

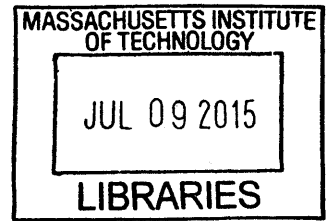
Life After Hate:  
Recovering From Racism

by

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ABSTRACT

Life After Hate is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping white supremacists transition out of the extremist lifestyle and to helping those outside the supremacist community understand how these groups work. Founded by ex-supremacists, the group is one of the only organizations in the country dedicated to helping those involved in the white power movement recover from racism. This thesis follows the stories of Life After Hate members and explores the science behind both everyday and organized hate. Touching on neuroscience, psychology and criminology, this thesis addresses the mechanisms that give rise to overt racists as well as those that contribute to systemic discrimination.

Thesis Supervisor: Corby Kummer

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Christian Picciolini was fourteen when he encountered his first white power skinhead. It was 1987 and Christian was smoking pot with a friend in a back alley near his home in Blue Island, Illinois, when he was interrupted by a dark muscle car that pulled into the alley, spitting gravel and skidding to a stop just a few feet away.

“He came out of the passenger’s seat, beelined it straight to me with a dead look in his eyes,” Christian says. “[He] just looked at me and said, ‘Don’t you know that that’s what the communists want you to do?’ and like in a kung-fu move, just pulls the joint out of my mouth and smacks me in the head...From that moment on, I knew I wanted to be like this guy.”

That’s when Clark Martell, a former member of the American Nazi Party who is largely credited with building the racist skinhead movement in the United States, told Christian about how white men stay enslaved—through advances made by less intelligent races, through drugs that calm the mind and draw focus away from the real fight, through greater opportunities for immigrant business owners, ironically just like Christian’s Italian parents.

Christian was mesmerized, not only by the Doc Martens-clad skinhead standing before him but also by the idea of being part of a social movement much larger than himself. Christian spent the next seven years involved in the white power movement. He eventually became regional leader of a group that was once one of the most prominent white power skinhead gangs in the country.

Christian initially loved the rush of popularity, the glamour of being in a family of outcasts, and the feeling of working toward what he believed was social progress...until it destroyed every other relationship in his life, including his marriage. Christian left the movement between 1995 and 1996, years after he stopped believing in the cause, but it wasn’t easy. There was fear. There were news stories of white supremacists killing those who attempted to leave. There was also the isolation and depression that comes with giving up a surrogate family.

“Sometimes there’s not a whole lot to gain by leaving,” Christian says, “because you feel safe. Even though you may have changed your mind, but you still feel safe and a lot of people, I think, don’t leave because of that. It’s a lot of work to leave. I’ve spent the last twenty years leaving and it never really gets easier.”

More than a decade later, Christian co-founded Life After Hate, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping former right wing extremists transition out of that lifestyle. In addition to offering support for recovering racists and those they’ve hurt, Life After Hate also works with government sectors and community organizations to help people outside the supremacist community understand how these groups work. Now they’re broadening their impact. With grant funding from the Department of Justice, Life After Hate is partnering with the research nonprofit, RTI International, to conduct a three-

year study that examines behavior patterns of former right wing extremists. By gaining a better understanding of the motivations behind joining and leaving extremism, Christian and RTI hope to create a psychological assessment that can help support organizations like Life After Hate understand who's ready to leave the extremist lifestyle and what they'll need to make a successful transition.

Life After Hate's study is just now getting under way and actual data isn't yet available, but the time is ripe for this research: organized supremacist groups appear to be declining in the United States, though it's possible that they're simply moving underground. Between 2013 and 2014, the number of active hate groups operating within the United States dropped seventeen percent—from 939 to 784 groups—and more than half of this decline was due to reductions in Ku Klux Klan chapters. The Southern Poverty Law Center estimates that there are currently 527 active supremacist groups in the country. These remaining groups offer chances to learn what catalyzes growth in these organizations and what leads to their downfall.

Converting a through-and-through racist is hard, in part because for those within white supremacist groups, racist ideologies become their identities. Letting go of racism also means letting go of their sense of self, their sense of community, and their beliefs about their place in the world, says Michele Lefkowitz, the southwest regional investigative researcher for the Anti-Defamation League and an expert on white supremacist hate groups. Supremacy “just becomes your whole world view,” she says; “the lens that you see everything through is through the gang.”

When I first heard of Life After Hate, I immediately wanted to know if a committed racist could truly be rehabilitated and if so, how that process might work. But in a larger sense, I was simply curious about how hate operates and why certain people are compelled to create communities organized around it. I wanted to know how those communities function, what happens to the people who are involved, and what life looks like for those who decide to leave. More importantly, could answers to these questions lead to more effective ways of eliminating hate groups and rehabilitating exiting members? In looking back after months of interviews and research, what I wanted most of all were easy, definitive answers to these questions.

In retrospect, my list of wants is almost comical in its naiveté. I quickly found that American right wing extremists are an under-researched group and answers for many of my questions just don't exist. The research on hate that is available is complicated, controversial, and hits so uncomfortably close to home that it has kept me awake at night thinking about my own unconscious favoritism and racially-biased judgments. Present in everyone, these two factors may work in tandem with hate and are, in some ways, much scarier than supremacist groups.

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## Your Brain on Hate

Before delving into how hate works, we have to understand what it is. Mark Twain thought he knew. For much of his life, the humorist harbored deep and passionate abhorrence for certain authors, most notably Jane Austen. Twain hated Austen's work so much, he called it "a great pity" that she died of natural causes instead of through punishment for her poor writing. In a letter to a friend, Twain wrote that "her books madden me so that I can't conceal my frenzy from the reader."

What separates Twain's brand of extreme dislike from real hatred is our core morals, says Jennifer Ray, a Ph.D. candidate at New York University who studies the social psychology of hate. (Of all the scientific fields that study hate, including neuroscience and criminology, social psychology offers the most research on everyday hatred. So that's where I started). In research presented at the 2014 Association for Psychological Science convention, Ray's NYU team asked study subjects to rate things they disliked versus those they hated. She found that hated objects were not only rated more negatively than disliked ones; hated objects also evoked emotions associated with morality, such as contempt, anger, and disgust. Ray says that hate isn't simply disliking something in the extreme. "You do dislike it so, so, so, so much, but you also tend to see it through a moral lens as well," she says.

Some researchers believe that morality, or at least a twisted version of it, lies at the heart of many hate groups, including white supremacist communities. Others argue that factors like aggression or a need for vengeance are more likely drivers. It's unclear whether morality is the primary force behind white supremacist communities, but moral code does play a significant role. In a separate study by Ray, websites created by hate groups, including supremacist communities, were about five times more likely to contain words related to morality and moral judgments than online complaint forums where users discussed things they disliked.

With an understanding of what constitutes hate, I wanted to know how the emotion of hate rips through the brain. I thought that if neuroscience could unlock the exact pattern that hateful feelings trace through the billions of neurons that make up our brains, it might provide valuable insight into why these feelings are so powerful.

What I found is that researchers are just beginning to study the neuroscience of hate. That's partially because one of the major tools used to study emotions in conscious people didn't exist until quite recently. Up until the early 90s, scientists relied on lower-resolution imaging techniques, like positron emission tomography (PET) scans, to figure out what was happening in the brains of conscious study subjects as they felt specific emotions. Introduced to the world in 1991, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) allowed researchers to take higher-resolution scans that measure how oxygen levels at specific locations in the brain change when conscious people feel different emotions. This new technology helped establish the field of affective neuroscience, the branch of neuroscience that examines the neural connections behind our feelings.

But more than two decades after the invention of fMRI, very few neurology studies focus exclusively on hate, and the ones that have been published have been debated among those in the field. One study—and I was able to find only one—claims to have successfully identified the unique activity pattern the brain goes through when we hate.

In a study published in October of 2008, University College London neuroscientists Semir Zeki and John Paul Romaya compared fMRI scans made while 17 men and women viewed photos of someone they hated—usually an ex-lover or competitor at work—against scans made while viewing a neutral person in their lives. When an enemy appeared, several parts of the brain were activated including the right insula, which processes negative emotions, and the premotor cortex, which controls movement and motor skills. Zeki and Romaya surmised that these parts may activate to ready the hater for “the possibility of attack or defense.” When we see someone we hate, our brains unconsciously start preparing for fight or flight.

To map exactly where things are happening neurologically, scientists divide the brain into tiny, three-dimensional units called voxels. Somewhere between 100,000 and 130,000 voxels are measured in a typical fMRI scan, with each voxel representing about one million individual neurons. In Zeki’s and Romaya’s study, three voxels had statistically higher activity across the group of subjects, indicating that those specific neuron clusters—the so-called “hate circuit”—are associated with how we process hateful feelings.

With the hate circuit identified, researchers can compare it to circuits for other emotions like romantic and maternal love, the focus of Zeki’s previous research. Both love and hate activate two of the same structures of the brain, which perhaps gives some evidence that there truly is a thin neurological line between the two emotions. However, whereas love actually “deactivates” regions of the brain associated with criticism and judgment, those regions are fully functional when thinking about an enemy. Zeki and Romaya concluded that this may be because “the hater may want to exercise judgment in calculating moves to harm, injure, or otherwise extract revenge.” In other words, love may be blind but hate has creepily precise 20/20 vision.

If science was one step closer to mapping exactly where hate lives and how it moves through our brain, could subsequent research reveal what triggers the emotion and, equally important, how to quell the feeling? Instead of treating hate and aggression through psychology, could science develop neurological treatments that chemically or even surgically stop hate in its tracks? Could researchers of the future neurologically deter people from ever joining hate groups? When I posed these questions to experts in the field, they told me to slow down. For all it accomplishes, the hate circuit study also highlights two major problems that prevent affective neuroscience from conclusively answering these larger questions about hate, or about any feeling for that matter.

The first, and biggest, problem facing both the hate circuit and other fMRI studies is issues of statistical significance. Emile Gabriel Bruneau, a neuroscientist at MIT’s SaxeLab who uses fMRI data to study groups in conflict, says that even though three

brain locations were consistently more active in all of Zeki and Romaya's hate circuit study subjects, that's not enough to draw solid conclusions. Because there are thousands upon thousands of voxels in the brain, "finding three individual voxels that show a pattern of correlation is actually incredibly weak," he says. "You would expect that by chance."

Statistical significance is important in all areas of research, but it's especially important in fMRI studies and leads to more questions about trustworthiness. Each fMRI scan covers a huge amount of data, so using standard statistical significance benchmarks, which rule out up to 99 percent of chance in experiments, can still yield lots of false correlations. The problem is further complicated by the fact that fMRI scans can be thrown off by many factors, including the subject's heartbeat and noise from the scanner itself. Without running the data through a bevy of statistical tests—a technique known as "multiple comparisons correction"—researchers can get some pretty strange results. For example, a team from the University of California, Santa Barbara, Vassar College, and Dartmouth College put a dead salmon into an fMRI scanner and watched as the screen lit up. According to Craig Bennett, a neuroscientist who worked on the project, the "brain activity" the team observed might have been fatty fish tissue throwing off the scanner's readings. Typical statistics tests wouldn't rule those results out; only multiple comparisons correction would.

Unfortunately, multiple comparisons correction wasn't the standard practice on fMRI research in 2008, when the hate circuit study was released. Zeki's and Romaya's research does use multiple comparisons correction for parts of the study—but not for the portion that identifies correlating voxels. In an analysis of six major neuroscience journals, Craig Bennett's team found that twenty-five to forty percent of fMRI studies published in 2008 also did not use multiple comparisons correction. The situation is better today. Unpublished follow-up research conducted in 2012 found that about 90 percent of fMRI research published in major journals uses these statistical controls, but that still means that in one out of every ten studies, something might be...fishy. In theory, Zeki and Romaya could re-analyze the data using multiple comparison corrections for the correlating voxels portion of their 2008 study. So far, to my knowledge, they have not. (Romaya did not respond to interview requests for this story; Zeki politely declined.)

The second major problem facing affective neuroscience is that mapping the neural networks of feelings doesn't shed much light on the actual cognitive process that's happening there. Even if specific voxels come online whenever we spy our mortal enemies, we can't necessarily peg that brain activity on hate.

"It's a little bit problematic to call it a 'hate circuit' when a lot of those individual components overlap with what might be called the 'love circuit,'" Bruneau says. "I would say that the overlapping regions are probably the salience [or] relevance dimensions," the parts that activate whenever we spot someone who is important in our lives.

Affective neuroscience isn't just limited to fMRI studies. Other commonly used study



techniques include measuring electrical activity in the brain and nervous system, or using other types of neuroimaging tools like magnetoencephalography (MEG), which measures magnetic fields in the brain. Unfortunately, there isn't much research in the field that is focused exclusively on hate. To answer my questions about how hate operates and if some people, like supremacists, are neurologically "hard wired" to hate more than others, I turned to the neuroscience studies that ADDRESSED where researchers believed hate lived long before Zeki, Romaya, or fMRI came onto the scene.

Nearly eight decades ago, experimental psychologist Heinrich Klüver and neurosurgeon Paul Bucy found that surgically removing the temporal lobes—a section of the brain located near the base of the skull in humans—could transform normal monkeys into hypersexualized but completely tame beings that lacked any aggressive tendencies whatsoever, even toward things they knew were harmful. The condition was later named "Klüver-Bucy syndrome" and was observed only in animals until nearly two decades later, when a teenager who had undergone surgery to the temporal lobes exhibited the same placid yet hypersexualized behavior. In 1956, the *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology* published another monkey surgery study by British psychologist Lawrence Weiskrantz that narrowed down control systems of fear and aggression to the amygdalae—two tiny, almond-shaped structures within the temporal lobes.

Since locating the brain parts that house fear and aggression, science has been on a hunt to answer whether aggressive actions could be neurologically nipped in the bud. If not, could neurological data at least provide some information about why certain people join hate groups and commit violent acts whereas others don't?

Several anatomical markers within the amygdalae can potentially foretell who is most likely to commit violent acts. Size counts here. A "classic amygdala" is 1.24 cubic centimeters in volume, and men with smaller-than-average amygdalae are statistically more likely to have higher levels of aggression. Tumors located near the amygdalae have also been linked to violent behavior: the gunman responsible for the 1966 University of Texas, Austin massacre had a tumor that put pressure on his amygdalae. Other anatomical markers can help predict aggression levels, for instance the presence of certain genes. An entire subset of controversial science known as neurocriminology is devoted to using brain data to gain insights about why certain people commit crimes and if biology can predict criminal behavior.

But neurocriminology runs into one major problem—anatomical abnormalities alone aren't enough to predict violent behavior. For every crazed gunman with a tumor on his amygdala, many, *many* more people live with tumors or larger amygdalae and never commit a crime. Even if neurology could detect murderers before they become murderers, questions arise about what to do next. Is it fair to punish someone for crimes they haven't yet committed?

To figure out what separates the ordinary, everyday disgust we all occasionally feel from the kind of hate that causes someone to consciously discriminate against entire races of

people, I started searching for the psychological roots of hate—when and why we start to feel it, how it affects our decision-making skills, and how it can morph into racial hatred. I thought that if I started at the beginning, I could see how hate develops differently in extremists. In the process of reading through piles and piles of research on both everyday and organized hate, I kept coming across studies that reinforced a central piece of Zeki's and Romaya's research—the idea that love is closer to hate than we think. As uncomfortable and counterintuitive as it sounds, love forms the basis for both hate and discrimination, and it starts influencing our decisions almost as soon as we're born.

## **The Dark Side of Love**

Mass murders, bombings, and widespread acts of prejudice have been committed by racist extremist groups in the name of keeping the Caucasian race “pure.” To even write about these acts in the same sentence as the word love feels wrong. Still, it's incorrect to say that these crimes are motivated by hate alone. Love plays a crucial role in supremacist groups and arguably serves as the foundation for systemic discrimination. And the roots of this discriminatory love develop almost immediately after we're born.

Our survival has always depended on the ability to recognize and stay close to friends while avoiding foes. Finding our tribe—the people who look, act, and hold the same values as us—meant the difference between living another day and dying of exposure. As a result, the human brain has all sorts of unconscious mechanisms to ensure that we can find and stick with our tribes. But outside of an evolutionary context, those same mechanisms designed for our protection can lead to some awful decisions.

In psychology parlance, this tendency to choose people in our own tribes over others is called “in-group favoritism.” And it's one of the very first skills infants learn. As young as three months old, babies choose to be close to people who physically look like their family members over those who show no resemblance. That means that long before they utter their first words, white babies show preference for white adults, and black babies show preference for black adults. Before judging babies as tiny, crib-bound racists, it's important to know that this favoritism transcends skin color alone. Babies also show favoritism based on sound, preferring adults who speak the same language as their parents.

As children grow up, their social circles expand. The in-group becomes bigger, and at some point, the group becomes too big to show favoritism toward everyone. That marks a developmental turning point, says Robert Böhm, a behavioral scientist at RWTH Aachen University in Germany. Sometime between ages six and eight, just when kids are entering school and expanding their social circles considerably, children continue to show favoritism towards their tribe, but they also show a desire to actively hurt those outside it. This, Böhm says, is when hate is born.

“Out-group hate is not a thing that comes with children from birth,” Böhm says. “It's something that develops if you have increasing amounts of intergroup interactions.”

Just as quickly as Böhm offered answers to some of my questions about the origins of hate, he also destroyed my pre-conceived notions about the motivation behind discriminatory actions. Out-group hate is a part of childhood development. But Böhm's research shows that instead of intensifying as we age and driving nasty, prejudiced decisions along the way, out-group hate fizzles to the point of being "very, very rare" among adults. Several studies show that adults are far more likely to be driven by a desire to help or strengthen their own group than by a desire to hurt someone else's. "Most of the kind of negative phenomena that we observe in real life are [instead] based on in-group love," Böhm says.

One way to give credence to Böhm's statement is to look at how modern day "white pride" groups portray themselves, both to their own members and to the outside world. Linguistically, love abounds in supremacist literature. For example, one of the largest white nationalist sites, Stormfront.org, bills itself as a community of "idealists" committed to "the idea that Whites may need to create a separate nation as a means of defending themselves." Last January, the Ku Klux Klan ran billboards in Harrison, Arkansas that stated, "It's *not* racist to love your people."

The supremacist community has "sort of tried to tailor their message to be more in line with, 'We're not haters, we're just proud of our race,'" says Michele Lefkowitz, the southwest regional investigative researcher for the Anti-Defamation League. "Usually they leave out their belief [in] the extermination or the purging of people of color or anybody else they deem socially inferior."

That's because it's a lot easier to rationalize harmful behavior when group members believe it's built on the idea of love and righteously protecting the oppressed rather than on outward prejudice. Racist hate groups are one of society's most reviled demographics, but champions of the oppressed are frequently the most loved. During the seven years he spent within the supremacist movement, Life After Hate co-founder Christian Picciolini says he personally brought many new recruits into the movement, but never with a prejudiced or racially driven message. Instead, he would express interest in new recruits and talk to them about things they had worked so hard to attain, and why they weren't getting ahead in life. He would establish trust and point to their economically disadvantaged status, reminding them that upward social mobility would most likely forever be out of reach. "Later on, once they're hooked, then you kind of spin it on who they should blame for those things," Christian says. "Almost always, the predominant marketing message is about love and protection, and not about hate."

Love as the basis for hate groups is a tough sell, but it's a little bit less of a tough sell if you consider the enormous volume of studies that focus on the power of in-group love. Group favoritism has a profound influence on unconscious decisions, and a growing number of researchers believe that the tendency to favor our tribe is so powerful that it's responsible for massive social inequities. A review paper published last year in *American Psychologist* that examined seventy-five years worth of research on prejudice found that in-group love causes a significant portion of racial discrimination within the

United States. In the paper, authors Thomas Pettigrew and Anthony Greenwald also highlighted something equally important about the nature of racism—in-group favoritism isn't generally fingered as the culprit, though research suggests that is. Most psychology literature only defines prejudice as outward expressions of negativity or hostility and completely ignores the kind of unintentional discrimination that happens in efforts to give members of our group a helping hand. If in-group love is strong enough to drive discrimination and at least partially drive hate groups, how does this type of favoritism influence everyday decisions?

Profoundly, is the answer. In-group favoritism not only influences the judgments we make; it also influences what information we use to make those decisions and affects “every single level of processing in the brain,” says Mina Cikara, a researcher who studies the psychology and neuroscience of intergroup relations and directs the Harvard Intergroup Neuroscience Lab. Statistically, Cikara says, when there's no conflict happening, we pay more attention to members of our own group than to everyone else. Studies show that when we consider people to be like us, it's easier to identify their faces, empathize with their emotions, and remember what they say.

Even more surprising is how little it takes to spark this type of favoritism. Human beings routinely show preference toward people of the same race, but they also show favoritism toward people they are arbitrarily grouped with. For example, one study published in 2013 in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* found that in as little as 170 milliseconds, the brain not only distinguishes randomly assigned group members from outsiders but also registers in-group members as having faces that are more easily recognizable as human. In other words, as soon as we know that people are like us, even if the reason why is meaningless, we literally see them differently and deem them more human. This theory that we view people like us as being more human than people who aren't like us is backed up by research from Princeton University psychology and public affairs professor Susan Fiske, who studies the psychology of stereotypes and discrimination. When examining fMRI images made while Princeton undergrads viewed photos of people considered extreme societal outcasts, such as drug addicts and the homeless, Fiske noticed that the medial frontal cortex—a component of the brain that reliably lights up when we think deeply about other people or ourselves—was about half as active when looking at outcasts.

“It's not just the neural responses that are like this,” Fiske says. “If you ask people, ‘Tell me about this person today, and tell me about what's going on for this person and how this person reacts to things,’ people have a hard time doing that [for outcasts]...It's hard for them to get inside the head of people who are such extreme out-groups.”

Fiske believes that these neural response combined with self-reports show that our brains register those we have a hard time relating to as “more like objects than is usual when we perceive other humans.” It's not just that we understand or process messages from certain people differently from others. Sometimes we recognize certain people as less human.

## Hate and the Unconscious Mind

I originally thought of racists as societal outliers driven by conscious hatred. But in the context of in-group love and unconscious favoritism, my conceptions began to crumble. If my brain is constantly showing favoritism toward people like me, does that make me racist without knowing it? If so, just how unconsciously racist am I?

There's a test for that, and thankfully you can take it online in the privacy of your own home. Implicit Association Test presents images of two types of people and measures whether test takers associate certain concepts more easily with one type of person over another. For example, when shown images of men and women, test takers statistically have a harder time associating career-related words like "manager" and "salary" with women than they do men. When presented with rapid-fire images of white and black faces, I was a little more likely to automatically associate white faces with positive emotions and black faces with negative emotions. After spending months studying the nature of prejudice, to find that my own brain still made some associations in favor of one race and against another was embarrassing and shameful. The "slight automatic preference" I displayed is unfortunately better than how most of the general population scores: of the millions of people, from a broad array of races, who have taken this particular test, about sixteen percent display a "slight automatic preference" toward white faces, while fifty-four percent display a moderate or strong automatic preference. Only six percent of the general population shows a moderate or strong automatic preference toward black faces.

An unconscious preference for white over black is pervasive among white test takers like me. But it's also present among racial minorities. Asian-American test takers scored roughly within the national averages while half of African-American test takers indicated a preference toward whites. That shows, according to the creators of the test, that our unconscious biases are "some combination of an automatic preference for one's own, moderated by what one learns is regarded to be 'good' in the larger culture." In other words, our brains are a reflection of what we see and experience. If we constantly see one specific association—white people as CEOs or women as homemakers for example—the brain gets good at making that link.

"You get [implicit association] through the media. You get it through socialization with your parents. You get it through segregation," says John F. Dovidio, a psychologist who studies racial bias and directs the Yale Intergroup Relations Lab. Those associations contribute to "an atmosphere, a pervasive feeling, and belief about the superiority of whites over blacks and that comes very early in life."

Race isn't the only area where implicit prejudices develop. Americans also show automatic preferences for straight people over gay, thin people over fat, and young faces over old. Those associations don't mean we're all raging racists, nor do they have any

bearing on our likelihood to join a hate group or carry out acts of aggression. But unconscious biases can seriously guide the many, many decisions we don't spend time actively thinking about.

“You can kind of think of implicit bias as your gut reaction,” says Calvin Lai, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University whose work focuses on reducing unconscious bias. “A lot of times throughout the day, we're not really sitting down and really thinking and deliberating about every decision that we make.”

In fact, out of the number of decisions we do make on a daily basis, we actively think about relatively few of them, Lai says, which means that gut reaction can go a long way in dictating how we live our lives. If that gut reaction is tainted by a prejudice, either for or against a specific race, it can present two major problems. First, implicit bias can, and does, create all sorts of societal discrepancies. It can be a factor in who gets hired, who gets promoted, who we date, where we choose to live, how we talk, which projects receive funding, our voting habits, which side we take in conflict, and who gets sent to prison. If enough people hold the same implicit biases, it can create dangerous systemic discrimination wherein certain people have a measurably tougher time existing and advancing in society, regardless of how much they contribute.

Secondly, implicit bias makes it nearly impossible to get rid of the very systemic racism it causes. Because implicit bias exists unconsciously and can operate counter to our conscious beliefs, a large majority of people don't recognize that they have any kind of bias. As I found out in the process of reporting this story, it is possible to have discriminatory racial associations even if you believe in equality to your very core. Few Americans are aware of their implicit biases and even fewer own up to them. Despite Implicit Association Test results that show that the vast majority of Americans hold some kind of racial bias, only thirteen percent of white Americans and twelve percent of black Americans admitted to holding bias in a 2006 CNN poll. Without anyone to take responsibility, implicit bias becomes a crime with no culprit.

Lai says that implicit biases are, in many cases but not always, “an antecedent to blatant prejudice and discrimination.” That still left me with questions about the causes of overt racism and what draws people to hate groups. To fully understand why people join white supremacist communities, I needed to look at the cultural context of these groups and figure out which factors help hate spiral out of control. Nobody knows that better than someone who's joined a hate group, been in the trenches, and come out the other side. I asked Christian Picciolini to walk me through his experiences.

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## **Part II: The Life of a White Supremacist**

Christian credits the night that Clark Martell yanked a joint out of his mouth as the one that launched his supremacist future. But like many who join white power hate groups, ideology was not his primary reason for getting involved. After meeting Martell,

Christian began hanging around that same alley, waiting for Martell and his friends to come by. “I kind of became almost the gopher for the skinhead group,” Christian says, “because they were all older than I was by a lot...I wanted to mimic them. I wanted to be just like them.”

Even after months of actively supporting the Chicago Area Skinheads—better known as CASH on the streets—Christian didn’t really think about the group’s message or mission statement, only about the fashion, the aggressive music the group loved, and the fearful looks on outsiders’ faces when racist skinhead gangs walked the streets. Christian liked the tenets the group chose to adhere to, which regulated everything from the foods he ate to the stores he shopped in, and the feeling of having older group members look out for him, care about his wellbeing.

“It was so empowering to go from nothing, to go from not having any friends and not having any influence at all, to all of a sudden being a part of an organization,” he says. “...I remember just feeling very empowered and almost drunk with power because I felt like I could do anything.”

Christian says he doesn’t remember an exact moment when the scales tipped, when he went from someone who merely enjoyed the security of being in the organization to someone who believed their ideology. But he does remember noticing small things that seemed to fit within the group’s beliefs, like an influx of crime as unemployment rates in Blue Island rose and an increasing number of poorer minorities moved in. When Clark Martell and five other supremacists were arrested in 1988 for breaking into a former CASH member’s home, beating her, and painting a swastika on the wall with her blood, Martell was sent to prison, leaving the Chicago Area Skinheads leaderless: some members quit the gang entirely while others fled the city.

At age sixteen, “I was left almost alone with this organization, which was the most infamous skinhead organization in the country because it was known that they were the first organized white power skinhead gang,” Christian says. “Before I knew it, I had kind of inherited it.”

### **Inside the Supremacist Community**

Christian sounded like an unlikely supremacist. The son of first-generation Italian immigrants, Christian came from a middle-class household. His parents had a healthy marriage and he was raised in “a really good home” that was bereft of abuse, alcoholism, drug use, or racist ideology. None of the stereotypes associated with white power radicals fit. He was just a lonely kid, he says, and, like many teenagers, looking to rebel.

Christian’s story is not uncommon within radical right wing communities. The approximately 527 active white supremacist hate groups currently operating within the United States represent a large swath of beliefs. The Ku Klux Klan and American Neo-Nazis are perhaps the most easily recognized flavors of white supremacy, but the

movement also includes certain racist factions of neo-Pagans who derive much of their doctrine from Norse mythology, and racist skinheads, a supremacist offshoot of the skinhead subculture that emerged among working-class punk rock youth in Great Britain in the 1960s.

Views on racism aren't uniform within the white supremacist community either, says Kathleen Blee, a sociology professor at the University of Pittsburgh who studies white power movements. Groups often clash—even chapters within the Ku Klux Klan occasionally face off with each other—and only a portion of white supremacist groups are violent. One thing white power hate groups do have in common is that almost all of the larger groups attract members from a broad range of geographic, education, and socio-economic backgrounds. The stereotypical white power leader is poor, uneducated, and has a prison record, but the reality is that right-wing hate groups attract the rich and the poor, high school dropouts and Ph.D.s alike. Many groups also focus on recruiting young members. Nearly one-third of users on the white supremacist site, Stormfront.org, are between the ages of fourteen and seventeen according to data analyst Seth Stephens-Davidowitz. And as strong a driving force as racism is within these communities, it's not usually what first attracts most new recruits as only a small portion of supremacists are raised in homes that hold those values.

“People think you develop really racist attitudes then you go out and find a group that expresses those, but that's not exactly how this works,” says Blee, adding that most modern-day white power groups are small. “It often works in reverse, that people start hanging around with people who are racist and they learn really racist attitudes by participating with those people in racist ways. Attitudes as much follow from behavior as they cause behavior.”

White power groups thrive on trust and personal connection, since the group's survival depends on staying underground and off the radar of law enforcement. Recruiting often goes something like this: group members hang out in entertainment hot spots that cater to younger crowds, like concerts and certain websites, and they're quick to pass along their own ideology-driven literature and fan zines. Supremacists spend time befriending insecure teens who are lonely and preferably already have pent-up anger. They physically defend weak kids from bullies, winning their loyalty in the process, and frequently use the movement's music, racist video games, and group cohesion as ways to entice recruits to come to events. All Life After Hate members interviewed for this story said that they were introduced to white supremacist ideology fairly quickly after hanging out in their respective groups; however, Kathleen Blee says that some supremacist communities initially skirt the race issue with new recruits.

“[New recruits] don't totally get the race-specific, particularly the anti-Semitic, ideas of the group until they're pretty deeply enmeshed in it,” she says. “From the outside it seems kind of impossible to believe, but actually people do hang out in these groups for a long time sometimes before they really know what's going on because the actual messages from the groups are somewhat hidden from more casual members.”



Acceptance is a vital component of white power communities too, and it's a key way that these groups feed racist ideologies to new members. Angela King was bullied and sexually abused during her early teen years. She was arrested for the first time at age thirteen and spent her early high school years bullying other students and hanging out with a punk rock clique. When the clique was recruited by a local Neo-Nazi gang, the then fifteen-year-old King traded in anarchy symbols for swastikas, though she knew little about what it meant. Within the Neo-Nazis, she found a family who seemingly cared for her. Like many other new recruits, she discovered that the group's cohesion gave her license to take her rage out on anyone she felt deserved it.

"I realized that being around [the Neo-Nazis], I could be angry," she says. "I could beat up as many people as I wanted and act out and I never had to explain."

Once inside a white power community, the group acts as a sort of echo chamber. Racist ideologies flourish, in part because of the group's drive to cut members off from the outside world. Social connections to anyone outside the movement may be discouraged, though this varies significantly from group to group. This isolation serves a dual function of creating a cocoon of racist ideology around group members and strengthening group cohesion by forcing members to rely on each other. Some supremacist groups even go so far as to form their own self-sustaining communes in rural locations to avoid any contact with outsiders.

Should members within white supremacist communities begin participating in the group's violent actions, the stakes get even higher, says Jack Schafer, a former behavioral analyst with FBI who investigated white supremacist groups for seven years.

"When they cross from rhetoric to violence, then the cocoon gets even tighter and they separate themselves from mainstream society," he says. "Anything inside [the cocoon] is going to be okay because it's validating. The only time it's not okay is when something from the outside comes in and says it's wrong."

With enough isolation, indoctrinating new "fresh cut" recruits is only a matter of time. Entire threads on Stormfront.org are devoted to the practicalities of navigating this isolation—from how to hide a white supremacist agenda when applying for a small business loan to dating tips on finding the perfect supremacist partner. With limited influence from the outside world, racism becomes the new normal. Fresh cuts who were once ordinary, angst-ridden teens begin to forget about the social connections they had (or didn't have) before the white power movement, and build their identities around the ideology of the group.

## **The Ingredients of White Hate**

I felt like I had found some of my answers. Existing alongside, and potentially working in tandem with, a natural tendency to love our own tribe and the discriminatory effects that come from in-group love, the culture of white supremacy (and, equally, the lack of

influence from anything outside that culture) is where overt racial hatred breeds. Supremacist communities prey on the young and the insecure, and the hate inside these groups grows in isolation from the outside world. But how does a new recruit in white supremacy, or any hate group for that matter, go from having racist views to committing violent crimes? In trolling through research on extremism, I found one paper that stuck out: *Terrorism—A (Self) Love Story*. Published in *American Psychologist* in 2013, the paper, which focuses on terrorist detainees in Sri Lanka and the Philippines, suggests that violent acts are often motivated by a quest for love and personal significance. According to the study, “the same motivation that when properly directed may uplift humans to their most constructive conciliations may, when misguided, plunge people into mutual destruction, savagery, and mayhem.” This passage seemed to underscore the central message that both in-group favoritism research and white supremacist testimony were also spouting—love is closer to hate than it seems. I reached out to lead author Arie W. Kruglanski, a cognitive social psychologist at the University of Maryland, to learn more.

According to Kruglanski, the shift from having a specific ideology to committing terrorist acts on behalf of that ideology is contingent on three basic ingredients, and according to my research, all of these ingredients perfectly sync with how the white supremacist movement operates. The first ingredient is a motivation for significance. In order to commit hateful acts of extremism, soon-to-be terrorists need to be searching for a way to feel like they matter or are worthy of being loved. That may offer a reason why the white power movement, as well as many other types of hate groups, intentionally seek out the young, the lonely, the bullied, and the angry, all of whom are already trying to carve out their place in the world.

Kruglanski’s second ingredient is an ideology that asserts that it can deliver that significance the new recruit so desperately wants. This too is a hallmark of the white power movement, which bills itself as the savior of the Caucasian race. One of the Aryan pledges widely adopted by white supremacist groups across the globe is Neo-Nazi leader David Lane’s famous “14 Words”—“We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” All Life After Hate members who were interviewed for this story stated that the urgency that comes with the 14 Words message is a key reason why so many disenfranchised people are attracted to Aryan ideals.

“I felt like I was doing something important,” Christian Picciolini says. “I had gone from doing nothing, looking at baseball cards, to changing the world, saving the white race from annihilation.”

The final ingredient to creating a racist motivated enough to commit crimes for the sake of their beliefs is a social network that continually reinforces the group’s agenda and the idea that the message is the only way to attain real significance. This is crucial, not only for creating violent racists but also for keeping them in the group, Kruglanski says.

“Once they stop believing in the ideology, this is a first step toward that deradicalizing

but it still may be difficult for them to extricate themselves from their social network,” he says. “They may feel dependent on the others in their network emotionally, materially. They may fear for their safety should they leave the network.”

These three ingredients not only offer an explanation of how new recruits get into terrorism; they also provide valuable insight on what radicals need to leave that life. (It is important to note that Kruglanski’s theory is by no means universally accepted in the field of terrorist psychology; but it is a useful and comprehensive tool to try to understand what motivates the formation of terrorist groups and approaches to fragmenting them.) Deprogramming a white supremacist is tough. Some researchers argue that it’s impossible to deprogram extremists on a large scale. But even some of the most ardent members of these groups do successfully leave, despite enormous obstacles hindering their way out. The Life After Hate members profiled in this story are some of these self-described “formers,” ex-hate group members who left white supremacy and lived to tell their stories. These formers can provide intel on the recovery process for die-hard racists and what, if anything, science can do to aid in the process.

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### **Part III: Is There Life After Hate?**

Music first got Christian Picciolini interested in racist skinheads, and music is part of what eventually drew him out of the movement. For Christian, copying flyers for the Chicago Area Skinheads quickly escalated to leading the group. He was expelled from four high schools, which left him with even more time to scale the supremacist ranks, eventually joining forces with the Hammerskin Neo-Nazi group. In 1995, Christian opened Chaos Records, a small store in Alsip, Illinois, that sold punk, ska, metal, and, of course, white power music. Though the store was primarily designed as a vehicle for supremacist bands, it forced Christian to interact with the general public.

“They were black people and Jewish people and gay people and Hispanic people,” Christian says. “I couldn’t deny the fact that I started to bond with them over things like music and the neighborhood.”

Chaos Records, along with the birth of his first child around the same time, were the first cracks in Christian’s cocoon. He had harbored questions and doubts about the movement for his entire supremacist tenure, but officially decided to leave sometime between 1995 and 1996. With an estranged family and no meaningful social contacts outside the movement, Christian battled an uphill transition back into mainstream society and spent the next five years fighting severe depression. “Everything that you have, everything that you know is wrapped up in this identity and leaving means that you have to start over...You have to leave everything behind.”

Life After Hate’s research on what causes and helps supremacists transition back into mainstream culture is just getting under way, and data won’t be available for a couple of years. But some things are known about converting racists. First, leaving the group isn’t

enough. Moving someone out of a culture of racism is not enough in and of itself to break their beliefs, though it may be sufficient to prevent them from acting on their ideology. Clark McCauley, co-director of the Solomon Asch Center for Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict at Bryn Mawr College, says that the Saudi Deradicalization Experiment provides examples of this in practice. Started in Saudi Arabia in 2004 in response to a dramatic uptick in extremist violence, the government-sponsored program provided psychological counseling to incarcerated terrorists and also religious-based education that downplayed violent interpretations of the Koran. Job support and money to help participants pay for housing, weddings, or higher education after release was also provided. Thousands of prisoners, many of whom were not directly involved in terrorist attacks, took part in the program according to the Council on Foreign Relations, and an estimated 80 to 90 percent of participants stayed out of extremist activities for good after leaving.

But for many participants, therapy and cutting terrorist ties did nothing to change their beliefs, only their behaviors. Follow-up interviews conducted during the program and after it ended show that some deradicalized graduates still ideologically supported the organizations they were arrested for joining, though it's tough to quantify exactly how many participants fell into this category. "Nobody really knows" how effective current deradicalization programs are at truly changing how participants feel about those they hated prior to entering the program, McCauley says.

Arie W. Kruglanski, author of *Terrorism—A (Self) Love Story*, says that a vital part of transitioning people out of the extremist life is addressing the issue that got them involved in supremacy in the first place—the feeling of insignificance. That means helping formers find some alternative means of gaining empowerment, such as through a job, education, or family ties, and reshaping their identities.

Turnover is high within white power groups, but transitional support for supremacists is extremely limited. That may be one reason why so many who try to leave these communities relapse, says Pete Simi, co-author of *American Swastika: Inside the White Power Movement's Hidden Spaces of Hate*. Some ex-supremacists risk their lives to leave, and those who make a successful exit start completely over once they're out. No identity, no surrogate family, no friends in the outside world; years of hate-filled actions to face down, a possible criminal record, and a body covered in tattoos that lets outsiders immediately identify past gang affiliations. Supremacists are hated so much, they're sometimes shunned even by organizations that specialize in gang intervention and recovery.

"It's almost like a double barrier for white supremacists in a way," Simi says. "There's the barrier that exists for all deviant groups...especially ones involved in violence and then there's probably an additional barrier for white supremacists because of their specific ideology."

Exit USA and Life After Hate are currently the only organizations within the United

States that provide transitional support specifically for ex-supremacists, though a few other nonprofits like Formers Anonymous and Against Violent Extremism include supremacists under a larger umbrella of programs for anyone leaving an extremist lifestyle. Part of the reason why there aren't more effective intervention programs could be because the supremacist demographic hasn't been studied enough to determine what causes members to drop the ideology and what they need to successfully break the racist mindset. Developing a better understanding of both of those things is one goal of Life After Hate's current research initiative, which is being led by Pete Simi and RTI International. In studying formers who successfully left, Simi hopes to find clear data patterns that can help organizations tell who's ready to leave and the best strategies for helping them make a successful and permanent exit.

## **Hate is Personal**

Life After Hate's and RTI's current research on what causes supremacists to exit their hate groups is one of the only scientific studies that focuses exclusively on the white power movement. However, research on other types of hate groups and on the psychology of dehumanization have led to valuable insights on how to break the cycle of racism and what society can do to help hate group members transition out. Eliminating hate, the studies, research, and interviews suggest, requires a personal touch. Just as new recruits get involved with supremacist organizations through personal connections, getting out also requires personal connections. Breaking the ideological echo chamber created within supremacist organizations oftentimes requires a close relationship with at least one nonjudgmental person from the outside, Simi says. Because supremacists strive to cut themselves off from the outside world, these connections often happen accidentally or through forced means.

Christian Picciolini found his exit connections while running his record store and being forced to deal with customers from all backgrounds who all had in common—music. Building those relationships happened slowly over the course of about one year, and when Christian revealed his supremacy background, his new friends supported his transition out.

“If it wasn't for them first of all showing me compassion even though they knew what I was about, I probably wouldn't have made the change at the time,” Christian says.

Angela King started her departure from supremacy in prison. While doing a three-year sentence for armed robbery, Angela was separated from her skinhead friends and forced to interact with the predominantly minority detention center population. She was surprised and overwhelmed by how decently she was treated by those she had spent years hating. Through forced interaction over several months, she found herself slowly opening up to a group of Jamaican women, several of whom treated her with compassion and pushed her to think about how her actions and attitudes affected other people. Through her friendship with these women, Angela steadily began developing a new identity. She came out as gay—an identity that's frequently rejected within the supremacist community—and began facing a daily barrage of questions about why she

held certain attitudes about race. One woman in particular kept asking Angela what would have happened if they had met on the outside—“What would you have done to me? Would you have killed me?” Through this new contact, she was also forced to confront racism from another perspective.

“One day she told me that she had always hated white people because most of the white people she knew in Jamaica were people that came as tourists and treated the land and the people there like shit and like they were property,” Angela says. “That was the majority of her experience with white people. I never, up to that point, had considered another side of it.”

Life After Hate and RTI are on a mission to figure out the most effective ways of lifting individuals out of the cycle of racist hatred within supremacist communities. Until their study is complete, research on dehumanization may provide hints on strategies that could help exiting supremacists view racial minorities in a different light.

Dehumanization, the process of demonizing an enemy by considering them less than human, thrives on isolation. Psychological research suggests that even if supremacist communities weren't racist, their drive to be separate from the general public and to create close social ties only with each other creates an environment that encourages members to forget that outsiders are humans just like them.

“Whenever people don't need to depend on others, when people have attained resources, when people feel socially connected, when people are consumed with their own group...They don't really need to notice other people or think about other people's minds,” says Adam Waytz, a psychologist at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

In a paper published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Waytz's research team found over a series of four experiments that the more we experience social connection with a friend or family member—in other words, people in our own groups—the more likely we are to believe that those who are far outside our group have smaller mental capacities than we do, are deserving of harsher punishments, and should be treated more like animals than people. Those results are reminiscent of Susan Fiske's findings that the brain perceives extreme outcasts as being a little closer to inanimate objects than people we feel we can connect with.

But just as isolation breeds dehumanization, the opposite is true too, and this is where group favoritism can potentially work to the advantage of recovering racists. In the same way that simply knowing someone is not in our group can cause us to perceive them differently and make judgments against them, discovering small things we have in common with out-group members can begin to reverse those effects. Acknowledging even basic facets of people, such as their name or a photo of their face, is a step in recognizing their humanity. This effect is so powerful that it even applies to inanimate objects. In a separate study published last year in the *Journal of Experimental Social*

*Psychology*, Waytz and his research team found that study participants were less likely to blame a self-driving car in an accident if that car had a human name and gender assigned to it. In other words, it takes very little to start the humanization process—a fact that product designers and advertisers have long used to help consumers feel good about their products. As Christian and Angela can attest, even small, menial interactions with racial minorities can, over time, go a long way in changing supremacist viewpoints.

Interaction alone won't be enough. Eliminating supremacist communities means taking steps to prevent loner teens from getting involved in the first place, creating systems designed to break the isolation that allows racist views to grow within these groups, and providing resources to help new members make a clean break. Fostering a broader understanding of how racism works and how the vast majority of people contribute to its perpetuation can help too.

When I first began researching this story, I thought of white supremacists almost as a different species from the rest of modern society. I was eager to learn about how the process of hate worked differently in supremacists, both neurologically and psychologically, than it does in the general population. The controversial science of the hate circuit and the body of literature on the power of in-group favoritism convinced me that in searching for hate, I wasn't looking at the issue broadly enough. The story of many white supremacists is one of in-group love used as a springboard to perpetuate a culture of racial hatred that targets young kids who have a need to feel powerful and protected.

Very little research focused exclusively on supremacists exists, and the Life After Hate-RTI study could potentially help answer questions about the best ways to help supremacists make a successful transition. But this story also taught me that overt racism is a much smaller concern than implicit bias, and perhaps greater scientific resources should be directed to researching effective ways of eliminating racist associations within the general public. Only recently has science considered eradicating unconscious racial prejudice a real possibility. Because unconscious biases are pervasive and hidden in the depths of our psyches, they're incredibly hard to fight. In fact, it's only in the last two decades that science has even bothered to try. Up until the late 90s, the assumption was that unconscious biases couldn't be changed. The research landscape shifted in the early 2000s when a few studies emerged revealing that implicit race bias could be temporarily reduced through methods like showing study participants photos of positive African-American role models like Martin Luther King juxtaposed with pictures of widely hated Caucasians, like Timothy McVeigh and Charles Manson. Since then, scientists have found multiple ways of temporarily reducing implicit bias, from having research participants read and discuss the positive effects of multiculturalism to having Caucasian study subjects navigate a virtual reality environment using an African-American avatar.

Calvin Lai, a Harvard University postdoctoral fellow, is one of the few researchers whose work focuses primarily on the small field of de-biasing. Last year, Lai tested 17 bias intervention methods to see which were the most effective. Those that reduced bias the

most had two things in common—first, they used tactics that evoked emotion in study participants. Second, they used a two-pronged approach for fighting bias. They attacked our inclination to favor our own groups while at the same time discouraging tendencies to reject outsiders. But questions loom about how long these results last. A few studies have shown reductions in implicit bias over time, “although overall,” Lai says, “the evidence is mixed and sparse.”

At this point, the sciences of rehabbing overt racists and de-biasing everyone else are both packed with more questions than answers, and those answers can't come soon enough. The past year has been a testament to the consequences of systemic white supremacy. Every Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice offers another indication that unacknowledged discrimination has life-altering effects. One way to reduce implicit bias may simply be to educate the public about these psychological mechanisms work and to create applicable programs designed to counteract the effects of unconscious prejudice. Another way could be to make those who create media aware of the deep psychological effects of repeated portrayals of white Americans in positive roles and black Americans in negative ones.

As racist right wing groups continue to decline, it's hard to see organized white supremacists as anything but a slowly dying breed. Increased understanding about this population and support resources to help them transition could hasten their ideological extinction. But for the general population, the majority of whom refuses to recognize their own biases, the battle to rid our racist brains of unconscious prejudices is arguably a much tougher one, and it's far from over. In fact, it's really just begun.



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