

Disclaimer

The following is a class assignment, a “position paper” for a “Hate Groups and Groups Violence” course. It is a balancing between following the class assignment, such as being a certain page length, format, and to answer the question prompt to discuss resources to offer American families to leave/avoid hate groups, along with trying to start a discussion with the Colorado Municipal League on where local governments and hate groups/violence intersect. This should not be mistaken for a fully vetted scholarly article in an official journal, but instead as research done over the span of a few months with limitations in both time and resources.

With this in mind, the value I find in this paper is it hits on a very difficult concept and idea for those aiming to reduce hateful ideologies. It covers the humanity in people who adhere to terrible worldviews, of the potential benefits of offering belonging and community to those who actively seek to deny both for others.

Local Governments Providing Belonging and Community to Curb Hate

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Pete Simi and Robert Futrell's book, "American Swastika", summarizes and analyzes the former's interactions with white supremacists in "Aryan free spaces", those places such as concerts, online sites, and homes where white supremacists can freely espouse and promote hate ideologies. The beliefs of such groups are cruel, what is disorienting is the common humanity Simi's experience reveals. A children's birthday party, a need for belonging and community, families who want to raise their children with shared values, remove the hateful expressions and there's nothing to distinguish them from others. (Simi and Futrell, 2015).

The assertion of this paper is that one means to decreasing hate within U.S. families, many described in "American Swastika" covering all manner of socioeconomic statuses, is to provide alternative and preferable means to gain the belonging and the community they find in white supremacy groups. In particular, it focuses on efforts that can be taken on the local level of government services. First, it's important to reaffirm the personhood of these families in contradiction to popular opinion that they are redemption-less, of beyond all reason and hope.

The Ethical Case

It's common to consider hate group and hate ideologies as aberrant, as beyond comprehension. It serves us to condemn both, to refute and take tangible steps through policy and practice to undermine these groups as well as their underlying philosophies. This does not mean the efforts to push against white supremacy need all be punitive, that a helping hand or genuine opportunity is out of the question.

When we look at pillars of social justice such as Ghandi, we find a historical and ethical basis for offering assistance even to those who would cause harm upon us. One of the concepts Ghandi adhered to, *ahimsa*, "goes beyond doing no harm, and involves an invincible good will to all, doing good even to one's enemy. It is through the weapon of self-suffering and love that one

ought to overcome an unjust person or system.” (Palakkappillil, 2014) Although Ghandi’s methods of self-suffering, of hunger strikes and enduring physical and systemic harm is a high benchmark to reach, it is nevertheless a lesson in the direction we can go, one that combats bigotry with tolerance, hate with love.

A modern example of this is Daryl Davis, made famous for befriending members of the Ku Klux Klan and eventually leading to hundreds of Klan members leaving. In a 2020 interview, Daryl observed:

“When a Klansman walks into a room, his wall is up. I’m trying to bring that wall down. I’ve been to 57 countries on six continents. But no matter how far I’ve gone, I’ve observed the same thing: we human beings all want the same things. We want to be respected. We want to be loved. We want to be heard. And we want the same thing for our families as everybody else wants for their families.” (Walker, 2020)

The final assertion in the ethical case is a better understanding of what movements of hate actually are. Hollywood romanticizes the idea of evil masterminds puppeteering sophisticated threats. Far right hate groups in reality are shaped much the same as less-destructive fringe movements. In the first chapter of Paul Jackson and Anton Shekhovtsov’s “The Post-War Anglo-American Far Right” we see these groups struggle with finances, loss of charismatic leaders, political infighting, the sort of mundane issues one could find in a local non-profit or election.

This is not to say that if such groups gained power, had deep financial wells, political control, and lacked repercussions the results would be anything less than devastating. This is evident by recent, high-profile incidents such as the Unite the Right Rally, the conspired kidnapping of Governor Whitmer of Michigan, and the January 6th Capitol attack. However,

each was and continues to be met with more powerful rebuttals from society and government institutions. We are contending with growing, yet still comparatively small and resource-constrained groups. A community-oriented approach is valid to address such problems.

Local Government Opportunities

Local governments are in the best position to provide community-level services and solutions. They have more knowledge, connection, and capacity to address issues in their respective jurisdictions that remain within an attainable cost and scope. Therefore, the remainder of this essay focuses on this level of government. Specifically, this paper discusses ways to bring about greater belonging and a sense of community to individuals and families either participating with hate groups or potentially participating with them.

Belonging

“Aryans are intensely aware of the stigma attached to their beliefs and the risks of publicly communicating their ideas. Exposure would likely mean loss of employment and possibly the vandalizing and picketing of their homes.” (Simi and Futrell, 2015) Although there is compelling evidence of continued systemic racism and other forms of bigotry in the U.S., the kind of extreme, Hitler-idolizing, explicit intolerance that comes from white supremacists is not accepted in greater society. In short, such individuals and families for most communities do not fully belong, must to a degree hide their beliefs to be acceptable. It’s from this starting point that action can be taken to help them better belong.

This belonging is not unconditional. Part of what makes local government efforts to provide services and opportunities for people a possibility is that the alternative of not changing should be worse, should be a less desirable option. The underlying assumption is any action

taken should pull members and prospective members of hate groups away from those ties and be a better part of society.

Common themes for those exiting hate groups involves several different kinds of connections with others including interactions with marginalized (minority) communities, experiencing social network shifts, healing through introspection and connection with others, and connecting with former white supremacists and/or an activist network. (Liguori and Spanierman, 2021). These common themes can be replicated through intentional public programs. Whether through court orders for those convicted of a crime, through public events, through neighborhood programs, and even with a specific program aimed at white supremacists all serve as means to encourage and facilitate these connections.

On another level of belonging is civic engagement. Whereas much of hate ideology is based on conspiracy theories and national, if not global, demands, local government tends to offer opportunities that are more immediate and accessible.

“The local level is the most permeable region of government; it is more proximate and accessible to individuals than state or federal government. Local policy issues are likely to be more immediate and comprehensible to individuals than state and federal policy. Likewise, local issues and decisions on matters such as land use, zoning, crime prevention, budgets, garbage collection and waste disposal, school governance, welcoming immigrant and minority communities, and upkeep of local parks and recreational areas, among many others, directly affect individual and community quality of life.” (Nabatchi and Amsler, 2014)

Promoting civic engagement with deeply racist and bigoted individuals comes with risk and sufficient preparation should come before any invitations or campaigns. The goal is to

establish belonging in individuals through public good, not using public platforms to promote and further white supremacy in communities. Therefore, smaller roles such as volunteering for a park clean up or attending a large community town hall or meeting will be more practical than having such individuals immediately join a decision-making committee or other significant initial role. As the goal is to bring individuals and families outside of groups, this push therefore should be to individuals and families, not to hate groups in their entirety.

The U.N. lays out a number of principles in its strategies to deal with hate speech, the first of which is “the strategy and its implementation to be in line with the right to freedom of opinion and expression. The UN supports more speech, not less, as the key means to address hate speech”. (Peters, 2020) In the United States in particular, suppressing speech, even hate speech, is an uphill battle due to First Amendment considerations. A different approach is to provide community members other, better options for expression in environments and with parameters to make hate speech more difficult and without reward.

Community

There is a growing body of literature that is looking into socioeconomic causes of hate and hate groups. In combining considerations of social capital (which reflects much of the above section in belonging) with matters of economic growth and development, there’s a case to be made that community-wide decisions can impact the likelihood of hate groups. (Goetz, Rupasingha and Loveridge, 2012) Although there is the need for more research into the specifics of what decisions can best lead to this, less segregation, more community amenities, other acts to try to make a more cohesive community should have a positive effect.

Of a similar track is the response to disasters and extreme events. Although natural disasters are normally the focus of such research, there’s little reason why human-caused

extreme events cannot also be included. Just as a flood, blizzard, or fire that caused unexpected damage and revealed a lack of preparedness can lead to systematic changes, so too can the identification and awareness of hate groups and ideologies in a community. In a continuum of learning from such events, social learning “the highest level of learning in [a] continuum, requires more in-depth analysis and discussion of previous policies and policy failures, including changes in goal definition and priorities.” (Albright and Crow, 2021) This social learning can be utilized within local government organizations and with the broader community as well.

Community events, public spaces, marketing and branding that share a more holistic, inclusive vision that’s followed up with action can create a sense of community to deter isolation and radicalization. Public art, walkability and ease of transportation, public gatherings added up can create a heightened sense of greater community to pull families away from hate groups and ideologies and into a more welcome, healthier, and beautiful society.

Conclusion

This position paper covers a very difficult concept of spending resources on hate group members and those with bigoted worldviews. This paper in no way suggests this is the only tool to be used, and legal repercussions, counter-protesting, and other social consequences such as a loss of job are not invalidated by strategies that seek to bring greater belonging and community. In fact, these strategies may serve to complement each other with the right balance of incentives and disincentives.

At the core of this paper is the understanding that hate groups do provide their members with belonging and community that they cannot, or perceive they cannot, find in mainstream society. Thus, there is the need to prove this belief incorrect through action. The ideas presented offer a starting ground to which more comprehensive tools and strategies can be built.

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