviews or ethnographic observations to provide even richer descriptions of inter-agency collaborations and the transformation of information into intelligence within the context of a terrorism investigation. Doing so would provide further insights into (a) those specific policing practices that are employed most often and most successfully, and (b) why and how law enforcement utilizes certain strategies to uncover and thwart terrorist threats across time.

Moreover, we limited our mixed-method analyses to terrorist plots that were foiled by police in advance, excluding investigations into completed acts of terrorism and plots that were attempted but failed due to terrorists' error. Accordingly, our findings provide little information on how investigatory successes relate to the ostensible shortfalls that law enforcement may experience in stopping terrorist attacks. Additional research should work to address this limitation to provide a more adequate understanding of the best practices for preventing jihadi and far-right terrorism.

Another limitation is that our study did not address issues relating to entrapment by federal law enforcement or wrongful conviction cases. Critics of preemptive approaches to countering terrorism have often accused the government of inventing terrorist plots and ensnaring individuals who provide no serious danger to the public. One study of post-9/11 terrorism prosecutions estimated that only about nine percent of foiled jihadi plots represent “authentic” terrorist threats (Norris & Grol-Prokopczyk, 2015). As our study mostly relied on mainstream media, criminal justice, and other government-related source materials, our case narratives underrepresent these issues. Future work is needed to disentangle the law enforcement strategies used to disrupt legitimate terrorist plots from illegitimate ones and explore how these approaches vary by terrorists' ideological backgrounds and across time.14

Lastly, our findings are not necessarily generalizable to other forms of terrorist plots, such as non-violent terrorism and eco-terrorism, or the plot investigations occurring in other settings (e.g., Canada, Europe). Future research employing a similar mixed method approach can expand upon the findings of the current study by comparatively examining other types of terrorism occurring in other settings.

This study explored the similarities and differences in law enforcement investigatory strategies used to foil jihadi and far-right terrorism before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Using a mixed method research approach, we uncovered important variations in key aspects of terrorist plots, including the role technology played, how investigations are initiated, and the

14 We thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this limitation and direction for future research to our attention.
contributions of state and local police in foiling plots across time and terrorists’ ideological affiliations. Importantly, though, we also found that once suspected terrorist activity is uncovered, law enforcement tends to rely on more traditional reactive and proactive policing strategies – namely the utilization of human intelligence, surveillance, and the retrospective gathering of evidence – to build cases against suspects and prevent acts of terrorism. Evidence from both quantitative findings and complimentary qualitative case narratives contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the modal law enforcement responses to terrorism over the past 25 years. On this point, it is our hope that this research informs law enforcement strategies for preventing the nation’s two top terrorist threats, as well as future scholarship on the counterterrorism investigatory process. In the end, it is through partnerships between the academic community and law enforcement that promising evidence-based policing practices can be used to better subvert future terrorist threats and promote public safety. With the recent rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) and continued threats posed by American far-right terrorists, understanding how law enforcement can best protect communities against such threats is an increasingly important endeavor.

REFERENCES


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DEFINITIONS FAVORABLE TO TERRORISM? SSSL AND RADICALIZATION: A CASE STUDY APPROACH

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Abstract

Although social structure and social learning (SSSL) theory has oft been proposed as a general theory of crime, it has rarely been applied to that which qualifies as ideologically-motivated. We seek to rectify this notable gap in the research by examining the suitability of an SSSL framework to radicalization; an understudied, yet vital process to enacting evidence-based counterterrorism efforts. Utilizing a “most likely” case study approach, we find several themes consistent with SSSL principles, primarily within its social learning constructs. We conclude that SSSL does indeed offer promise for explaining all forms of crime including acts of terrorism.

Keywords: social structure and social learning theory, radicalization, terrorism, eco-terrorism

INTRODUCTION

Surprisingly few contributions have specifically applied social learning theories to acts of terrorism despite being utilized to explain other forms of collective violence like that of gang activity (e.g. Winfree, Bäckström, & Mays, 1994; Winfree, Mays, & Bäckström, 1994). This deficit is especially pronounced in one iteration of these theories: the social structure and social learning (SSSL) model. However, the exceptions that do exist (Akers and Silverman, 2004; Akins and Winfree, 2016; Hamm, 2007; Jensen et al., 2016; Wilmer and Dubouloz, 2011) offer promise in elucidating the terrorist process that is often most of interest to policy-makers; namely, that of radicalization.

In an effort to address this lacuna in the research, the intent of this exploratory study is to assess the applicability of SSSL perspectives in understanding the radicalization processes among extremists in the United States. Specifically, to determine the role of theorized constructs present in the SSSL model, we draw upon two case studies of convicted environmentalist extremists: Daniel McGowan and Walter Edmond Bond. Presented as a “typical” case (Gerring, 2008; Gerring and Seawright 2008) of an environmentalist extremist, McGowan played an
especially nuanced role within “the Family,” a cell of the radical eco-movement responsible for a series of arsons in the early 2000s. Utilizing a case study approach, we discover several elements consistent with a SSSL framework within McGowan’s radicalization. We then compare McGowan to a counterpart in the movement, Walter Edmund Bond, to further explore the theory’s generalizability in the radicalization context.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORIES

Social learning theories enjoy a rich tradition within Criminology and have undergone several iterations and developments (Akers, 1973; 1985; 1998; Akers and Sellers, 2000; Burgess and Akers, 1966; Sutherland, 1947; Warr & Stafford, 1991; Warr, 2002). In sum, this branch of theories attempts to decipher one of the robust findings in the field: namely, that delinquents have delinquent friends (Akers, Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce, & Radosevich, 1979; Krohn, 1974; Matsueda and Heimer, 1987; Warr, 2002). At its most parsimonious, social learning theories maintain that this relationship is the result of an excess of definitions favorable to crime. These definitions are learned in close, intimate personal groups (Sutherland, 1947), through operant conditioning and imitation processes (Akers, 1985). Social structure variables, such as those identified in social disorganization, conflict, and strain theories, are said to influence these processes (Akers, 1998). These variables can lead to what is termed “differential social organization” or something that “distinguishes one community, region, society, or social system from another” (Akers and Jennings, 2016: 237). This particular iteration of social learning perspectives, known as “social structure and social learning (SSSL),” has been presented as the quintessential general theory of crime (Akers, 1998). These claims seem to be consistent with the extant research, where SSSL constructs have been found to predict offending in a number of contexts (Pratt et al., 2010).

One context of particular interest to this investigation is Akers and Silverman (2004), who employ SLT principles in their explanation of terrorism. The first of these principles, Sutherland’s (1947) differential association, is defined in later iterations as the “normative and interactive dimensions of the primary and secondary-group relationships and affiliations” (Akers and Silverman, 2004:20). The authors maintain that these relationships and affiliations manifest themselves through both attitudes and behaviors. For example, an individual terrorist is more likely to be amenable to violence if such violence is intrinsic to their group’s ideology and/or actions. It is through the process of differential association that definitions, or “one’s own attitudes and beliefs, rationalizations, justifications, and definitions of the situation” (pg. 20), are then formed; those that are both conducive and oppositional to the act of terrorism. Akers and Silverman (2004) also contend that these definitions can go on to serve as internal discriminative stimuli, which “provide cues or signals to the person that this is the right or appropriate time and situation in which to engage in the behavior” (pg. 21), and can further reinforce violence in specific situations. Behavior is then encouraged or discouraged through a process of differential reinforcement (“a balance of rewarding and punishing consequences of behavior, of anticipated or actual consequences of behavior” (pg. 21)), depending upon whether it is rewarded or punished (or there is anticipation of either). Finally, learning can also occur through imitation (“learning by observing others’ behavior” (pg. 21)), whereby the terrorist observes techniques and applies such techniques to their own terrorist actions.
The terrorism literature holds findings consistent with the main premise of social learning theories; namely, that learning can occur, and is reinforced, in close-knit “cliques” (Borum, 2011; Hogg and Adelman, 2013). Nonetheless, and outside of Akers and Silverman’s (2004) conceptual piece, these theories have only had a handful of direct applications to terrorism (Akins and Winfree, 2016; Hamm, 2007; Jensen et al., 2016; Wilmer and Dubouloz, 2011). Hamm’s (2007) groundbreaking work used a case study approach to identify which skills are needed for acts of terrorism and how those skills are transmitted. Another exception is Atkins and Winfree (2016), who in studying the global jihadist movement, highlighted the role of social media within differential association and imitation. Finally, Jensen and colleagues (2016) discovered that membership in close-knit, insular cliques, though not the presence of radical family members, was a significant factor when assessing the propensity of individuals’ participation in violent extremism. Jensen et al. (2016) concluded that despite increased interest in countering the threat from lone actors, “radicalization to violence remains a process that is distinctly social” (pg. 38). The next section reviews what else is known about this uniquely social process, with specific focus on the importance of close relationships as key to its facilitation and maintenance.

**RADICALIZATION**

Efforts at explaining participation in political violence, specifically through the lens of small-group dynamics, commonly emphasize the importance of close social influences in communicating norms and moralizing behaviors to the newly formed recruit (Hafez, 2016; McCauley, 1989; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008; Sageman, 2004). Della Porta (1995), in her study of German and Italian militants in the 1970s, found that intense devotion to comrades can lead to a clique of friends whom radicalize collectively. This focus on close social networks has most notably been applied to violent jihadist cases by Sageman (2004; 2008), whose research emphasizes the dynamics of in-group bonds and out-group animosity as integral to the radicalization process.

The potential influence of close personal relationships on the development of extremist beliefs is not limited to friends and peers, however. Familial ties may play a unique role when considering how some individuals come to develop extremist beliefs and how small groups are able to evade counterterrorism efforts (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Hafez, 2016; Horgan 2009; Kleinmann, 2012; Milla, Faturochman, and Ancok, 2013; Slootman and Tillie, 2006). In short, it is easier to convince and recruit people who already share a common identity, rather than constructing an entirely new one (Hafez, 2016).

Collectively, the radicalization literature has offered important insight into the complex processes involved in this phenomenon. Such processes seemed to inordinately involve, consistent with SSSL’s contentions, the significance of peer and familial relationships. However, the majority of this work focuses on those that ascribe to a radical jihadist ideology, when other movements have been much more active in the United States; namely, the radical eco-movement.
The Radical Environmental and Animal Rights Movement

The radical eco-movement is one the most frequent perpetrators of ideologically-motivated crime and terrorist activity in the United States (Carson, LaFree, & Dugan, 2012). While the use of violence has been rare, around 17% of incidents do meet the threshold of terrorism, defined as, “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation” (LaFree and Dugan 2007: 184). Incidents that fit this classification, like a number of large scale arsons in the late 1990s and early 2000s, prompted local and federal law enforcement to deem the movement a significant terrorist threat during this time (Lewis, 2005; Chermak, Freilich, and Simone, 2009). Interestingly, this threat has all but desisted. In fact, 2015 saw only one attack that would qualify as related to the movement, which did involve a molotov cocktail, but did not cause any injuries (Global Terrorism Database, 2017).

Yet, empirical research on the radical environmental and animal rights movement has thrived in the past decade (Carson, LaFree, & Dugan, 2012; Carson, 2014; Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015; Gruenewald, Allison-Gruenewald, Klein, 2015; Joose, 2007; Liddick, 2006, 2013; Smith and Damphousse, 2009). Collectively, results from this literature suggest that the movement is largely decentralized (Joose, 2012), with less planning time involved in “direct actions” (Smith and Damphousse, 2009). The radical eco-movement has also been found to target a range of facilities from universities to automobile dealerships (Carson, LaFree, and Dugan, 2012; Leader and Probst, 2003), with a preference for local, soft targets (Gruenewald, Allison-Gruenewald, Klein, 2015; Smith and Damphousse, 2009). Members of the movement also tend to base target selection on avoiding personal injury (Chermak et al., 2013; Gruenewald, Allison-Gruenewald, and Klein, 2015), but do attempt to inflict the most property damage possible, creating an average loss of over $800,000 (Carson, LaFree, and Dugan, 2012).

Radical environmental and animal rights activists represent a unique demographic, even among ideologically-motivated criminals. They tend to be older (average age of 28), are more likely to be female, college educated, in a serious relationship, and less likely to be mentally ill than those in other movements (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015; Cunningham, 2003; Jensen et al., 2016; Liddick, 2006). While a small contingent do subscribe to extreme philosophies like that of “green anarchy,” the majority hold nonviolent convictions (Carson, LaFree, and Dugan, 2012). Biocentrism and deep ecology, viewpoints that are frequently alluded to by activists, view all life as sacred, and consequently, stand in direct contrast to many other terrorist ideologies.

This unusual profile that has emerged for the average “eco-terrorist” has prompted the majority of scholars to apply rational choice-based theories to understanding their motivations (Carson, LaFree and Dugan, 2012; Carson, 2014; Deshpande and Ernst, 2012; Gruenewald, Allison-Gruenewald, Klein, 2015; Yang, Su, & Carson, 2014). Other research has employed situational action theory (Carson and Bartholomew, 2015) or the techniques of neutralization (Liddick, 2013). However, it could be argued that elements consistent with SSSL’s main constructs are inherent to the findings within this research trajectory; in particular, the learning of definitions favorable (and unfavorable) to crime, the reinforcement of those definitions, and the modeling of behavior. The next section gives an overview of how we plan to explore these
constructs in explaining the radicalization of what was two of the movement’s most important figures.

CURRENT STUDY

The review of the extant literature denotes a few key gaps in the state of knowledge regarding social learning theories, terrorist radicalization, and how the former informs the latter. First, and despite being proposed as a general theory of crime, scholars have been limited in their application of SSSL to the study of terrorism. Although other investigations speak to mechanisms that are consistent with its primary tenants (Borum, 2004; Della Porta, 1995; Everton, 2015; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008), there are few direct explorations of its framework to radicalization. Second, outside the knowledge that entry into terrorism is a complex and multi-faceted process, the literature on this phenomenon is relatively limited, exacerbated by its almost singular focus on jihadists. Additional research is vital to informing counterterrorism policy. Finally, the radical eco-movement remains an understudied, yet invaluable subject for understanding the complexities involved in ideologically-motivated behavior. It is through this movement that we can best assess the promise of SSSL’s as a general theory and the many elements involved in radicalization.

Consequently, and following the suggestions of Freilich and LaFree (2015), we “broaden inquiry to include criminology’s other major frameworks” (pg. 2). Specifically, we examine the role of SSSL’s theoretical constructs in explaining terrorist radicalization; an understudied, yet vital line of inquiry for policy-relevant research. The next sections lay out our methodology for the selection of our subjects, Daniel McGowan and Walter Edmund Bond, along with describing the procedures involved in our case study approach.

METHODS

To assess the role of SSSL constructs in the context of terrorist radicalization, we rely on the case study method. Case studies are uniquely situated to handle the complex and dynamic social interactions hypothesized by SSSL scholars for several reasons. First, they allow researchers to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events - such as individual life cycles and small group behavior” (Yin 1984: 4). This is nuance that is critical in contextualizing SSSL perspectives, but would be lost in other research methods that utilize large-N statistical approaches. Second, and perhaps most important to the study of a phenomenon as multifaceted as that of radicalization, case studies allow for, “the ability to capture and explain change” where viewpoints can be conceptualized as a “developing process rather than a stable state of thinking and acting” (Pennington, 2015: 904). This method also gives the analyst a way to operationalize theoretical constructs that are otherwise difficult to measure through finite numbers. Third, case studies are a useful procedure by which theoretical perspectives like SSSL can be clarified and understood by exploring causal order (Seawright and Gerring, 2008; Vargas, 2014). Case studies have recently been employed in order to understand the complexities of gang activity (Vargas, 2014), procedural justice (Pennington, 2015), and most relevant to the current research, terrorism (Gartenstein-Ross, 2014).
Sample

To identifying our primary “typical” case (Gerring, 2008; Gerring and Seawright 2008), we started with the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database, a newly-released dataset collected and maintained by researchers at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). These data include individual-level information on the backgrounds, demographics, group affiliations, and personal histories of 1,867 extremists who radicalized within the United States from 1948 to 2016 (Jensen et al., 2016).

Analyses of the PIRUS data have shown that environmentalist and animal rights extremists in the United States are distinct from other types of extremists (e.g., Islamist, far-right) on a number of attributes, but also share some attributes of central tendency useful for identifying a “typical” case (Jensen et al., 2016). According to the 118 environmentalist and animal rights extremists included in the PIRUS data from 1982 to 2016, the modal age at which they first participate in ideologically motivated behavior is 25 years old. Additionally, 73.7% of the individuals were male; 96.1% were white; 70.5% were members of small, insular “cliques” of fellow extremists; 80.4% were not single (never married, divorced, or widowed); 50% held employment; while 65.5% of cases came from a middle-class socioeconomic background. Moreover, only 4.2% of environmentalist and animal rights extremists engaged in behavior that caused or intended to cause violence or injury toward people, while a mere 10.8% had a history of criminality prior to their radicalization (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2017).

Table 1 compares these broader population figures to the particulars of McGowan’s life-course. As shown, McGowan typifies the broader population on every key attribute, and thus makes him a suitable candidate as a “representative” case for this exploratory analysis (Gerring, 2008; Gerring and Seawright 2008). In regards to the clique attribute, McGowan was a member of the “The Family,” an organized cell of Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front activists responsible for 20 criminal acts from 1995 to 2001. McGowan served over a 5 year sentence for his participation in two of these acts; namely, arsons at the Superior Lumber Company in Glendale, Oregon on January 2nd, 2001 and at Jefferson Poplar Tree Farm on May 21, 2001 in Clatskanie, Oregon.

Table 1. Case Comparison to Typical Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PIRUS variable</th>
<th>% of environmentalist/animal rights extremists from PIRUS (n=118)*</th>
<th>McGowan</th>
<th>Bond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age at first known illegal extremist behavior</td>
<td>25 years (mode)</td>
<td>25-26 years</td>
<td>19 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>73.3% male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 For the purposes of identifying a typical case of an environmentalist extremists, we rely on data that also includes animal rights extremists, such as affiliates of the Animal Liberation Front. These two movements overlap in a number of ways including primary ideological tenets, group membership, organizational structure, and tactics. For an overview of these two related movements and their close similarities, see Bjelopera, (2013).
For our second subject, we sought to select a case from within the same ideological milieu, but which was more atypical of the broader population on several of these shared tendencies. Walter Edmund Bond was also a single, white male who engaged in acts of nonviolent, ideologically motivated criminal activity. However, his background is sufficiently different as to provide a compelling comparison; a troubled family at the lower end of the socioeconomic stratum, a history of criminal behavior, younger than most activists, and unemployed when he first engaged in extremist behavior. Perhaps the most interesting attribute of Bond’s radicalization trajectory, and which holds the most relevance to assessing the causal mechanisms presented by SSSL perspectives, is that was not a member of an insular, extremist clique. Bond was responsible for a series of arsons targeting the Sheepskin Factory in Denver, Colorado, the Tandy Leather Factory in Salt Lake City, and a restaurant in Sandy, Utah. He is currently serving his 147 month sentence in a federal facility.

THE RADICALIZATION OF DANIEL MCGOWAN

Pre-Radicalization

Daniel McGowan was born in 1974 in Brooklyn, New York to a transit officer and an elementary school cafeteria worker (Curry and Hamachek, 2011; Lee, 2007; SupportDaniel.org, 2009). He was the youngest of four children, with an especially close relationship with his sister, Lisa. When he was three, the family moved to Rockaway beach in Queens, living in what McGowan describes as a mostly “working class” neighborhood.

Growing up in this area, his exposure to the frequent closure of Rockaway beach for contamination, had a significant influence on McGowan. As he notes, this experience, “left a really big impression on me of how poor neighborhoods get the lion’s share of the pollution. I didn’t need an environmental textbook to tell me that” (Lee, 2007). However, these beliefs did
not appear to manifest themselves until later in life. As his sister Lisa described him, McGowan growing up “wasn’t the political kid fighting for anything” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011).

McGowan was a high school athlete at his Catholic high school, Christ the King (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). He also became active in student organizations at this time, such as Students against Drunk Driving and the National Honors Society (U.S. v. McGowan, 2007). McGowan went on to attend college at SUNY Buffalo, graduating in 1996 with a double major in Business Administration and Southeast Asian studies, noting that the former was chosen for its practicality (Curry and Hamachek, 2011; Lee, 2007; SupportDaniel.org, 2016). After college, McGowan traveled for several months around Thailand and then started his first job at a large public relations firm in New York (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). During this time, McGowan ran into a woman collecting signatures at Union Square. She introduced him to the Wetlands Environmental Center, which he describes as the place “where it changed.” In a separate account, McGowan says that he learned about the center from a copy of the Earth First! Journal (Gold, 2016).

The Wetlands Environmental Center was founded by Larry Bloch, an activist with two main intentions: to entertain and to promote activism (McKinley, 2012). The center held concerts and weekly “Eco-Saloon” sessions, focused on environmental and animal rights-related topics. McGowan describes being especially affected by the viewing of documentaries, which highlighted environmental destruction in graphic depictions. Specifically, he has stated that he:

> had never seen with my own eyes what kind of world we lived in. I feel like I am in perpetual mourning and I have been from the moment...I took the blinders off and was like, holy crap, what the hell are we doing? And I got involved pretty much instantly (Curry and Hamachek, 2011).

From here, McGowan became actively engaged in letter writing campaigns and protests. He describes one his first events at the center as a letter writing campaign for Ron Coronado, who was serving time for the arson of a Michigan State research facility (Gold, 2016). McGowan notes that he, “went to one of these meetings and was blown away by what they were talking about. I didn’t really know much about it. I’d grown up in New York City, my dad’s a cop, and I didn’t have hammered-out beliefs on prisons and criminal justice.” McGowan continued to write letters to Coronado, meeting him after Coronado’s release from prison.3

**Entry into Crime**

One of McGowan’s first key protests occurred in July of 1997,4 in conjunction with the annual Earth First! National Gathering Round River Rendezvous.5 Before this event, McGowan notes he had not even slept outside and that the event was his first real exposure to nature (Curry

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2 McGowan has also been described as working for various “rainforest protection” nonprofits in Manhattan and at a Vegetarian restaurant at this time (Gold, 2016; Goodman, 2007; Lee, 2007).

3 Unfortunately, there is little else known about this contact in McGowan’s writings. This may be due to McGowan protecting Coronado, or as it appears here, that Coronado was more of a tangential influence in McGowan’s life.

4 He was described as participating in 2-3 protests a week.

5 Now in its 37 year, the event bills itself as a chance to “watch the sunset over an endless body of fresh water on top of a sand dune while you consider the conversations, workshops, and experiences of an Earth First! Rendezvous.”
and Hamachek, 2011). At the end of each “Rendezvous,” activists typically participated in some sort of direct action. In 1997, the action was a protest against the proposed opening of a copper and zinc mine in Crandon, Wisconsin by Exxon Coal and Minerals, which activists feared would pollute the nearby Wolf River (Jabolnski, 2013). McGowan was arrested, along with 14 other protesters, after trying to enter the offices of Crandon Mining Company in nearby Rhinelander, Wisconsin (Tribune News Services, 2007). He describes this arrest as “eye opening” and pinnacle to learning about the “environmental resistance movement” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011).

Concurrent to these events were a series of visible protests in which police utilized controversial tactics. One such protest occurred in June of 1997, when three activists were repeatedly pepper-sprayed after stationing themselves on a tree scheduled to be cut down for commercial development (Daily Emerald, 2000). The activists were attempting to block the tree’s removal until the city council could meet, exacerbating their resulting disenchantment in the political system (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). Two additional high profile incidents took place in October of this same year, when demonstrators staged sit-ins at Pacific Lumber Company and Representative Frank Riggs’ office. Once again, footage documenting the use of pepper spray on activists, including the “swabbing” of eyes and close range spraying, was widely disseminating within the environmental community. These latter incidents have since resulted in lawsuits filed against the Humboldt County Sheriff and Eureka Police departments (LaGanga, 1997). McGowan maintains that these types of events were important to his transition as they, “erode people’s belief that anything can change” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011).

A consequence of reading about these incidents coupled with his own arrest, McGowan began to shift his perspective on working within the legitimate system. He notes that at this time he felt that there was little point to civil disobedience, that it was not getting them anywhere, and that “no real change happens without pressure...without force...into intimidating governments and corporations into changing their behavior” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). McGowan then began to consider the possibility that criminal actions, on the other hand, could at the very least, “slow down logging” and that “while there was a preponderance of other tactics being tried, these tactics weren’t being tried” (Lee, 2007).

Entry into Terrorism

McGowan moved to Northern California in 1998, initially to work for the Headwaters Forest Campaign, an organization aimed at the protection of the redwood ecosystem. However, and due a high profile incident where an activist was killed by a falling tree, McGowan was told

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6 His friend, Tim Lewis, describes events prior to this time as also being critical to “understanding” McGowan. One such event occurred at Warner Creek in 1995, when McGowan was still living in New York. A large-scale protest was staged, in response to the formally protected area being opened for logging. It became the first time economic sabotage was utilized and led to an increasing disenchantment with the forest service based on their response. The Warner Creek protest also prompted some of “the Family’s” first arsons on the Detroit and Oakridge Ranger Stations respectively.

7 The website for the organization is no longer active, but the homepage describes the forest as, “the last large unprotected ancient redwood ecosystem left in the U.S. when Texas corporate raider Charles Hurwitz took over Pacific Lumber Company, raiding the company’s pension plan, selling off its assets, and doubling the logging in the forest so he could pay back his junk bonds debt.”
there were “no spots” for him upon arrival (Goodman, 2007). He describes himself as “already quite radicalized” at this time, but stated that he “couldn’t believe people accepted what was going on” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). McGowan notes the influence of seeing firsthand the large amount of logging in the area, which motivated him to question the use of “gentle” tactics. Specifically, McGowan describes that his involvement in the more radicalized end of the movement was a,

natural progression, but it also coincided with my increasing grief and rage I was feeling about the environmental destruction I saw. We’d drive to the edge of town and you saw the logging mills, or you went into the forest and stumbled upon a clear cut. It just blew me away. I had to find a way to channel that grief and rage (Lee, 2007).

Collectively, these events became the impetus for McGowan’s first real act on the radical end of the spectrum: the “Black Bloc” at the World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in November of 1999. Although previously utilized as a tactic in other demonstrations, the WTO protests brought a special notoriety to Black Blocs; a strategy where activists wear black and conceal their faces to send a message that “consumer America is destroying the world” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). Such notoriety was mainly due to the estimated 17 million dollar loss caused to downtown businesses like McDonald’s, Starbucks, and U.S. Bank. Over 600 arrests were made, primarily for obstructing traffic and refusing to disperse, but no one was seriously injured (Seattle Police Department, 2000). McGowan stated that it, “felt good to take out my rage on these corporate windows because they had caused so much destruction in my mind” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). Perhaps most significant to the protests was its role in introducing McGowan and his girlfriend at the time, Suzanne Savoie, to members of “the Family” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011).

As noted, the Family was a cell of animal rights and environmental activists, some of whom had escalated into criminal activity after the Warner Creek protests (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). Before McGowan’s introduction, the group consisted of 12 separate individuals responsible for 11 arsons, with the first direct action dating back to December of 1995. Up until this point, the Family’s targets had included everything from wild horse corrals to a variety of forestry targets. Perhaps the most infamous of these actions was the arson of a Vail ski result, which resulted in several million dollars of damages.

In 1999, McGowan moved to Eugene to keep in touch with these and other activists he had met at the WTO protests (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). Eugene had increasingly become the home base for the radical contingent of the movement. McGowan notes that he planned to work for the Earth First! Journal (Goodman, 2007), whose mission is a focus on, “the institutional, economic, political, social and cultural dynamics of hierarchy, power and privilege that define mainstream society also permeate the radical environmental movement” (earthfirstjournal.org, 2013). McGowan also spent time volunteering for Eugene PeaceWorks and projects involving Lane County homeless youth (United States v. McGowan, 2006). He was described by friends as the “disgruntled one,” as he had a “nasty attitude” and was “bitter;” always challenging others’ ideas (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). His former girlfriend, Savoie, has said that he was extremely involved in the issues and very social at this time. Similarly, law enforcement identified him as a leader in the movement and as someone to whom people looked for guidance.
McGowan acknowledges that he had become a different person and while noting he was already radicalized, he does describe moving to Oregon as leading to a sense of increasing disenchantment:

I was blown away by Oregon. I had never seen trees like that before. I had never seen forests or animals or anything like that. And so, I had—it had a really profound impact on me. And I was already quite radicalized, but I was—couldn’t believe the fact that people accepted what was going on there. I couldn’t believe the clear cuts on the mountaintops. I couldn’t believe the animal cruelty that I saw (Goodman, 2007).

McGowan relays that it became clear to others in the movement he was interested in doing “other stuff” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). After meeting the unofficial leader of the Family, Jake Ferguson, McGowan says that “some things (were set) in motion.” Ferguson was not only the groups’ originator, but also a “hard-rocking, drug-addicted musician and prolific anarchist arsonist” (Smith and Damphousse, 2009: 492).

McGowan became involved in the Family’s “Book Clubs,” named for their utilization of books as a tool for secure communication. These clubs were considered to be subcells of the Family’s larger network and served as places for the training of, “clandestine methods of committing direct actions, including the manufacture of mechanical and electrical timing devices for setting off improvised incendiary devices, reconnaissance of targets, lock picking, and computer security” (United States v. McGowan, 2007). Smith and Damphousse (2009) describe trainings in secure communications from members with technological backgrounds, including how to use anonymous e-mail accounts. These meetings were also a way for members to reinforce their ideological purpose to plan for future actions (Deshpande and Ernst, 2012). Two of these actions were the arsons at Superior Lumber Company in Glendale, Oregon on January 2nd, 2001 and at Jefferson Poplar Tree Farm on May 21, 2001 in Clatskanie, Oregon (United States v. McGowan, 2007).

McGowan has indicated that Superior Lumber first came to his attention after seeing their lumber bundles on the commercial train in town (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). He describes that he was initially recruited by Meyerhoff, “a radical anarchist who eventually called for violent action against persons, not just facilities” (Smith and Damphousse, 2009: 485) and Savoie, to serve as a lookout. Kevin Tubbs, “a college-educated animal rights radical with degrees in philosophy and fine arts” (Smith and Damphousse, 2009: 485) and Ferguson were also a part of the action, which resulted in $400,000 dollars in damages. After the arson, McGowan was tasked with writing the communique and sending it to the “North American ALF and ELF Press Office,” a way that members of the otherwise decentralized network could credit their actions to the movement (Deshpande and Ernst, 2012).

After seeing the media coverage, McGowan describes feeling like he had accomplished something, particularly when the high damage amount was reported (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). Specifically, he states that there is, “something really strange about when you attach a statement to an arson it suddenly becomes newsworthy…it is like propaganda with teeth” (Lee,
2007). Consequently, he was motivated to take a more active role in the second arson at Jefferson Poplar.8

McGowan’s more active role involved, “lay(ing) out soaked gasoline sheets and towels connected to a homemade incendiary device, designed to set fire to a fleet of SUVs and the company office” (Lee, 2007). Meyerhoff and Savoie were once again participants, with Nathan Block and Joyanna Zacher taking other roles in lieu of Tubbs. The incident caused almost a million dollars in damage.

THE RADICALIZATION OF WALTER EDMUND BOND

Pre-Radicalization

Walter Edmund Zuehlke was born on April 16, 1976 in Iowa (Animal Press Liberation Office, 2010; Bond, 2014; DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2014) and had a “childhood marked by parental instability and substance abuse,” which led to “the development of his ardent positions against social ills, such as drug abuse” (DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2014). Bond’s biological father was heavily addicted to methamphetamine and cocaine after his return from serving in Vietnam. He was also known to be a part of an outlaw motorcycle gang. Bond refers to his father by his first name, “Mark,” and notes that his biological parents divorced when he was 12-months-old. Mark was sent to federal prison for his involvement in drugs, with Bond describing him as a “deadbeat dad, a liar and a scumbag.”

Bond appears to have a much stronger connection with his stepfather, James, whom he met when he was “in diapers” (Animal Press Liberation Office, 2010; Bond, 2014; DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2014). James adopted Walter and consequently, Walter took James’ last name. Walter describes his stepfather as “the only father I have ever known” and a “good man with a bad problem.” This problem, alcoholism, led to divorce from Bond’s mother when Walter was twelve. Bond’s mother subsequently moved them to Denver to be around family.

It was around this time that Bond moved into a house with “12 relatives.” He talks about how this experience exposed him to, “all the horrors that people of color are privy too. Racist cops, soup kitchens, drug abuse, sexual abuse, violence and of course, prison” (Bond, 2016). Bond also expresses being exceptionally close his cousin Eric, who is portrayed as “doing whatever he wanted” (U.S. v. Bond, 2010).

Bond’s mother also appears to have issues with substance abuse (Animal Press Liberation Office, 2010; Bond, 2014; DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2014). Bond acknowledges that he frequently smoked marijuana with her after the divorce from James and that they both became frequent drug users. He describes his peer group at this time as “other kids like me. Friends with broken homes and druggie parents. Biker kids. Punk rock kids. Nerds, geeks and the throwaways” (Animal Press Liberation Office, 2010) who would “make all kinds of clip art under the name ‘Anti-Statist Counter Culture’” (Black, 2013). In another account, Bond describes everyone he knew at this time as either dealing or using methamphetamine and remarks that he

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8 This incident was concurrent to an arson at the University of Washington.
was “part of a huge social circle in the Denver punk scene” (Animal Press Liberation Office, 2010). Bond dropped out of school after the eighth grade and began a “nihilist lifestyle,” which was marked by being “very reactionary and angry at the whole world, parents, school, and everything” (Black, 2013).

When Bond was 15, he discovered the “Straight Edge” music scene, which he identifies as instrumental to saving his life (Animal Liberation Frontline, 2011; Bond, 2014). Bond states that Straight Edge, “means no drugs, no alcohol, no promiscuity for as long as I live. It furthermore means standing against drug culture and apathy” (Animal Liberation Frontline, 2011). Choosing this lifestyle as a way to rebel against his family, Bond spent most of his adolescence as a drummer for “Defiance of Authority:” a Straight Edge band. When he was 18, Bond relays coming home to find out that his mother, whom he describes as “feral and free,” had left with her third husband to live in the Pacific Northwest; he would not see her for 7 more years (Animal Press Liberation Office, 2010; Bond, 2014; DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2014).

Entry into Crime

Although predated by illegal drug use and low-level vandalism, Bond’s first ideologically-motivated crime was the setting of a pentagram on fire inside a church to protest religion when he was 18 (DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2014). He did not serve any jail time for this act.

When Bond was 19, he began what he describes as a transition to that of an “animal liberation and veganism activist” (Animal Liberation Press Office, 2014; Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2013) as the result of his first official job with Dakota Mechanical. This company was responsible for building two pork production facilities where Bond notes that, “the horrors I witnessed there had a profound effect on me” (Animal Liberation Press Office, 2014). In particular, the bludgeoning of an escaped pig by his coworkers coupled with their ensuing celebration had a powerful influence on this metamorphosis. About this incident, Bond says:

Then came the day that changed me. We were wrapping up all our tools and cleaning up when a hog who had been knocked out with an electric jolt, had his throat stuck, and had been hung upside down to bleed to death woke up, convulsed, and freed himself of the foot-hold. He came running off of the kill floor straight toward me and the rest of the crew. Three IBP workers gave chase. One with a pipe wrench and two with baseball bats. They began to beat the hog to death. I turned away as I thought anyone would… I was wrong. As I turned, I was face to face with the rest of my crew. While listening to the thuds and squeals of a blunt force death a mere 30 feet behind me, I watched as my co-workers whooped and cheered, high-fiving each other each time there was a thud, laughing and celebrating the violent death of a sentient being (Bond, 2010).

Bond stopped eating meat immediately after this incident and eventually transitioned to a vegan. He also observes that he, “went home and began to study Animal Rights” and “worked at
Animal sanctuaries and rescued Animals whenever I could” (Bond, 2010). In his writings, Bond also reflects on his shame that he did not get involved sooner:

I found myself wondering why do we as a “civilized” society allow this to happen. Why did I not personally intervene when I had the chance? Why did it take me several years after bearing witness to this atrocity to seriously begin speaking out and fighting against it? (Bond, 2011).

Bond’s refined ideology became “Straightedge Veganism,” which he describes as, “the first time that doing what’s compassionate and right was presented to me in way that appeared, and well…Dangerous.” Bond states that after the slaughterhouse incident he was, “not interested in ultra pacifist hippie ways of answering all the horrors I had witnessed” (Pieslak, 2014). He conveys that he also became involved with the “Hardline” movement in conjunction with Vegan Straight Edge, which “approached the issues morally and ferociously” (Pieslak, 2014). About this particular movement, Bond says that it was a “fairly holistic and codified world view and way of life” that is “militantly pro-life as it is Vegan and also against all sex outside of that between a man and woman, specifically for pro creative purposes” (Pieslak, 2014).

At 21, Bond moved back to Iowa and became acquainted with one of his two “full-blooded brothers,” Trapper, who was raised separately in Mark’s household (Animal Press Liberation Office, 2010; 2011; Bond, 2014). About Trapper, who would later become an informant for the government, Bond notes:

I had never had a brother before and I loved him with all my heart. I loved him blindly. He would steal from me and I would ignore it. He would lie straight into my face and I would excuse it. My brother was always a master and genius at sensing a person’s emotional vulnerability and using it to his maximum advantage.

Frustrated by Trapper’s methamphetamine addiction and the police’s lack of response, Bond burned down the drug dealer's house (Animal Liberation Press Office, 2010; Bond, 2014). About this incident, Bond states that he, “had been through so much because of other peoples’ (and my own) drug use that I took drastic measures and attacked the source of all this insanity. The dealers themselves” (Animal Liberation Press Office, 2010). He notes that this arson was responsible for the arrest of several dealers and states that his “four years of imprisonment was a small price to pay for such a positive result” (Animal Liberation Frontline, 2011).

During his first incarceration, Bond depicts everyone on the outside as estranged from him out of “self-preservation” (Animal Press Liberation Office, 2010). He became increasingly immersed in “Animal Rights, biocentrism, philosophy, world history, evolution, religion, mythology, law, social justice movements, politics, sociology; anything I could get my hands on that was non-fiction.” This immersion included materials like the book “The Declaration of War: Killing People to Save Animals and the Environment,” (DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2014), which he describes as, “the best book ever written as it pertains to the reality of animal liberation and the tactics that must be employed” (U.S. v. Bond, 2010). This manuscript, ascribed to an anonymous author, has sentiments like “we cannot end hunting, but we can put an end to some hunters” (Husar, 1992). Bond appears to also have been persuaded by the work of Peter Singer, an animal rights activist, and his book, “Animal Liberation” (Office of Intelligence
According to its description, Singer’s work reveals “shocking abuse of animals” and “offers sound and humane solutions;” none of which appear to advocate violence. Bond also references his affection for Abbey’s “The Monkeywrench Gang” and Foreman’s “Confessions of an Eco Warrior” (Pieslak, 2014), which both promote the use of economic sabotage to various targets. Bond has affirmed that, “Some people go to Penn State, I got my education at the State Pen” (Bond, 2010). This included his GED, which he earned while in prison (Bond, 2014).

Bond was released after serving a little more than three years of his sentence (Vaughan, 2014). He returned to Denver, where he began work at a health food store and became even more absorbed with veganism and animal liberation (Animal Liberation Press Office, 2010; Bond, 2014). Bond was heavily involved in “leafleting at shows and in the streets, tabling at Pride events, protesting, or volunteering at animal sanctuaries” (Black, 2013; DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2014). He began “flyering all over Denver” until his “thumb and fingers were blistered” and started a blog to “revise the vegan hardline philosophy” (Bond, 2010). However, he became disheartened when he saw many of these flyers on the ground or when he heard Vegetarians talk about their unwillingness to give up cheese. About his outreach efforts he states:

I came to the conclusion that most people don’t want to change, most people don’t want to learn what’s going on with Animals because they don’t want to feel bad or responsible for it, and most people are not going to sacrifice their time energy or money to make a change. BAM! The facts, welcome to reality! All that was left in my life was to fight back on the Animals behalf of shut up because I was sick of the sound of my own voice (Black, 2013).

Although he did have a small network of close friends and family during this time (Bond, 2010; U.S. v. Bond, 2010), Bond became to view the majority of his peers as uncaring, uncommitted, and inauthentic. He describes one animal rights meeting as a “creepy form of speed dating” full of “intellectual egoism” (Bond, 2010). Specifically, he states:

When it was my turn, I mentioned my stand against “free range,” I was met instantly with eye rolls and rationalizations about it being “a step in the right direction” and “Rome wasn’t built in a day,” even, “I’m Vegan but I am so glad that meat-eaters now have a humane and cruelty-free alternative!” My response was, “I can’t believe I am listening to a group of Vegans promoting animal use!” After this, a huge argument ensued and I left that meet-up determined to expose “free range” and once again educate everyone I could. Only this time with more zeal and vigor than ever (Bond, 2010).

Even Bond’s fellow hardcore and straightedge friends had become to him, “more into practicing dance moves and playing video games than putting their back into their beliefs” (Bond, 2010). He references distancing himself from “the people and the music” and becoming burnt out. About this group, Bond says:
Apparently, the bulk of the straight-edge scene is about collecting records and keeping it to yourself. That and politics, politics, politics. Instead of the primary focus being on animal liberation or drug-free living, it seems that half of straight-edge is about being a Christian, Right-wing American Patriot that resemble a bunch of clean-cut cops with tattoos. Bullying people at hardcore shows and staying dedicated to the “boys only” mentality. While the other half are wanna-be Beatnik, Bohemian anarchists that go ten steps out of their way to be offended about everything, but won’t do anything except philosophize and try to squeeze the words “patriarchal” and “heteronormative” into as many conversations as possible (Bond, 2010).

Bond then had his neck tattooed with the word “vegan,” describing this as a, “life changing event” that “literally changed my personality” and “pushed (him) over the edge” (Black, 2013). Bond also identifies one specific turning point during this time:

For a few months, all I did was work. I was depressed because I felt marginalized and ineffective; I began daydreaming at work about what I would do if I had no fear, nothing to lose. I would be a member of that clandestine underground, I would be an Animal Liberation Front operative. The more I thought about it, the happier I became. Then one day while stalking the potato chip isle at work, it hit me: there’s no time like the present. I quit my job and left my normal life in isle seven of a health food store (Bond, 2010).

In another account, Bond states that his “transformation from a legal activist to a clandestine one came on the day I finally decided that I couldn’t stand one more hollow conversation about ‘The Big Picture of Our Movement’…at this point I quit my job” (U.S. v. Bond, 2010).

**Entry into Terrorism**

Bond’s transformation to a “clandestine activist” became marked by another tattoo; this time, aboriginal artwork was added to half of his face (Bond, 2014). He describes knowing first and foremost that he would work alone as he did not have a peer he “considered up to the challenge” (Bond, 2010; DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2014). This is confirmed by federal law enforcement, which found “no evidence that Bond joined a violent extremist group or associated with violent extremists in conducting his arson attacks” (DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2014). This is despite Bond referencing organized entities like Earth First! as “spectacular” and leaders Dave Foreman and Howie Wolkie described as “pioneers and super effective activists” (Pieslak, 2014). Bond also identifies ALF as a “set of principles and not a group in any organized way” (Pieslak, 2014) and states that “the ALF is any Vegan or vegetarian that harms no life and decides by illegal means to liberate Animals and/or cause economic damage to those that profit from Animal use and abuse” (Bond, 2010). He has also

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9 Bond does describe himself as the one time “Senior Editor of Militant Direct Action” for “Negotiation is Over,” a group started by his friend focused on vivisection. Bond states that this group does not engage in criminal acts and is consequently, “far tamer” than ALF (Pieslak, 2014).
noted that he does not know anyone in ALF, Animal Rights Militia, or Justice Department, but feels solidarity with them (U.S. v. Bond, 2010).  

When choosing targets, Bond was careful to select entities that would allow for maximum damage because he believed the government would call him “a terrorist for breaking a McDonald’s window” (Bond, 2014). To do so, Bond focused on older, more fire-susceptible buildings where the possibility of detection would be less likely. He acknowledges that he learned from other Animal Liberation Front (ALF) actions not to use an incendiary device and was able to get most of the supplies for the arsons from alleys and trashcans (Bond, 2014).

Bond’s official transition to terrorism occurred when he burned down The Sheepskin Factory in Glendale, Colorado on April 30, 2010, resulting in half a million dollars in damages. About this incident, he says:

The day after I burnt down the Sheepskin Factory I felt awesome! Before that action I had so much tension, disenchantment, and activist burnout, and that one act washing it all away. Nothing will ever compare to directly intervening and stopping a grave injustice. I also, all at one, felt in control of my life, perhaps for the first time… I brushed my teeth that morning and looked in the mirror thinking, ‘ I am a member of the Animal Liberation Front,’ just like all my heroes. And every moment after that as long as I was alive, free and continuing my campaign, I was winning (Bond, 2014).

Bond’s next act was the arson of the Tandy Leather Factory in Salt Lake City, Utah on June 5, 2010, which caused around $20,000 in damages (Stettler, 2014). He then targeted a restaurant in Sandy, Utah, leading to $10,000 worth of repairs. Bond then claimed responsibility for the acts on the “Voices of the Voiceless” website, an entity of ALF, as an “ALF Lone Wolf.” Specifically, he posted:

Be warned that making a living from the use and abuse of animals will not be tolerated. Also be warned that leather is every bit as evil as fur, as demonstrated in my recent arson against the Leather Factory in Salt Lake City. Go vegan! (Stettler, 2010).

Interestingly, Bond has been careful to separate out these acts from violence, but also concedes it can be an effective tactic:

For me personally the philosophy of non-violence is not a rigorous dogma to be upheld at all times and in all situations. I personally would never use physical violence against people in the name of any cause, because I am not a violent person and this world is suffering from so much violence already I do not want to add to that. But I do not fault anyone for wanting to keep all available tactics up for

10 Bond does relay his original intentions were for his, “ALF brothers and sisters worldwide (to know) the power of acting alone…one person can accomplish a lot” (Bond, 2010). He claims that others were indeed motivated by his attacks, identifying eight “international underground acts of solidarity” (Black, 2013).
discussion when the issue is the slaughter of billions of innocent lives and the death of Mother Earth (Pieslak, 2014).

In another account, Bond describes himself as “in no way a pacifist,” but again reiterates he would only use violence for defensive purposes (U.S. v. Bond, 2010). After the third arson, Bond became increasingly fatigued. He says that, “the stress of being homeless and ALF campaigns had caught up with (him)” (Bond, 2014). As a result, he told Trapper about the arsons, who then turned him into the FBI for a reward. Bond was sentenced to five years in federal prison and mandated to pay over a million dollars in restitution (InGold, 2014). At his sentencing, the judge received 50 letters of support. Bond remained unrepentant at the time, referring to himself as a “prisoner of war” (InGold, 2011).

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 2 shows the results from the case study as detailed below. As a whole, McGowan’s case was reflective of SSSL main components, especially those regarding the learning processes involved. Interestingly, Bond, despite his role as an atypical case and lone offender, demonstrated many of these elements as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SSSL variable</th>
<th>Akers’ Definition</th>
<th>McGowan</th>
<th>Bond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Structure</td>
<td>Strain/anomie, social disorganization, conflict theories</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Homeless; Family and Employment Instability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differential Social Organization</td>
<td>“Distinguishes one community, region, society, or social system from another.”</td>
<td>Environmental Inequality</td>
<td>Lone Actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differential Association</td>
<td>“Normative and interactive dimensions of the primary and secondary-group relationships and affiliations.”</td>
<td>Girlfriend Savoie; The Family; Coronado</td>
<td>Motivated by Lack of Action by Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>“One’s own attitudes and beliefs, rationalizations, justifications, and definitions of the situation.”</td>
<td>Definitions Favorable to Terrorism</td>
<td>Definitions Favorable to Terrorism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11 (with Sellers, 2004; with Jennings, 2016)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discriminate Stimuli</th>
<th>“Provide cues or signals to the person that this is the right or appropriate time and situation in which to engage in the behavior.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>River Rendezvous</td>
<td>Lone Actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differential</td>
<td>“A balance of rewarding and punishing consequences of behavior, of anticipated or actual consequences of behavior.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcement</td>
<td>Black Bloc; Superior Lumber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opposite as Predicted with Peers; Sheepskin Factory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitation</td>
<td>“Learning by observing others’ behavior.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Clubs</td>
<td>ALF Actions; Internet/Books</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Social Structure Variables**

Interestingly, McGowan’s case study lacks much reference to the traditional social structure component of SSSL. As primarily a middle class, educated, white male, the theoretically defined constructs inherent to social disorganization, strain/anomie, and conflict perspectives are largely missing from his experience. Consequently, differential social location, both within groups and the social structure, are less representative of McGowan’s life.

It could be argued that McGowan’s childhood exposed him to issues of environmental inequality and led to a kind of differential social organization. However, this organization did not directly lead to the mediating constructs of differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation as outlined in Akers’ model. Similarly, and while much of the radical eco-movement’s ideology is based on principles inherent to conflict theory, McGowan’s relative privilege seems to minimize the role of these factors in his own life.

On the other hand, Bond has many of these factors present in his life history narrative. Bond was homeless at times and often lived in poverty, primarily due to his familial instability. He appears to have moved around quite a bit between communities, only first holding a stable job when he was 18. Certainly, constructs present in social disorganization, strain/anomie, and conflict perspectives were present in his experience including residential mobility, a lack of informal social control, a means-ends disparity, and issues with the capitalist economic system.

**Social Learning Variables**

While McGowan’s case study does not adequately reflect the social structure predictors elucidated in Akers’ model, there are several instances of social learning mechanisms. However, and as stated above, these variables do not appear to be mediators caused by structural conditions. Rather, they served as standalone causes of McGowan’s radicalization.
As noted, Bond did have social structure variables present in his life, and it could be argued that such variables provided the context for his radicalization. Nonetheless, Bond’s learning occurred primarily through literature, the previous actions of other terrorists to whom he was unaffiliated, and some internet browsing. In other words, there is no evidence that Bond learned his behavior directly through an association with peers. Instead, he became motivated to act because of what he viewed as his acquaintances’ hypocrisy and non-action, which became especially noticeable to him in several unfruitful “all-the-more Vegan-than-thou” conversations.

Furthermore, and despite maintaining a blog online and communicating with followers, it does not appear that the internet was a large source of peer networks.

**Differential Association.** McGowan’s case study illustrates several elements consistent with SSSL’s construct of differential association throughout both his radicalization and desistance. Before and after his involvement in the arsons, McGowan was surrounded by individuals who held values and behavior that reinforced compliance. McGowan has stated at the time of his sentencing that he was, “incredibly lucky to have the best support network that I have ever seen. That intense support-moral, legal, financial and otherwise-has made all the different to me and it’s why I write today with acceptance of my current situation and with clear conscience” (United States v. McGowan, 2007). This network includes both members of his primary-group, who held morals, attitudes, and ethics supportive of legal behavior, and secondary-group organizations/reference groups, with similar value systems.

The primary-group who had the most influence on McGowan, particularly in regards to his deradicalization and disengagement, is that of his family. McGowan’s father, a law enforcement officer, has indicated that while he never agreed with his son’s philosophies, they still maintained a supportive and loving relationship (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). Letters written on McGowan’s behalf at the time of his sentencing describe him as “loyal brother and son” and a “dedicated uncle” to his niece, who is the child of his sister Lisa (United States v. McGowan, 2007). Lisa served as an especially important influence on McGowan, described in these same letters as having a relationship that is “especially close.” McGowan also lived with his sister, including during his house arrest after she used her own house as collateral. As noted, it was Lisa’s birthday party where McGowan was reminded of the importance of his family and where the initial meeting for his wife, Synan, occurred. Both of these prosocial influences were the impetus for McGowan to move back to New York City, where he maintained a “strong bond” and an “unflagging love” with Synan (United States v. McGowan, 2007). McGowan also appears to have a number of law abiding friends responsible for his compliance during this period. Letters written by those within his primary-group describe him as “the kind of friend I wish everyone could have” and “always available for support and kind words when I am in need of them.” He also credits his friends in Canada as reinforcing the role that legitimate action can have in social change.

It was only when McGowan became increasingly isolated from these types of primary-group relationships, particularly those within his family, that he became a self-described “different person” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). Looking back at this time in his life, McGowan has stated that he wished that he had people who would have guided him to a “different path” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). It is possible that McGowan’s relationship with Coronado, initially through letter writing and then in person, was one of the first of these types of
associations (but we cannot be certain given the aforementioned lack of information regarding this relationship). Coronado, who has served time for several ideologically-motivated acts including arson, has publicly voiced his own justifications and rationalizations (Rietmulder, 2015). However, it was members of the Family (13 of whom he was indicted with) who were most influential to McGowan’s radicalization, starting with their interactions at the WTO Black Bloc. As noted, McGowan has divulged that he was first recruited for the Superior Lumber arson by his girlfriend, Savoie, along with Meyerhof. He has also identified Ferguson as responsible for bringing him into the more radical fringe. Collectively, McGowan associated with individuals who held beliefs supportive of, and disproportionately engaged in, acts of ideologically-motivated crime and terrorism before his involvement in such acts.

Outside of the Family, there were several secondary reference groups and organizations to which McGowan identified. Prior to his radicalization, these included athletics, student organizations, and his high school/collegiate institutions. Social justice and environmental organizations were also instrumental to McGowan’s deradicalization, through again reinforcing the role of legal entities in creating social change. These consist of McGowan’s work at the Rainforest Foundation and Women’s Law, along with his volunteer efforts at RNC Not Welcome and Running down the Walls. Other political and social reference groups did the opposite for McGowan. Although not necessarily promoting a radical ideology, the Wetland Environmental Center served as the starting place for his shift in attitudes and beliefs. Earth First! further reinforced rationalizations and justifications for his illegal, albeit nonviolent behavior.

On the other hand, Bond had few, if any, prosocial primary-group relationships. His father, stepfather, mother, and brother all suffered from drug addiction, with the latter turning him in for reward money. His childhood appears to be marked by instability and abandonment. However, Bond does mention the death of his “beloved grandmother, Gwen” as a significant personal challenge (U.S. v. Bond, 2010). There is also no mention of a partner.

It also appears as if Bond’s secondary reference groups and organizations were primarily prosocial, but had the opposite effect on his offending. As a lone offender, Bond was in part motivated to act by the hypocrisy he saw in these groups and organizations. Thus, Bond does not demonstrate the traditional conceptualization of differential association as predicted.

Definitions and Differential Reinforcement. McGowan’s radicalization demonstrates a progression in definitions to those that became increasingly positive and neutralizing to acts of ideologically-motivated crime and terrorism. Consistent with the premise laid out by SSSL, these definitions were contingent on with whom McGowan was associating. The beginning of this progression shows definitions favorable to activism, established through his interactions with Coronado, the meetings at the Wetlands Center, and perhaps most important, documentaries viewed at this organization. As noted, McGowan says that these films opened his eyes and motivated him to act, while the meetings forced him to work through beliefs on criminal justice. McGowan’s definitions then escalated to those favorable to nonviolent, ideologically-motivated

12 It should be noted that some of McGowan’s relationships, even during the height of his radicalization, could be characterized as positive (e.g. volunteer work in a homeless shelters). Nonetheless, he appeared to be have an excess of definitions favorable to his more radicalized viewpoint.
crime through his interactions with Earth First!. In particular, the River Rendezvous exposed him to the possibility of environmental resistance with his arrest reinforcing his commitment to this end of the spectrum. Although the mine eventually opened, this event appeared to serve as a discriminant stimulus of sorts for McGowan by creating positive associations with this form of activism.

Although not directly involved in the series of visible protests involving controversial police tactics, McGowan notes the importance of these events in his progression of beliefs. Here, we can see the influence of a type of “virtual group” (Akers and Jennings, 2016; Warr, 2002), despite McGowan’s radicalization occurring primarily offline. Namely, the viewing of these protests through mass media led to McGowan’s disillusionment, where his belief in civil disobedience became eroded, motivating him to seek out the more radicalized end of the spectrum. McGowan then began to form rationalizations and justifications for techniques that had not been tried and embraced force as the best avenue for change. His direct viewing of logging trucks in Northern California only served to solidify these beliefs and motivated him to “find a way (to channel his) grief and rage” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011). The Black Bloc was the first way he felt he was able to do so, noting the positive reinforcement he received in creating the extensive damage.13

McGowan’s belief system then transitioned to one that became favorable to acts of extremism and just as quickly, reverted back to those that embraced working within the legitimate system. His differential association with the Family created rationalizations and justifications that were used to neutralize extremist behavior. In particular, McGowan’s participation in the first arson at Superior Lumber and its perceived success as discerned through news coverage of the extensive damage positively reinforced his decision to become more active. Alternatively, the failure of his group in their choice of Jefferson Poplar Farm served as a key event in his desistance, through a form of negative punishment. When it was discovered that the farm did not engage in genetic engineering, positive stimuli like feelings of accomplishment were removed. The removal of this stimuli, coupled with McGowan’s increasing discomfort with the collateral damage resulting from these acts and discussions of more violent tactics, forced him to revisit his philosophy. His visit to Canadian friends who worked in social justice, reminded him of alternatives to extremism hardening his belief that “burning things down (was) futile” (Curry and Hamachek, 2011).

Although not necessarily formulated through close, intimate peer groups in the way SSSL would predict, Bond also had a metamorphosis in his definitions. In response to his drug-addicted family, Bond embraced a conformist lifestyle. This continued until he was overwhelmed by perceived injustices, starting with his brother’s addiction and his frustration with the justice system. Bond then reacted similarly to the treatment of animals brought on by his exasperation with how legitimate peers were complacent toward the issue. In a sense, Bond reacted in the opposite way one would expect with SSSL; with conformity from antisocial peers and with deviance from conformist peers.

13 It is also possible that McGowan’s beliefs were reinforced by the beginning acts of the Family. In particular, the Cavel West meat packing plant, which was responsible for the slaughter of wild horses on public land, was never able to rebuild after it was burnt down by The Family.
It also could be argued that Bond became differentially reinforced by his first action. After the Sheepskin Factory action, we see elements of purpose and accomplishment in his words. In the same vein, his deradicalization comes about as fatigue sets in from the actions coupled with his realization that little ground has been gained from even the most radical of efforts. In many ways, this disillusionment is what overlaps McGowan and Bond the most.

*Imitation.* The process of imitation was present several times in McGowan’s transition from activism to crime to terrorism, and again back to activism. McGowan was first introduced to the former through directly witnessing the behavior of those at Wetlands; namely letter writing and nonviolent protest. He then transitioned to nonviolent illegal behavior following his time at the River Rendezvous, when he accompanied others to participate in his first direct action. Perhaps most illustrative of imitation were the Family’s Book Clubs, which provided training sessions for the diverse skill set needed to carry out the arsons. Similarly, McGowan’s participation in the first arson at Superior Lumber as a lookout allowed him to witness how such skills were applied.

Bond’s offending also had elements of imitation, but again, not in the traditional sense of how SSSL is operationalized. Instead, Bond appears to have learned certain elements of his attacks through previous ALF actions, including what to do and what not to do. Given no peer connections have been established, it is assumed that the mechanism of this learning was via the internet or the previously identified literature. In one account, Bond does acknowledge using the internet to research targets, but it is unclear from where else this information was discerned (U.S. v. Bond, 2010).

**CONCLUSION**

This study sought to explore the applicability of an SSSL framework to terrorist radicalization. As a whole, the social learning, but not traditional social structure processes were well-represented in McGowan’s experience. As such, structural variables did not begin the chain of causality as specified in SSSL. Instead, the learning constructs of differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation appear to have directly influenced McGowan’s transition from an activist to a criminal, a criminal to a terrorist, and from a terrorist back to an activist.

Interestingly for Bond, our comparison case, structural variables were very much present. However, and given his role as a lone offender, these constructs were not responsible for creating definitions favorable to terrorism in ways traditionally predicted by SSSL. Instead, deviant peers appeared to spawn conformity in Bond, while those who were mainly conformist had the opposite effect.

This importance of learning variables to McGowan’s trajectory into and out of extremism is also consistent with many of the perspectives found in the radicalization literature. Specifically, those frameworks that emphasize the significance of close social networks upon individual behavioral outcomes are of particular relevance (McCauley, 1989; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008; Post, 1988; Sageman, 2004). Despite a recent increase in the interest of lone actor behavior in the United States (Gill, Horgan, and Deckert, 2014; Spaaij, 2011), McGowan’s
The case study demonstrates the influence of primary social groups at each stage in his adult life, including fellow extremists, friends, and family, through their central role in shaping norms and thus, influencing behavior. As McGowan became more entrenched within different groups, his views on various tactics shifted to accommodate that of the group, primarily as a reaction to the positive enforcement. These mechanisms were also present during his transition away from illegal extremism after the incident at the Jefferson Poplar Farm. In a dynamic process instigated by an event of profound disillusionment with the group’s strategy of resistance, McGowan eventually reformulated his social network to reflect his newfound stance on legal activism. Such instances of “cycles” of activism to extremism and back to activism are understudied and suffer from a lack of empirical data, but provide a potentially fruitful avenue for future research.

As Bond’s case study demonstrates, however, close social networks and the learning processes associated with them are not necessary conditions for individuals to engage in extremist behavior. In lieu of ideologically aligned pro-social groups, Bond found suitable replacements for close peers through self-guided research on the Internet and with the radical environmentalist movement in the United States more specifically, which maintains a decentralized and largely anonymized organizational structure. Moreover, it is possible that frustration and disillusionment with members of one’s pro-social group for their ambivalence toward a critical political issue may have actually served as a catalyst for more extreme forms of behavior. More research is needed to determine if this dynamic is generalizable to extremists outside of the environmentalist context, or lone actor extremists, or if it is a unique feature of Bond’s radicalization trajectory.

Our findings from McGowan’s case study offer some important insights for counterterrorism policy. First, law enforcement and counterterrorism strategies should not overcommit their resources to countering the threat from lone actors at the expense of disregarding the important role played by peer relationships, both online and in-person. Despite the profound changes the world has undergone in the way it consumes and distributes information through online channels, radicalization to extremism remains a thoroughly social process (Jensen et al., 2016). Second, any counter-extremism policy that seeks to move beyond a simple deterrent ought to incorporate friends, family, and other positive social networks in an effort to build alternative pathways out of extremism. Programs like EXIT-Germany and Hayat, both of which are partners with the German federal government, offer a model in which to inform U.S. counterterrorism programs. Third, the importance of McGowan’s close social ties throughout his radicalization and mobilization raises some serious ethical implications concerning counterterrorism techniques commonly used by law enforcement. Specifically, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is known to rely heavily on confidential informants and in some instances, undercover agents, to enter communities and befriend individuals thought to be at risk of engaging in extremist behavior to gather potentially incriminating evidence (Schreiber, 2001; Ward, 2006; Zimmerman, 1995). Law enforcement agencies need to consider the role of these undercover actors and whether their very presence reinforces some of the SSSL principles, which might accelerate the radicalization process among some individuals.

It should be noted that this study is not without limitations, which can inform future research. The issues with case study research are well-documented (for critiques of case-study research see King, Keohane, and Verba, 1994; Geddes, 2003; for support see Brady and Collier, 2004; George and Bennett, 2005) with most of them concerning external validity. The
experiences of McGowan and Bond could be unique to them and consequently, cannot be
generalized to all extremists. Our study is careful to acknowledge the complexity of the
interpretive issues that go with committing to an ideologically-driven movement and it is
possible that not all relevant processes have been outlined here.

Similarly, and in constructing these case studies, we relied on recent open sources,
including, but not limited to, Twitter, blogs, interviews with various media representing each
offenders’ own reflections, and court documents. Stemming from the limitations associated with
not being able to conduct our own interviews with each subject, we want to acknowledge the
inherent challenges in constructing life-history narratives exclusively from secondary and open
sources. While a cost-effective way of gathering data, such sources, save for directly transcribed
interviews, have already been processed and interpreted by the original author, which raises the
problem of maintaining consistent objectivity throughout the narrative. Another potential risk of
relying on publicly available source material is missing crucial context for certain life events.
Information on internal normative processes within closed groups is central to the theorized
constructs within the SSSL perspective; information that may be absent from open source
accounts. Future researchers seeking to adapt this data collection method ought to consider the
difficulties built into this approach and take appropriate steps to counter any deleterious effects.

Additional studies should continue to examine the radicalization of alternate subjects,
particularly those that adhere to more violent ideologies or those who represent non-protypical
subjects. It could also be that social structural elements have a more discernable impact with
these types of offenders. Relatedly, additional quantitative research is needed to examine
whether SSSL is representative of the larger extremist population. The newly released PIRUS
dataset offers promise for this trajectory of research. Ultimately, evidenced-based
counterterrorism policy cannot be considered as such without the presence of robust, empirical
research.

As the current administration continues to strip environmental regulation and groups like
the Antifa become more and more active, left-wing terrorism may very well witness a resurgence
in the United States. This pattern would fit with the cyclical nature of movements, often affected
by larger, macro-level forces. Studies like this one are imperative to understanding these forces,
and ultimately, countering, this behavior.

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THE EMERGENCE OF VIOLENT NARRATIVES IN THE LIFE-COURSE TRAJECTORIES OF ONLINE FORUM PARTICIPANTS

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Abstract

Online discussion forums have been identified as an online social milieu that may facilitate the radicalization process, or the development of violent narratives for a minority of participants, notably youth. Yet, very little is known on the nature of the conversations youth have online, the emotions they convey, and whether or how the sentiments expressed in online narratives may change over time. Using Life Course Theory (LCT) and General Strain Theory (GST) as theoretical guidance, this article seeks to address the development of negative emotions in an online context, specifically whether certain turning points (such as entry into adulthood) are associated with a change in the nature of sentiments expressed online. A mixed methods approach is used, where the content of posts from a sample of 96 individuals participating in three online discussion forums focused on Islamic issues is analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively to assess the nature and evolution of negative emotions. The results show that 1) minors have a wider range of sentiments than adults, 2) adults are more negative overall when compared to minors, and 3) both groups tended to become more negative over time. However, the most negative users of the sample did not show as much change as the others, remaining consistent in their narratives from the beginning to the end of the study period.

Keywords: radicalization; negative emotions; sentiment analysis; online discussion forums; turning points.

INTRODUCTION

In an exclusive interview with CNN on December 21, 2015, Abu Hurriya – a former self-proclaimed "chief propagandist for Al Qaeda in the United States" (Cohen & Goldschmidt, 2015, para.11) – admitted “he was once a lost, angry young man (a "seeker") who went through the radicalization process, just as young people are going through it today”. According to Harriya, who was speaking to the effects of the Internet as a recruitment tool, “I can understand how

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[youth] can get to that point. They're young and vulnerable” (Cohen & Goldschmidt, 2015, para.12). Before entering into the radicalization phase, Hurriya states he was lost and angry. It is this emotional state of anger and frustration (as well as the strain from feeling lost) that appear to be a critical aspect of a youth’s decision to seek out other like-minded individuals who could make them feel connected.

The role of the Internet in the process of radicalization is the object of an increasing amount of scholarship (for a recent review, see Ducol, Bouchard, Davies, Ouellet, & Neudecker, 2015; Neumann, 2013; Ryan, 2007). Many of the most informative studies use cases of known terrorists and look back through their trajectories, the way Hurriya did above, to find whether or how the Internet played a role in the process. The inherent sample selection bias of those studies (i.e., only confirmed terrorists are selected) is usually compensated by the benefits of studying a subpopulation of individuals who moved from radical ideas to actual violent acts. A complementary, but rarely investigated aspect of this issue is to look at a much broader set of individuals and their online involvement, even before any traces of radicalization are present. In other words, we still lack a detailed understanding of the nature of the conversations that young individuals have online, and the emotions they seem to convey. Negative emotions, or manifestations of frustration, have been associated with the development of violent and extreme ideas (Fredrickson, 2004), but have also been an integral predictor of violent criminal behavior and delinquency more generally, via General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992). Thus, it becomes necessary to understand whether frustration and anger can be captured in the online setting both qualitatively and quantitatively and whether it is possible to assess its evolution over time.

Drawing from Life Course Theory (LCT) and General Strain Theory (GST), the current study will seek to address the development of negative emotions in the online context, specifically, whether certain turning points, such as entry into adulthood, are associated with a change in sentiment expressed online. The case study selected for analysis is a series of online discussion forums frequented by English speaking Muslim youth. This group of youth was chosen as they have faced, more so than other groups, a tumultuous period where a specific interpretation of their religion has been associated with terrorist activities. The vast majority of youth analyzed were not reporting any activities that could be associated with radicalization. Instead, the presence of frustration, as expressed in these youths’ narratives online, was examined with a focus on changes associated with the transition to adulthood. Thus, the current study is not a study of radicalization but can inform such literature indirectly – through an examination of the range of sentiments expressed by youth online.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

On average, youth between the ages of eleven and eighteen tend to devote about eleven hours a day exposing themselves to electronic media and overall social networking sites (Shapiro and Margolin, 2014). The psychosocial impact this amount of time spent using electronic forms of media is having on adolescents today has yet to be fully understood, especially in relation to individual maturation process (Ducol et al., 2015; Shapiro and Margolin, 2014).

The general topic of youth development in the more traditional offline context has been thoroughly researched by scholars and practitioners in various fields including, but not limited to, psychology (Cassell, Huffaker, Tversky, and Ferriman, 2006), criminology (Loeber, 1990; Donker, Smeenk, and van der Laan, 2003), psychiatry (Guan and Subrahmanyam, 2009),
Regardless of the discipline, a common theme that emerges seems to be the importance, and significance, of transitioning into adulthood (or developing throughout the general time period of late teens/early twenties) on youth behaviour (Cernkovich and Giordano, 2001). The emergence of the Internet has brought with it new complications and facets for youth development, with some academics suggesting this new phenomenon to be detrimental to the maturation process (Guan and Subrahmanyam, 2009), and others promoting its ability to “enrich and extend life experiences” (Berson and Berson, 2005, p.29); but most believing the Internet to serve both positive and negative roles (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008). One facet that most academics will agree upon is that of youth vulnerability in the online setting (Ryan, 2007; Berson and Berson, 2005; Young, 1998; McKenna and Bargh, 2000). According to Berson and Berson (2005), “the permeation of the Internet into the lives of youth can expose them to information with questionable legitimacy, ideas that can be contrary to positive behaviors, and messages that are intended to manipulate their actions or beliefs” (p. 30).

While the risk factors for youth engaging in online interactions and activities have been relatively well researched and documented (Ryan, 2007; Berson and Berson, 2005; Young, 1998; McKenna and Bargh, 2000), the developmental aspects of youth maturation (transitioning from adolescence into adulthood) have yet to be comprehensively examined in relation to the online setting. Additionally, some discuss the effects of Internet exposure on youth development offline – specifically that of online pornography negatively impacting adolescent sexual development (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2005), as well as online risk factors more generally (Guan and Subrahmanyam, 2009) – but do not address the extent to which youth development can be manifested online. Thus, the current study will seek to fill this gap in the literature by drawing focus to individual development over time, online.

**Strain, Life Course Transitions, and Online Sentiment Trajectories**

To understand how frustration and anger can potentially be related to violent behavior, we turn to Robert Agnew’s General Strain Theory (GST) for guidance. Anger is a core emotion for GST and is considered by Agnew (1992) to be a key factor in the development of criminal behavior (Froggio, 2007). Anger is said to be a result of experiencing subjective strain whereby negative emotions accumulate, and feelings of intense negativity are produced. It is important to note, however, that the extent to which a negative emotion is experienced (if at all), is highly dependent on the individual and their attributes. For some, an emotion such as anger has the ability to "increase the individual's level of perceived injury, create a desire for revenge, motivate action and lower inhibitions" (Froggio, 2007, p.389), and has been said to result from underlying feelings of intense frustration and aggression (Berkowitz, 1989; Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). Thus, it becomes important to understand the extent to which extreme negativity is taking place in online forums, as this negativity may reflect the development of frustration, anger, and even violence.

Our study specifically examines the transition of minors entering into adulthood, which can be particularly stressful for many youth, both in their academic and personal lives. The ability to take on a new role as an adult, make your own choices and live your life however you please (without the direct interference of parents/authority figures), brings with it the inevitable experiencing of new stressors (Agnew,1997). Agnew (1997) makes note of the vulnerability accompanying the years of adolescence, since the cognitive capabilities are in the process of
developing, but have yet to fully form – meaning, youth have a limited ability to see the ‘bigger picture’ and fully comprehend the situations they find themselves in. This inability to manage (or form effective coping strategies) and identify the source of stressful situations is considered by Agnew (1997) to be an additional strain on the youth, and allows the individual to experience negative emotions – the least of which are frustration and anger (Froggio, 2007, p.411).

Over the years, the manner in which the radicalization process is understood has changed and developed to include both offline and online factors. Sampson and Laub’s Life Course Theory (LCT), emphasizes the importance of two fundamental concepts: trajectories and transitions. Trajectories are synonymous with individual pathways throughout the lifespan, developing and changing based on various transitions and turning points. Transitions, as defined by Elder (1985), "are marked by specific life events that are embedded in trajectories and evolve over shorter time spans" (Sampson and Laub, 1993, p.254). These transitions are predominantly age-graded – life events such as entrance into high school or university, marriage, parenthood, sickness, and or death; although, age may not always be a factor as the timing of one's life events may be early or late.

The current study seeks to better understand the emergence and development of extreme negativity in the online setting. Part of that task requires a deeper understanding of the various pathways and extraneous factors that may influence an individual’s sentiment trajectory. The impact certain life events, or transitions, can have on a life trajectory is supported by Sampson and Laub’s (1990) study on transitions into adulthood, and the social ties associated with it – specifically in relation to university education, marriage, and job stability.

Sampson and Laub (1990) stipulate that social bonds developed in adulthood seem to have a significant effect on modifying (or reducing) criminal and deviant behaviour during adolescence. While youth tend to age out of certain life behaviors and mentalities, the same cannot necessarily be said for that of negativity (or negative affect). Literature to date is mixed on this topic, with some studies suggesting negative affect to increase with age (Ferring and Filipp, 1995), others finding support for a decrease in negative affect over time (Mroczek and Kolarz, 1998 ;), and several reporting no changes at all (Smith and Baltes, 1993).

**AIM OF THE STUDY**

The current study will employ several concepts drawn from LCT and GST to address the development of negative emotions in the online context – specifically whether entry into adulthood is associated with a change in the nature of sentiments expressed online. The research question will be answered via a mixed methods approach. The extent to which individuals vary in their sentiment over time will be determined quantitatively via the use of a sentiment analysis software that attributes specific scores to narratives from the extremely positive to extremely negative (Kennedy, 2012). After graphing each user’s sentiment trajectory, those who display significant peaks or drops in their trends will be extracted for further analysis, in addition to those displaying extreme negativity of a consistent nature. The content of user posts during these peaks and/or drops in sentiment will be analyzed qualitatively to extract the themes emerging from their online narrative over time – themes related to turning points and life transitions, most notably that of entrance into adulthood. Finally, the connection between the quantitative and qualitative analysis of user posts will be examined.
DATA AND METHODS

Forum Selection
Since the events of September 11 2001, young Muslims have learned to develop their identity in a society that typically associates their religion with major terrorist events around the world. For this reason, three forums both open to the public and focused on Islam-related issues were selected: Islamic Awakening (IA), Shia Chat, and Ummah. Although the study aims are broader, known terrorists have also named Islamic Awakening as a forum they frequent (Berger, 2011). The research was purely non-participant observation: a public forum was used (no password or login needed), and we did not intervene in any of the conversations. We also anonymized user pseudonyms for this paper.

Data Collection
Data was collected using a software MITS Crawler, which is a custom-created web-crawler designed in part to capture the content posted to openly accessible discussion forums. The software captures information from a user-selected forum by downloading all its webpages, parsing the page apart with the use of forum-specific ‘rules’ to capture all the useful information present on the forum, then storing it in a corresponding database. The database is designed to resemble the structure inherent to discussion forums and is navigated in the same way: each forum has many sub-forums, which in turn have many threads of discussion, each with at least one post. The result is a collection of copied forums that, if possible, are updated daily with the new posts from the original discussion forum.

User Selection
Given limited time and resources, we introduced several restrictions to select the sample for analyses. First, we restricted our analyses to forum users associated with a single country (Canada), allowing us to partially control for the variety of socio-political contexts experienced by the international crowd encountered on the forums. Second, we divided our sample in two, to compare a subsample of users who started on the forum during their adolescence with others who started as adults.

Users were selected from all three forums (Islamic Awakening, Shia Chat, and Ummah) in varying ways, as each forum presented unique restrictions surrounding the ability to search for members, determine their age, or establish current/previous geographic location. Shia Chat was the most liberal with their privacy settings, allowing for members to be identified based on geographic location, or even simple keyword searches (such as “Canada”, “Canadian”, “Cana”, “West”, etc.). In addition, Shia Chat had a sub-forum entitled “Introduce Yourself Here!” whereby thousands of members introduced themselves, commonly revealing detailed sociodemographic information – including real name, age, current geographic location, birth location, relationship status, and other personal information. Manual analysis (i.e., reading through the threads and individual comments) allowed for over 250 users to be identified and extracted for consideration in the initial stages of the study.

The Islamic Awakening and Ummah websites were slightly more challenging to navigate, as both forums restricted their privacy settings to the extent of being unable to search for/view members based on keywords or variables. For these forums, the MITS Crawler was employed to search for users based on specific keywords (identifying their Canadian tie and
approximate age). Based on the information extracted by the crawler, it became feasible to estimate the ages of the individuals in question by examining the content of the posts being made. For example, some individuals overtly stated their ages, making it possible to deduce the age while taking into consideration the date (year) in which the post was made. Others posted information pertaining to their grade or year in high school or university, or birthdays they had recently celebrated. When the age was not specifically stated by the user, it became necessary to corroborate information (like an individual being in the first year of university) with additional information found on the same individual (like another user wishing them a "happy birthday", or other statements made concerning an age bracket).

Of all users identified and extracted in the preliminary stages of the study, a total of 96 individuals who either self-identified themselves as Canadians or had mentioned living in Canada at one point in their lives, were sampled from these forums. Forty-eight (50%) of these individuals started on their forum before the age of 19 - they were considered the sample of "minors." Forty-eight Canadian minors and forty-eight Canadian adults (as a control group) were sampled from the forums IslamicAwakening, Shia Chat, and Ummah. All users sampled were required to meet the following criteria: 1) be on the forum for at least 12 months 2) have at least 100 posts. The 96 users in the sample were the only ones fitting these criteria. Additionally, those who were considered minors were required to meet the following criteria: 1) they needed to be under the age of 18 at first post, and 2) active on the forum through the transition into adulthood; whereas those who were considered adults needed to be over the age of 18 at first post.

**Variable Selection**

The variables “years on forum”, “number of posts”, “age at join”, and “age today” were extracted for individual users (based on profile details made available by each forum), and calculated so as to compare and contrast between the minors and adults groups. “Age at join” was extracted either directly from the forum (if available), or searched for using a keyword search via the MITS Crawler. “Age today” was simply a calculation of “age at join” plus the appropriate years to reach 2015 (time of capturing data).

**Post Selection**

Posts for each user sampled were extracted through the MITS Crawler. The posts were then used to conduct sentiment analysis and average sentiment scores per 6-month time periods of analysis. In total 282,411 posts were extracted and analyzed. The time period whereby posts and users were extracted from each forum was between 2002 and 2015 inclusive (14 years). The year 2002 was chosen as a start date since this was the year Shia Chat opened as a public forum and was the earliest date from which users and posts could be extracted.

For both minors and adults, the majority of users originated from ShiaChat, followed by Ummah, and IA. For adults, however, Ummah forum members seemed to be more active, on average, than those found on the other two forums. Approximately 68.76% (or 33/48) minors continued to post after they became an adult.

A sample of posts was subjected to qualitative analysis. The online MITS crawler, alongside manual searching, was used to search for keywords and phrases in individual user trajectories to determine transitions the user already entered into (such as adulthood or university), and transitions they were currently entering into. Transitioning into adulthood was
defined as turning 19 years of age, and entering into university was determined by the user explicitly stating their involvement in, and the start of, university. In doing so, keywords such as "university", "school", "age", "birthday" (and many others), were searches for with the crawler. Qualitative coding (and analyzing) of individual posts occurred for each user, within 6-month intervals – to match that of the quantitative, sentiment analysis. A random sample of posts during this time period was analyzed, making sure to identify any turning points and transitions.

**Sentiment Score**

Sentiment score is a measure that quantifies the emotionality and positivity/negativity of content. This measure provides a quantitative understanding of the content of information being found in online forums – specifically, the extent to which positive and negative sentiment is present. The sentiment analysis program producing the score aims to automatically extract the emotions or attitude of a text, or narrative, and assign a value that ranges from the ‘negative’ to the ‘positive’ (Kennedy, 2012). For example, a word such as “love” might incur a positive sentiment score of 20 (approximation), whereas a word such as “hate” might incur a sentiment score of -20 (approximation).

SentiStrength is a computer program that analyzes scripts of sentiment (verbal discourse) and attributes a score to each word based on a polarized scale of positive to negative connotations associated with each word (Kennedy, 2012). This program has a built-in dictionary whereby every word has a pre-determined score of positivity or negativity, and as such, will average out the sentiment score for the portion of data being examined. Text analysis is incredibly useful at both the micro and macro level as it allows for “thousands of posts [to] be sifted [through] and wider trends and dynamics [to] be discovered” (Neumann, 2013, p.450). Individual sentiment scores were determined for each post collected over the years spent on the forum, averaged into one score per 6-month time periods of analysis (first 6 months in the year, and second 6 months in the year), and then sorted by date in order to plot these points on a chart and examine the trend in sentiment over time.

**Analytic Strategy**

The current study uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to track the evolution of sentiments over time. The analysis proceeded in two main steps: 1) Before/After analysis of sentiments using SentiStrength; and 2) Analysis of sentiment consistency by individual, drawing from qualitative analysis of individual narratives. A final, secondary step is to compare the individuals deemed most negative from the quantitative analysis of sentiments to those deemed to have the most violent narratives from the qualitative analysis.

The goal of before/after analysis is to better understand the extent to which user sentiment trends develop over time, specifically whether or not the transition into adulthood encourages a change in sentiment (whether that be an increase in positivity, an increase in negativity, or neither). For the users who started as minors, the before/after analysis will test whether there is a statistically significant difference between a minors sentiment scores during their youth (before-19 years old) compared to their sentiment scores after they turn into an adult (after-19).

For comparison purposes, the adults group will be examined as well. Since this group does not have the turning point of adulthood (as they began on their forum as an adult), their first 50% of posts will be compared to their second 50%. A Paired Sample T-test will be conducted
on 33 minors who had both before and after sentiment scores, as well as the 48 adults with their first/last 50 percent of sentiment scores.

Sentiment ranges were generated for each minor (n=48) and adult (n=44), and then the median determined from the list of ranges (minors median=4.95; adults median=8.32). By using the median (and not the mean, which was overly impacted by outliers), it was possible to differentiate between consistent and inconsistent trends in this sample. The adults group had four individuals who did not possess enough data points to generate a range; thus, the total number of adults used for the current analysis was 44.

To determine the sentiment trajectory, the median range of sentiment per individual was used. If an individual's range fell outside this standard number (4.95 for minors, 8.32 for adults), then it could be understood that their sentiment scores were varying to a degree that would classify their trajectories as being "inconsistent". If an individual's range fell within this standard number, then it could be inferred that the individual had a somewhat "consistent" trajectory.

The qualitative component of the current study employed directed content analysis as a coding technique. This qualitative coding scheme was chosen for its ability to best interpret and reveal meaningful information from the data examined. Directed content analysis begins with a theory or findings established from prior research, allowing the coding to be guided as per the pre-established direction of the theory/research (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

While LCT traditionally measures rates and trajectories of crime and delinquency over the life course, the current study substitutes these variables for that of negativity and positivity in the content of their online posts. We approached this analysis with the assumption that certain transitions and turning points may be associated with changes in the levels of negative discourse online. We sought to analyze users’ narrative to investigate the presence of frustration and negative emotions. In doing so, we paid particular attention to the consistency and inconsistency displayed by individual users, were we able to perceive distinct changes in tone and content over time.

All users who displayed sentiment trajectories that were considered to be above the sample average for negativity were considered for further qualitative analysis, after which content analysis was conducted to identify turning points evident in each user's online trajectory, as well as their effect on individual sentiment trends. Only those displaying negativity in their sentiment trajectory were considered since the current study sought to address the development of negative emotions in the online context, as opposed to positive emotions – a limitation for the study. Furthermore, qualitative analysis allowed for former classifications (based on sentiment trends) to be assessed.

The online MITS crawler was used to search for keywords and phrases in individual user trajectories. Based on the posts observed throughout the year under examination, it was possible to determine transitions the user already entered into (such as adulthood or university), and transitions they were currently entering into, through manually searching for keywords/events within all of their posts. Analyzing these turning points was conducted through manually reading user posts over the course of their time on each forum to identify appropriate timing and determine levels of negative speech in relation to said turning point and transition. In some instances, working retrospectively based on statements made in future posts was required. The following two turning points/transition were determined and considered relevant for examination: entrance into adulthood and entrance into university.
Qualitative coding (and analyzing) of individual posts occurred for each user, within 6-month intervals. A random sample of posts during this time period was analyzed, making sure to identify any turning points and transitions. Furthermore, additional important factors such as the development of interests/opinions and beliefs, the number of posts exhibiting frustration or anger throughout time on the forum, and any other key information (posts) that may have been of interest and relevant to the study were recorded. Once all information was collected, it was possible to qualitatively understand the development of user sentiment over time by contextualizing statements (or posts) made by each user. In some instances, it was necessary to retrospectively read through the thread to gain a better understanding of the post made by the user under analysis – in other words, understanding the true nature of the post based on context (a factor that is unable to be accurately accounted for by SentiStrength).

RESULTS

To begin, the sample of minors and adults are compared. An independent samples T-test was conducted to determine whether or not statistically significant differences could be found between the two groups (Table 1).

First, the variables “years on forum” (14 years on average) and “number of posts” present similar numbers for both minors and adults, suggesting consistency between the two groups. These similarities imply that potential differences in sentiments between the two groups would not necessarily be explained by these variables. Second, as expected given the research design, age at which they joined the forum, and their age today were significantly different.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Descriptive Statistics – MINORS &amp; ADULTS</th>
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<td>MINORS</td>
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<td>Years on Forum</td>
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**MINORS & ADULTS**

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<th></th>
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<td>27.2</td>
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*a* Welch’s t-test used (equality of variance not assumed), comparing minors and adults; *p<.01

**Quantitative Sentiment Analysis**

Each user was attributed an overall sentiment score based on the average of all sentiment scores calculated by post. Descriptive statistics were run on these overall sentiment scores for both minors and adults – see Table 2. As can be seen, adults appear to be significantly more negative overall, when compared to minors, in their sentiment scores (minors mean = -1.1; adults mean = -1.9). The most negative (overall) averaged sentiment score for the minors was -26.28, and -14.50 for adults. The most positive (overall) average sentiment score for the minors was 2.85, and 4.63 for adults. On average, minors vary more in their sentiment (minors range = 29.14; adults range = 19.14), presenting a wider range of emotions, when compared to adults. The difference that was found to be statistically significant at the .05 level.

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<th>Range</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<td>29.14</td>
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<td><strong>Adults</strong></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>19.14</td>
<td>-14.50</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>-1.8902</td>
<td>3.29035</td>
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</table>

*a* Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U Test used (null hypothesis rejected).

**Before/After Analysis**

For the minors, the before/after analysis tested whether there was a statistically significant difference between a minors sentiment score before they turned into an adult (before-19) compared to their sentiment score after they turn into an adult (after-19). For the adults, we divided the before and after as the first 50% of posts, compared to the last 50%. We also examined the first 50% versus the last 50% of posts made by minors to determine whether differences could also be found with adults when using this alternative definition.

Figure 1 display the overall (averaged) sentiment scores before and after the cut points described above. It can be seen that the overall sentiment scores for minors before turning 19 were significantly less negative than scores found after turning 19 – suggesting an increase in negativity after transitioning into adulthood. Similarly, the first 50% of sentiment scores (overall) for adults were significantly less negative than those of the second 50% - suggesting an increase in negativity throughout their time on the forum.
Only 33 minors had both before and after 19 sentiment scores, as 15 individuals stopped posting before they entered into adulthood. The difference before (-1.16) and after (-2.9) turning 19 was not found to be statistically significant at the p<.05 level (p=.08) (see Table 3). A larger sample size may produce results closer to statistical significance. These results are suggestive of a difference, but the lack of significance warrants caution.

For the minors group, the first fifty percent of posts were averaged up and compared to the second fifty percent of posts, for all 48 users. As the variables were not normally distributed, a nonparametric test was employed to compare the sentiments expressed in the first and second half of each user’s posts (the related samples Wilcoxon signed rank test) – see Table 3. The same technique was used for the sample of adults (n=48). There was no statistically significant difference between the first 50 percent of sentiment scores (mean=-1.07) and the second 50 percent of sentiment scores (mean=-1.17) at the p<.05 level for the minors group, suggesting relative consistency in speech patterns, and sentiment over time. This finding reinforces the interpretation that entrance into adulthood may be a significant turning point for this sample of youth, enough to affect the nature of the sentiments they express online.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Descriptive Statistics &amp; Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test Results – MINORS &amp; ADULTS with 50/50 sentiment scores</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>n</strong></td>
<td><strong>Min.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MINORS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>First_50%</td>
<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sec_50%</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For adults, we did find a statistically significant difference at the p<.05 level between the first 50 percent of sentiment scores (mean=-1.50) and the second 50 percent of sentiment scores (mean=-2.29). The earlier posts of forum participants tended to be less negative than the most recent ones we examined.

**Qualitative Analysis**

Individuals displaying above-average negativity in their sentiment trends were extracted for further examination. In doing so, user sentiment trends were classified as being either consistent or inconsistent, with consistent trends being broken down into the following sub-groups: ‘consistent / negative,’ ‘consistent / positive,’ and ‘consistent / neutrality.’ Using qualitative analysis, we were able to further examine these trends by reading individual posts to confirm trend accuracy or provide alternate conclusions.

Of the 48, 25 minors were considered to possess inconsistent sentiment trends (outside the average group range of 4.95). Similarly, 23 minors were considered to possess consistent trends, with nine displaying positive overall linear trends, five displaying negative overall linear trends, and nine displaying neutral overall trends.

Of the 48, 22 adults were considered to possess inconsistent sentiment trends (outside the average group range of 8.32). Similarly, 22 adults were considered to possess consistent trends, with two displaying positive overall linear trends, seven displaying negative overall linear trends, and thirteen displaying neutral overall trends.

Minors were considered for further qualitative analysis if they met the following criteria: remained on the forum during transition into adulthood (n=33); presented either inconsistent trends, or consistently negative trends (n=30); displayed a change in sentiment (negative change) via their trajectory within 1 year before and 1 year after turning 19 (n=21). Thus, the final number of minors examined was 21. Adults were considered for further qualitative analysis if they met the following criteria: met the required amount of time periods to generate a range (n=44); presented either inconsistent trends, or consistently negative trends (n=29); displayed a change in sentiment (specifically negative change) via their trajectory within 1 year before and 1 year after their half-way mark on the forum (n=22). Thus, the final number of adults examined was 22.

Based on the quantitative findings of the current study, it was determined that the minors, on average, exhibited a statistically significant change in sentiment scores before and after transitioning into adulthood (at age 19). Similarly, the quantitative findings for adults revealed a statistically significant change in sentiment scores (on average) before and after the halfway mark of their time on the forum. While there did not appear to be any obvious consistencies
regarding posting behavior (frequency of posts and sentiment of posts) and time spent on the forum surrounding this transition, two main themes were discovered nonetheless. The following section will contextualize and further elaborate on the possible impact of this turning point for minors, as well as the development (or lack-there-of) of sentiment occurring online for the adults. The group of adults presented identical themes to that of the minors – with differing examples and numbers of individuals found in each theme.

Theme 1 – Consistency in Narrative (for the most negative/radical individuals). Minors and adults who showed consistency in their narratives were the most negative, and sometimes violent in their speech, but did not develop into (or out of) this type of online behavior as they transitioned into adulthood. Instead, these individuals tended to remain constant in their narratives over time. Even though they were not necessarily “well-received” by others online – as their posts sometimes appeared to be too extreme for the majority of users to accept – these users did remain on the forum, discussing with others and networking (forming both negative and positive relationships with others).

While the sentiment trajectory for the following users was originally classified as being inconsistent, it is important to note that the peaks or drops in 6-month data points (given the trajectory classification of being inconsistent) occurred during sudden decreases in posting behavior. Thus, there would not have been enough posts to average a sentiment score reflective of a consistent trend. Furthermore, all the users were found to be predominantly negative in their sentiment trajectories.

While not the most negative or radical of the users examined, the following individuals displayed consistently negative sentiment scores throughout their time online (regardless of sentiment trends that might have suggested otherwise) as a result of discussing/debating issues pertaining to religion, political affairs in the Middle East and the West, and the variation of appropriate cultural norms between the Middle East and the West. A large portion of the most negative posts can be attributed to news articles that were copied and pasted into a comment – specifically discussing these three topics.

USER M-11

User M-11 was chosen for his consistent rhetoric regarding the nature of Al Qaeda, terrorism, and Islam. While he does not express support for extremism, his sentiment trend was consistently negative as a result of the topic discussed, and words used.

Before-19: “I know that Islam doesn’t support terrorism. Al Qaeda are deranged, these are the same kind of people that would behead their daughters if they accidentally showed their face, you can’t expect rational thinking from them. If they really want to protect muslim lands, they should fight man to man with foreign troops on their lands, not fly overseas and blow up innocent people who have nothing to do with any of that [Edited Out] and just want to live their lives and make a living.”

After-19: “I think wahabis/salafis are a bigger enemy of Islam because they’re an enemy from within.”
USER A-33

This adult user considered himself to be a "loose Salafi", frequently quoting the works of Anwar al-Awlaki, arguing with others online (most notably another minor sampled in the current study), and somewhat "security-aware." User A-33 was not necessarily extreme in his sentiment, as he was quite eloquent in his writings, but was clearly attempting to sway the minds of individuals online – most likely as a result of his age (45 at start – oldest in the sample). He started off confident, did not sway in his opinions, and eventually became an Ummah moderator. The following quotes represent various time points throughout his trajectory online – from start to finish:

“My source is the Taliban themselves, the Mujahideen themselves, a 11 part Jihad lecture which talk about everything by Anwar Al Awlaki”.

“Hereafter Series by Anwar Al Awlaki. I recommend every muslim give it a listen. Life and times of Umar ibn khattab by anwar al awlaki is a great series”.

“I respect Anwar Al Awlaki rahimullah because he spoke about it heavily then actually did it” [referring to hijra, or the migration or journey of the Islamic prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina].

Re: security awareness: “I don’t think anyone should be putting up contact information up on public forum.”

The subsequent examples are of users (one minor and one adult) who displayed extreme, even radical, posting behavior from entrance into the forum – throughout the transition into adulthood, and past the halfway mark – until exiting the forum.

USER M-44

Even though User M-44 began on the forum at age 18, the majority of his posts could be found during this before-19 phase. It seems as if this particular user differed from all the rest in the sense that he immediately began posting (and engaging in) discussion topics of a more negative, even radical, nature from the moment he joined the forum. User M-44 acted as an "instigator," posting extremely negative, even violent statements. User M-44 appeared to be fanatical from day one on the forum – character traits which did not develop over time. He remained extremely negative until his last post on the forum (in 2011, 8 years). He also exhibited the traits of superiority and unwavering confidence in his person, religion, beliefs, and culture:

“We Shias are superior muslims…and we are knowledgeable and mature. In Shiaism we think that religion comes first and then world. Well you Christians & Jews aren’t even true with ur religion. drinking alcohol and eating pigs makes u mean and u cant think out of ur world.. We are waiting for the mesiah whose name is Mehdi and he will come and inshallah destroy Satan America & Satan Israel.. Inshallah he will behead u MARINE BASTA*DS one day.”

These types of users were not well received by others, especially User M-44. As such, responses from others on the forum were of concern and sometimes fear. Many of these responses could be attributed to the extremely negative, and often violent personal poems and chants that User M-44 wrote and posted on the forum. These poems and chants consisted of topics pertaining to martyrdom, killing, vengeance, hatred, terrorism, and the “Great Satans”: America and Israel.
From the beginning of his time online, User M-44 stated his fervent beliefs in Islam and what he considered to be "acceptable" religious/cultural behaviors that one should partake in if they consider themselves a "follower." These activities/behaviors consist of, but are not limited to: refraining from listening to music; practicing Zanjeer – hitting oneself on the back with a chain of blades (Zanjeerain); living in an Islamic state; getting married before age 18; being a pious wife (for women); and acquiring military training (for male Shia Muslims).

“I ordered the Zanjeerain which were made on special order and...they came through regular mail from Pakistan and it didn't get caught in customs. I live in Canada and it is very difficult to do zanjeer matam here.”

“Salam, if anyone commit these heinous crimes so he should be handed to death or beheading squad. Anyway the solution to this is to impose Islamic Govt (not puppet one). Get children married when they are 18.”

“I think every shia must have a Military Training. They must know how to use the gun. I know how to use Ak47 and 9 MM. I am planning to experience grenade throwing, bottle bomb throwing, RPG firing soon when I go to Pakistan next year.”

In addition to stating these behaviors as a responsibility of all Muslims following Allah, User M-44 wrote his articles supporting physical action, posting them to the forum, in an attempt to motivate others to become inspired towards the Jihad. Some of these articles received fairly positive responses of encouragement and support.

“The reason our Imam is disappointed from us is because we are just replying to his call of help emotionally but not physically.”

“The conclusion of this article is we should participate in protests which are against the US, Israel, Britain and there Allies. This is the only way I see that we can answer Imam Hussain call emotionally and practically.”

User M-44 displayed a fervent and unwavering desire to become a martyr, and for others to learn how they too could engage in martyrdom. Throughout the users’ time on the forum, this theme of a passion for martyrdom was the most constant. As can be seen in the proceeding sub-section for User M-44, there is supposedly a long line of martyrs in his family (back in Pakistan) – hence his desire to be a martyr.

“Salam, My one wish that I wish come true is that I get shahadat or martyrdom. I wanna get extreme martyrdom which is that my body gets into so many pieces that no one could recognize me..... I know people will now call me extremist... If you really wanna know how you can get shahadat so plz read the biography of Allama Shaheed Arif Hussain Al Hussaini and Shaheed Dr. Mohd Ali Rahimi......... Newayz I am not afraid of death as I am also the member of the gusul-e-mayyut commitee....... I think every buddy should learn how to give ghusul as it will get ur death fear out of u...”

“Death is sweeter than honey... Love Pakistan & Willing to die for Pakistan...”

USER A-44

The second adult individual found within theme one presented himself in a manner that alerted authorities in the United States to his online activities. User A-44 was negative, even violent in his sentiment from the very beginning until he was arrested by the Federal Bureau of
Investigation (FBI) on terrorism charges in 2014. This individual attempted to motivate others towards radical ways of perceiving Islam and was referred to in a recent mainstream media article as helping change the way young Muslims radicalize online. User A-44 was an avid Anwar al-Awlaki poster and displayed an unwavering (and consistent) belief that all Jews needed to be eradicated.

"Dear brothers and sisters, it is as clear as day and night that the Jews are the enemy of mankind and even the environment. It is crystal clear that the Jews (may Allah swt destroy them) run the media, banking, USA foreign policy, and the porn industry, etc. Brothers and sisters rather than being kept busy refuting this bacteria we should focus on ridding Judaism from this earth".

In addition, User A-44 openly expressed his support for organizations considered to be terrorist groups by the Canadian government (CC section 83.05), even providing advice to others online on how to travel overseas and partake in activities alongside these groups. User A-44 openly referenced the importance of online forums – particularly the one he took part in – for known extremists and terrorists, and continually attempted to recruit and inspire others online:

"We call you to Islam and to leave the lie that is Wall Street. Come to REAL ISLAM in its totality and make the world a better place. ISLAM IS THE ONLY SOLUTION!!!"

It should be noted that User A-44 was arrested as a result of his activities on YouTube as well as a personal Muslim extremist website he co-founded with several other individuals (all of whom were arrested as well).

Theme 2 – Evolution in Narrative. Some of the minors and adults considered to be relatively negative in their speech evolved into more extreme forms of posting as they transitioned into adulthood (minors) or passed the halfway mark (adults). There was an overall finding of increased frustration and annoyance at other users during the latter periods of their time online. Such a finding is consistent with the earlier quantitative findings, which revealed there to be a statistically significant difference between the first 50% of posts and second 50% of posts (for adults), and marginal significance for the sample of minors displaying more negative emotions in their online posts as they entered into adulthood.

The changes observed for the least negative users could be explained by individuals developing general life interests, but not necessarily towards more negative (or even extreme) opinions/beliefs, as well as overall irritability with one another. In other words, their opinions did not change, but the topics they chose to engage in did – hence the increasing negative sentiment scores. The following examples illustrate the development, which occurs over time (specifically during the transition into adulthood, and the immediate entrance into the latter half of posting), for the pseudo-extreme individuals:

**USER M-19**

User M-19 seemed to be posting many more discussion points and articles on conspiracy theories, Iran, terrorism and suicide bombers immediately preceding his transition into adulthood. Such a change in sentiment can be visually depicted in Figure 2, during the time period of analysis 2005(1).

---

3 We omitted more specific references in order to preserve anonymity within our sample.
“All this anti-Iran propaganda they’re publishing everywhere is an attempt to turn the public against Iran so that if America tried to take some sort of action against Iran (because of nukes, the strength of the Islamic Govt. etc.) then there would hopefully be less critical public opinion.”

“There are more useful ways to do Jihad than in a testosterone fuelled machomanegotistical attempt to satisfy one’s arrogance by going to Iran and playing with your toy guns. If I was to take part in "physical jihad", it would be in defense of Iraq (or Ireland). Jihad is for Islam not for a country.”

Furthermore, User M-19 begins reading and studying more on Islamic history, specifically martyrdom. This change in topic (and therefore sentiment) can be seen in Figure 2, during the time period of analysis 2005(2).

“I think the day of this great scholar’s martyrdom should be a message for all of us. It has now become clear that the government can not protect us. And that our silence and patience gives more courage to the SSP. I believe this is the time when we must stand up for our rights, and fight back, on all fronts.”

“Innalilahi Wa Innailaihi Rajioon. Allah has chosen him to be a martyr on the hands of His Prophet’s killers who know that we have a long battle with them and the blood of martyrs especially our leaders has always taken our resistance to a higher and stronger level.”

USER A-29

While User A-29 began his time online discussing political, cultural, and other "sensitive" subjects (such as the Holocaust), he then developed from expressing himself in a neutral manner to expressing himself with more negative statements – directed towards Middle Eastern rulers who were in power and “wreaking havoc on their people” (as expressed by User A-29):
"Salaam, theirs peace in the north and the south isn't really that stable plus the shabab have killed innocent people, I'm all for shariah law but you can't kill innocent people to get what you want".

"May Allah destroy bashar al-kalb and raise him with his father hafez on qiyamah. Ameen, and may Allah destroy the raafidah."

"I make dua every night for Allah to destroy him. He's a shaitan, who kills my fellow Brothers and Sisters".

User A-29 then goes on to express his newfound interest in learning from Anwar al-Awlaki:

"Instead I listen to lectures (Anwar Al-Awlaki, Ali Timimi etc) so try and incorporate that. May Allah make it easy for you. Ameen".

Alternatively, the remainder of users found in theme two displayed signs of development as a result of engaging in life experiences (which were reflective online) but were not considered "extreme" in nature – a finding which should be expected for the majority of the online community. These individuals exhibited a slight development of frustration and annoyance directed towards other individuals on the forum as time went on.

USER M-22

User M-22 became involved in heavier and long/intense religious debates (and general debates) after transitioning into adulthood, as opposed to simply posting articles – as he did before adulthood (examples of these articles will not be provided for the sake of space). User M-22 began making comments in reference to his new interest of learning about martyrdom – however, not in an “extreme” or worrisome manner. In addition, new opinions and interests appeared to be forming with regards to political / cultural issues in the West versus Pakistan, interests which attracted the attention of forum moderatos who consequently deleted his post for being too offensive.

User M-22 expressed he had not been going on the forum as much lately. When he did, he would write long messages (fairly well reasoned). Some posts displayed hints of frustration and annoyance when he was forced into writing a long response.

“First of all [user name edited out] I suggest you quit with your lame remarks and your holier than thou attitude. You are a no one. I don't know why you seem to have an interest in my personal life and what I do (wasn't it you who randomly brought up some story about me going to school on Ashura on some next thread :lol:) and what sites I visit or don't visit. Do you have some sort of a Website-tracker installed on your computer that tells you what websites I visit for nohas?”

USER A-29

User A-29 increasingly developed into frustration over his time online – as represented by the following comment made in the latter half of his online trajectory:

One of the last post made by User A-29: “I'm done trying to justify and defending some of you who bring this website into disrepute, so by avoiding it i've removed it completely for the time being until further notice to save the headache, really we
don't need to be dealing with such issues now All of those threads should be removed."

As a result of being immersed in an online community whereby more intense and even “extreme” political and cultural topics are discussed, such a development into negativity (based on sentiment scores) seems fairly reasonable. Throughout time spent on the forum, it would be expected that individuals would eventually begin discussing topics of a more negative (possibly extreme) nature, as this would constitute a natural progression throughout the forum based on developing interests and exploration into the various sub-forums and threads available to a user.

**Quantitative & Qualitative Comparison of Top 5 Most Negative Users**

This section compares the top five most negative individuals (as per their sentiment scores and trajectories) with the qualitative findings to determine whether or not those most negative quantitatively are also those most negative qualitatively. These individuals were drawn from both the minors group and the adults group. To identify these users, SentiStrength scores were averaged up per user to determine overall sentiment scores. Those users with the five most negative overall sentiment scores were selected for comparison with the top five users qualitatively determined to be most negative/violent. Table 4 displays the top five most negative individuals as per the SentiStrength results, and the qualitative analysis findings – separated.

**Table 4 Top 5 Most Negative Users – SentiStrength vs. Qualitative Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User ID</th>
<th>Ave. Sentiment Score</th>
<th>Minor / Adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SENTISTRENGTH</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User M-8</td>
<td>-26.3</td>
<td>Minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User A-9</td>
<td>-14.5</td>
<td>Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User M-26</td>
<td>-9.1</td>
<td>Minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User M-29</td>
<td>-8.9</td>
<td>Minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User A-4</td>
<td>-8.3</td>
<td>Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>QUALITATIVE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User M-44</td>
<td>-2.3</td>
<td>Minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User A-44</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
<td>Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User M-11</td>
<td>-3.2</td>
<td>Minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User M-6</td>
<td>-1.3</td>
<td>Minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User A-33</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
<td>Adult</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All five users found to be most negative qualitatively were determined by the themes in which they were classified. All individuals found in theme one (n=5) presented as either extreme or pseudo-extreme, and as such, were classified as the top five most negative users qualitatively.
As can be seen from Table 4, the top five most negative users as determined by SentiStrength did not appear to be the top five most negative users as determined through qualitative analysis. The sole case that may have constituted an exception would be that of user A-9, who was determined to be quantitatively one of the top five most negative individuals. However, he was not considered to be one of the top five most negative individuals qualitatively (he would, however, constitute a top 10 member).

The findings of this analysis support the overarching argument (of the current study) that qualitative analysis is required to better understand and contextualize the quantitative findings of SentiStrength. These two types of analyses would appear to supplement each other, providing further support for the notion of a mixed-method approach when examining online trends of sentiment over time.

**DISCUSSION**

The current study set out to examine the development of negativity in the online context, with a specific focus on minors engaging in online Islamic forums. We used theoretical guidance from Life Course Theory (LCT) and General Strain Theory (GST), to determine if certain turning points in life could affect an individual's online sentiment trajectory. Quantitative results suggested the transition into adulthood (for minors) to be important, as this point in time was reflected by a statistically significant increase in negativity (compared to their pre-19 sentiment scores), and a non-significant finding when comparing first 50 percent to second 50 percent of posts by minors – reinforcing the interpretation that entrance into adulthood may be a significant turning point.

Sampson and Laub (1990) stipulate that social bonds developed in adulthood seem to have a fairly significant effect on modifying (or reducing) criminal and deviant behaviour developed during adolescence. While youth tend to age out of certain life behaviors and mentalities (as they mature), the same cannot necessarily be said for that of negativity (or negative affect). The current study determined negativity online to increase after transitioning into adulthood. The current findings do not seem to support the notion that youth will develop out of (or reduce) the amount of negative affect they experience and express online. Additionally, analysis of the adults group further supports the idea that negative affect does not necessarily diminish over time. These findings lend support to previous literature on affective development whereby negative affect increased with age (Ferring and Filipp, 1995). However, these studies were conducted in the offline setting, whereas the current study analyzed sentiment in the online setting – a factor that would require further research and analysis in order to understand the impact of such a contextual change, if any.

While most users displayed a change in sentiment (quantitatively) and overall posting content (qualitatively) before and after transitioning into an adult (age 19), for a select few, there did not appear to be any evidence of changes during this time. Through qualitatively analyzing these individuals, two overarching themes were discovered for both the minors and adults group. The first was that the most negative/radical individuals tended to be consistent in their narratives over time. Initially, it was not well understood the extent to which the more extreme individuals would be acting as "inspirers," "motivators," or "indoctrinators" towards others online. Thus, it became important to understand the effect certain (more violent) individuals had on others online – particularly youth. Essentially, these users did not appear to “sway” others with their thoughts and manner of dialogue. In fact, the more infuriated they became, the less they were able to get
their point across, as others were either ignoring them or refuting their arguments. Furthermore, the majority of minors examined appeared to be quite resistant to, and able to identify, other users of an extreme negative and even radical nature.

Of those displaying extremely negative online sentiment trajectories, the lack of changes in sentiment suggests they may not have been affected by any significant turning points during this time. It is possible, however, that these individuals experienced life-altering turning points offline (before entering into their forums). User M-44, for example, revealed viewing the violent death of several family members (through acts of martyrdom) back in Pakistan. Such an environment of violence and extreme emotional distress may have stunted certain aspects of this individual’s development. Ginwright and James (2002) refer to the more precarious and detrimental life conditions as “social toxins” (p.28) – otherwise understood as representing “the degree to which the social world has become poisonous to a person’s well-being” (p.29), with specific reference to extreme forms of violence, brutality, and threats to the family. Furthermore, these “social toxins” create an unhealthy environment in which youth must live and mature, preventing them from adequately (or normally) developing (Ginwright and James, 2002; Brooks-Gunn, Ducan, Klebanov, and Sealand, 1997).

As was stated numerous times throughout user M-44's online trajectory, he seemed to display a desire to become a martyr himself (following in the footsteps of previous family members). Many academics to date believe oppressive and toxic environments foster emotions and desires of "depression, loneliness, and suicidal tendencies" (Ginwright and James, 2002, p.31; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997). Thus, the significance of growing up in an environment of violence and trauma could very well stunt (or prevent) a youth from developing in a healthy manner, which may come across as a lack of development – as portrayed in the online setting.

Furthermore, LCT would stipulate that the “timing and sequencing” (Sampson and Laub, 1993, p.254) of turning points is of vital importance when examining the effect they have on later behavior. According to Agnew’s (1992) GST, anger is a vitally important emotion and is considered to be a key factor in the development of criminal behavior (Froggio, 2007). With such traumatic events occurring so early on in life, it is possible to foresee how the frustration and anger experienced offline could develop into the violent (even radical) behaviour seen online.

The second theme was ‘evolution in narrative (with pseudo-extreme and least negative individuals).’ These individuals tended to vary in their speech patterns over time, with the turning point of entrance into adulthood/university (or the halfway point for adults) displaying a noticeable change in each user's sentiment and content of posting. The majority of minors, however, did not necessarily develop into more negative and extreme forms of narrative. They simply portrayed a development of maturity and responsibility while becoming increasingly frustrated with other users online.

The individuals who developed into more extreme forms of negativity merely increased their use of negative and extreme words (and posting of extremely negative news articles). They did not necessarily develop into more extreme forms of thinking or acting. For both groups, it was common for users to develop within their forum, increasing their interests in more controversial topics pertaining to politics, international affairs, and terrorism in the Middle East.
Few academics have addressed the notion of online peer interactions and communications leading to frustration and annoyance with one another (McInerney and Roberts, 2004). Huffaker (2010) notes the impactful nature of negative affect (or negative emotions) expressed online in encouraging further negative feedback and reciprocity. Thus, it would seem logical to assume that the development of frustration over time within this group of individuals (in theme two) could very well be attributed, at least partially, to the somewhat controversial setting in which these conversations took place.

According to Sampson and Laub (1993), the ability for a minor to transition seamlessly into adulthood becomes a vital factor for healthy development. Based on the quantitative findings of the current study, this transition into adulthood did coincide with an increase in negative sentiments. While it is difficult to conclude with a high degree of accuracy that the increase in negativity can predominantly be attributed to entrance into adulthood, the results do suggest there to be some level of relationship between these two variables. Qualitatively, it became evident that almost all of the minors partaking in discussions online were experiencing stress and strain during this time as a result of more general life factors (such as leaving home, starting university, attaining a job, etc.). In order to cope with these stresses, many began using their respective forum as a stress outlet and means of support. As such, it would appear as if the majority of minors (and even adults) found solace in their new online community, easing their transition into adulthood.

With the exception of topics pertaining to high school (and related youth interests), both minors and adults tended to discuss fairly similar subject matters in their respective online forums: issues of politics, culture, and terrorism (specifically in the Middle East). Additionally, the traits of rationality, objectivity, and maturity all seemed to be present in individuals of varying ages, suggesting these traits to be more so attributed to the individual themselves, as opposed to traits such as age and gender. Where the groups did differ was in their manner of speech and additional topics of discussion. It became evident that the minors were more naive in both their writing styles and opinions, whereas the adults presented themselves in a more logical and even rational manner (with a few exceptions).

This study was unable to examine motives for participating in discussion forums. It is reasonable to expect that motives to enter the forum as an adolescent could be different than the ones found for adults. Some studies have found participation in online community groups to be the result of social identification – or one’s attempt to establish and identify themselves in the social setting via exposure to others online (see Ducol et al., 2015 for a review). Thus, demographics and rationales of participation in these forums would be an appropriate avenue for future research, as such an analysis may shed light upon the differences between minors and adults found in the current study.

Many forum users were frequently asking questions with regards to the religion of Islam and Islamic culture; these individuals tended to be the ones who were curious and seeking knowledge – especially if they were ‘converts' to Islam. While this in itself is not associated with violent extremism (as many seek further knowledge to understand their religion better), it has been suggested by scholars, intelligence professionals, and even former terrorists, that the act of seeking knowledge can highlight individuals for recruitment by terrorist organizations (Masi, 2014). Mubin Shaikh – a former recruiter (in Toronto) for the Taliban, now acting as a CSIS operative – stated in an interview with Alessandria Masi (2014) of International Business Times, that when recruiting:
There [are] certain things looked for: people who didn’t know the religion as much, [and] people who were converts, because converts would probably have problems with their parents at home, so they were more likely to stay in our [terrorist organization’s] company (para. 4).

While the current study did not set out to profile terrorists, or even potential terrorists – as such a study would require a different data set and analytic strategy – there were a select few users who self-reported actions of terrorism, and some who self-reported intent to engage in actions of terrorism. Although these individuals were the minority (in both the minors and adults groups), they were still present within the relatively small sample of users collected, and extracted, for analysis.

While graphing sentiment trajectories provided a good base from which to sample inconsistent or consistently negative online trends, once qualitatively analyzed, it was determined that these sentiment trends did not always correspond to the qualitative findings – qualitatively consistent sentiment profiles may have been quantitatively inconsistent. Some reasons as to why this may be are that 1) several time periods of analysis (6-months) had only a mere few posts from which to analyze – skewing the average for the time period of analysis, and creating an inconsistent trend; 2) Sentiment analysis captured articles that individuals had posted online – sentiment which may have been negative, but not necessarily representative of the individuals personal opinions/beliefs, and 3) in some instances, sentiment analysis captured the original post for which said user was responding. Such findings suggest more work is needed to develop the SentiStrength program better and obtain more accurate and representative sentiment scores, as well as to better understand how sentiment analysis can provide accurate and supportive findings to corroborate the qualitative (or “contextual”) aspect.

Both approaches, however, did measure negativity over time, allowing for an overlap in objectives. Each analytic tool taps into a separate and distinct concept, as both measure their separate phenomenon over time – with SentiStrength measuring user sentiment from a quantitative approach, and qualitative analysis accounting for the contextual factors surrounding user sentiment. It is difficult to determine the exact amount (or percentage) each tool explains or accounts for in the other (how much they overlap), but when comparing the top five most negative users as determined quantitatively, with those determined qualitatively, there was no overlap between the two groups, suggesting a limited amount of overlap between the two analytic tools.

**Limitations and Future Research**

As the current study attempted to address a somewhat under-researched area of study, several limitations should be noted. First, only the negative individuals displaying inconsistent or consistently negative sentiment trajectories were examined qualitatively. As the current study intended to focus predominantly on the development of negativity over time, such a research decision to focus on negative trajectories was warranted, but does constitute a bias and limitation. Second, the inclusion of only two turning points (entrance into adulthood, and entrance into university) may present a limitation of the current study, as the inclusion of additional turning points – stipulated through LCT literature – may have explained more. For example, once the adults group passed the halfway mark of their time online, they became
significantly more negative over time, suggesting there could be other factors (and turning points) effecting the progression/development of sentiment online.

Third, sentiment analysis (or SentiStrength) tended to capture articles in their entirety, which individuals had posted online as part of their comment or response. As such, the overall sentiment score generated for those posts would have been somewhat unrepresentative of the user's true opinions, thoughts, and beliefs — especially if the article was being posted as a joke or counter-argument to the point they were making. Likewise, in some instances, sentiment analysis captured the original post a user was responding to — meaning there would have been a sentiment score generated for a post that technically encompassed another user’s sentiment (or opinions and beliefs), thereby skewing the overall sentiment trajectory for that user. Lastly, the SentiStrength program was not designed to account for, or capture, the contextual elements of sentiment online. Individuals could have been using sarcasm, and SentiStrength would have generated an overall score reflecting the positive or negative nature of said comment. In addition, users may have been positively agreeing with a very negative (or even violent) statement — warranting a negative overall score — yet, SentiStrength would have generated a positive score based on the words being used (and vice versa).

Overall, literature to date has failed to adequately address within-individual development in the online context. The current study sought to address this limitation by doing exactly that. While the findings of this study should not be considered all-encompassing — to the extent of explaining (and understanding) the exact process by which the Internet serves to foster personal development — use of the Internet (specifically online forums) did appear to serve as a strategy to understand the development of maturity online. Qualitative findings presented ample examples of such a concept (most of which were present in theme two), with only a select few (those of a more extreme and radical nature) failing to exhibit this trend.

Future research should examine the impact of major events on the sentiments expressed by users. For example, determining whether these major events have an impact on individual user sentiments, beyond the larger tendencies captured for these individuals over time. Such an endeavor would prove useful for understanding the impact of external events on the internal development of each user (as expressed via their posts and associated sentiment scores).

While it would have been ideal to use the current study (and subsequent findings) to inform the process of radicalization in the online setting, the current design was not intended to accomplish such a goal. Future research, however, might benefit from expanding the research design to include a broader sample of all nationalities and several more Islamic forums (e.g. Scrivens, Davies, and Frank, 2018). Research goals would need to focus specifically on better understanding the process of internal (individual) development one would need to experience online in order to become radicalized — including analyzing turning points and identifying ‘indicators' of possible radicalization — as well as how and whether violent radicals may influence others online, if at all.

REFERENCES


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