

In the United States, the problem of extremism is more pressing than ever. Despite this, some individuals are able to turn away from their extremist beliefs to a more moderate political stance before engaging in violence. Numerous deradicalized individuals can pinpoint the exact moment they “awakened” from their extremist selves. The concept of “deradicalization” – “a process of individual or collective cognitive change from criminal, radical, or extremist identities to a non criminal or moderate psychological state” (Koehler 2016:2) – is relatively new, as one of the first academic theories of deradicalization emerged in 2015 (Koehler 2016:80). To build a bridge between scholarly concepts of deradicalization and the lived experiences of the deradicalized, we must turn to these “awakening narratives” to study the mechanisms behind deradicalization from extremism.

One mechanism we should consider is religion and its central role within deradicalization narratives as a reason for both radicalization and deradicalization. The language of religion is employed by deradicalized individuals as a way to express the transformative nature of a significant political shift. Similarly, emotion is also central to understanding radicalization, deradicalization, and the rhetoric used in deradicalization narratives. A third mechanism is narrative, which emphasizes the discovery of commonalities around the way people *frame* their experiences rather than looking for objective truth. In this paper, I argue the mechanisms narrative, religion, and emotion are integral to understanding the rhetorical conceits used in deradicalization narratives, examining how these mechanisms surface in two prominent reasons for deradicalization– interpersonal relationships and disillusionment– within 30 public narratives of deradicalization posted to YouTube, TikTok, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts.<sup>1</sup>

### *A Sociology of Deradicalization*

The concept of “deradicalization” has been primarily situated within psychological and criminological discourses. The impulse of psychological and criminological frameworks is to pathologize radicalized individuals, further stigmatizing and alienating an already vulnerable group. Bringing deradicalization into sociological discourse would allow for a social and cultural analysis that takes into account factors outside of the individual. Max Weber, cited in Alexander and Mast (2018), articulates that “sociology is and should be concerned with the subjective meaning of action, and the act of ‘verstehen’— empathetic understanding—might allow for sociological ‘imaginative participation’ in the actions of others who live in differing circumstances or different times” (27). In other words, radicalized members of the alt right are not primarily agents of social oppression and politically “regressive,” but are reacting to material struggles they experience to make sense of the world.

In order to understand deradicalization fully, we must turn to the contexts and environments in which the process of radicalization happens. Radicalization describes a “process of individual depluralization of political concepts and values (e.g. justice, freedom, honor, violence, democracy)” toward an ideology (Koehler 2016:125). Radicalization encourages extremist views toward visions of political progress that often include the necessity of violence to further their agenda. Of the 30 narratives in this sample, most narrators pointed to at least one of three sources of radicalization in their narratives: being raised in an extremist environment; being recruited by in-person extremist organizations while in a vulnerable emotional space; or being radicalized through content online. In order to examine how people articulate the reasons for deradicalizing, we must analyze the mechanisms through which deradicalization is mediated: narrative, religion, and emotion.

### *Narrative*

First, narrative is a useful tool to study deradicalization. Most narrative studies focus not on “pure” empirical reality but on the ways in which the stories people tell “involve *conceptions* of truth that rely and take shape around the worldview—the beliefs, values, perceptions, ideas, feelings, and moral evaluations—of the community to which one belongs” (DeGloma 2014:3, emphasis added). Narratives reveal the shared cultural codes that are commonly used to explain complicated moral questions. People make sense of their deradicalization experiences through the narrative format, creating stories that appeal to audiences in familiar formats instead of making straightforward empirical claims about the realities of being deradicalized.

Narratives also serve a social function, and for deradicalized individuals, that may be to foster community solidarity among former extremists, offer alternatives to current extremists, or to help others understand how they might reach extremists to deradicalize them. In order to be socially compelling, narratives must be seen by audiences as authentic, which “is thematized by such questions as whether a person is “real”—straightforward, truthful, and sincere” (Alexander 2004:548). Performance theory, articulated by Jeffrey Alexander via cultural pragmatics, is a useful tool for understanding how narratives can socially and culturally resonate with audiences. Performers, in this case, try to “configure social and emotional life in compelling and coherent ways” (Alexander 2004:530). Awakening narratives can also be described as performative, as “[a]wakeners use affect, voice work, body imagery, apology, and other performative mechanisms as dramaturgical strategies to enact, engage, and undermine their past selves” (DeGloma 2014:146). The performative elements of narratives function rhetorically.

Within narratives, actors detail their own experiences being deradicalized, often drawing from their personal histories to construct the context behind their story. However, it’s problematic to make a complete distinction between personal and collective narratives, as they often work in conversation with one another. For example, former extremists may draw from the way that other people present their narratives of deradicalization to construct their own. DeGloma points out that the construction of truth through narratives must take into account the “function of the social situation or cultural vantage point of the individual making claims” (2014:3). Not only do narratives of deradicalization influence one another, but “by connecting their self-narratives to collective narratives, individuals can identify with such ‘imagined communities’ as class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nation” (Jacobs 1996:1241). Narratives draw from the repertoire of cultural stories that define the moral values of groups as a whole.

Deradicalization narratives also draw on the identity categories of an individual in order to establish the context of the narrative. Different identity categories have different cultural connotations, creating incentives for individuals to make note of certain identities in their narratives while not mentioning others. Some deradicalized individuals discuss the role of their identity categories in facilitating either their radicalization or deradicalization from the alt-right. For example, in a TikTok narrative posted online in 2025 by a woman who identifies as “a Black woman from Chicago, who grew up in [...] a poor family,” she discusses the religious pressure she faced. She was pushed into more conservative religious spaces because of her mother’s fears around her learning African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) from her peers, playing into the respectability politics that the narrator points out is a “survival tactic” used by Black communities throughout history. Her race also played an integral role in deradicalizing from these kinds of spaces, because she noticed how “how the Bible is weaponized against [her] ancestors,” eventually coming to the conclusion that her “ideology was anti-black.” The author

pointedly gestures at her identity as a Black woman to subvert the cultural scripts around what kind of person gets drawn into the alt-right.

It is also vital to analyze the setting where these deradicalization narratives are being performed, which impacts the presentation of and audience reception to the narrative. Social media has been acknowledged as a space where social actors present their digital selves in order to garner attention and recognition from an audience. While the intentions behind posting deradicalization narratives online may be to foster a community among people who have deradicalized, there is inherently a self-serving element to creating an online platform. In order to fully understand public deradicalization narratives, we must acknowledge this tension. Similarly to the necessity of specifying the *setting* of which these narratives are disseminated, we also must specify the *type* of narrative that deradicalization narratives utilize.

### *Awakening Narratives*

The codes of deradicalization that coalesce into narrative performances are what DeGloma calls “awakening narratives,” or “stories people tell about having once been contained in a world of darkness and ignorance and subsequently awakening to an enlightened understanding of their experiences and situations” (2014:2). When people deradicalize from extremist groups, their cognitive processes involve both a rejection of the values and norms of extremist groups, and an adoption of an entirely new worldview. For deradicalization narratives, awakers “account for their personal political blindness or ignorance as ‘false consciousness’ caused by political power relations” and make sense of their newly discovered truth as an “impetus to social conflict and change” (DeGloma 2014:52). This can explain the need for some deradicalized individuals to tell their stories, as many share their personal experiences as a way to hopefully encourage others who may have had similar ones to come forward. In a deradicalization narrative posted to TikTok in 2024, Emma, a middle-aged white woman, discusses leaving the alt-right growing up in a highly religious and conservative family. She explains that she has “fears of the ramifications of talking about this cult and getting out of it ... but I also think that it's very important for people who are thinking about leaving or have left to know that they aren't alone.” Additionally, people who have had similar experiences might pick up on new shared terminology or a community identity that describes their stories. In both of these ways, political awakening narratives can be mobilizing.

Like Emma, many narrators articulated a clear sense of being separated from their previous selves as a way to distance themselves from extremist ideology and thus, their own culpability. One individual who posted a narrative to TikTok says that when he got into “progressive politics and human centered morality,” he “lived a new life as a new person, experiencing the world in a completely new way.” Language surrounding rebirth was present in other narratives as well, as a narrator who posted his story to YouTube said that after his transformation, “A new person is born and awakened.”

This sense of inhabiting a “split self” results in social actors distancing themselves from their extremist past. Many narrators mention being called to share their experiences as a way to atone for their previous actions. One individual mentions feeling “a sense of obligation” to provide information to reporters about people she previously worked with at a white nationalist organization. She also goes on to say that the guilt she feels leads her to the conclusion that she doesn't “deserve to seek therapy for some of [her] experiences” because of her extremist past. Others process their guilt into action by simply telling their stories in hopes of both “inspiring other people to question their beliefs” and “amplify[ing] the voices of other people that have left,

who might not be ready to speak out.” Deradicalization narratives could potentially help others both leave extremist groups and encourage others to publicize their own narratives.

### *Religion*

Another mechanism we should consider is the cultural power of religion, which often provides the moral frameworks represented in deradicalization narratives. Cited in Taylor (2024), Fuist theorizes that religious frameworks can provide social schemas for articulating cultural events, impacting the political landscape in which deradicalization narratives are mediated (19). Extremist ideology is also influenced by religion, and religion “plays important roles in *most* right-wing social movements in the United States, including many that are not explicitly ‘religious,’” like white supremacist movements or the Tea Party movement (Braunstein 2021:1). Emma explains that she left the alt-right because she “loved Jesus,” noticing discrepancies between the hateful values practiced by her community and the peaceful teachings written in the Bible. She explains this further by saying:

I grew up staunchly Christian and not just culturally. I wasn't just somebody who said they believed in God. I loved God. And one of the things I loved so much is the fruits of the spirit: love, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control ... And when I got older and I became an adult I started seeing a disconnect between what I was taught and what my Bibles actually said and what the words of Jesus actually said, and what was happening in my church and in the politics of the Republican Party. And I did not see love, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control. So I started seeing discrepancies.

In this sense, some people who have been deradicalized had previously been drawn to extremism due to the very same religion that aided them in the process of exiting said group. In Emma’s case, she grew up surrounded by what she calls “far-right Christofascist” beliefs, but left that ideology behind because she “read the Bible, because [she] prayed, because [she] loved Jesus.” Religion can play a role in radicalizing an individual, deradicalizing an individual, and also influences the rhetoric through which one articulates either narrative.

Emma’s narrative is important because it reminds us that deradicalization doesn’t always come with a loss of faith, despite the way that faith is often tied up with extremist groups. Sociologist Ruth Braunstein embarked on a comparative ethnography of two communities involved in political organizing with spiritual ties. One was a chapter of the Tea Party, a conservative right-leaning group, and the other was a progressive interfaith community organizing group. Braunstein found that both groups “asserted that their religious traditions offered values, lessons, and notions of ‘the good’ that could help solve the country’s most pressing problems,” pushing against the left-leaning/secular and right-leaning/religious binary that structures conversations about the role of religion in political discourse today (2017:59-60). Both Emma’s narrative and Braunstein’s ethnography give nuance to this binary, discussing the way that religious ideas can be used to both exclude and include within the context of politics.

Currently in the United States, identification with one’s party of choice is often treated as something akin to spiritual affiliation. Experiences at rallies are transcendent, and political icons are revered as possessing supernatural characteristics. To some, this indicates that people are uncritically examining political discourse and falling under the spell of a charismatic leader. A cultural sociology of religion and politics opens up a more optimistic, nuanced view that expands beyond seeing religion as a catalyst of division and offers an explanation of the ways in which religion can be a tool for achieving unity. Many of these cases reveal the way that the moral

frameworks created by Christian narratives play a key role in helping people disengage from extremism.

### *Emotion*

Emotion is a social and cultural framework that individuals use to express both their radicalization and deradicalization processes. Emotion is performative, especially when dealing with performances that might be highly curated on social media. The emotions might be real, but performances of emotion inside narratives also work to create a sense of authenticity and trust in audience members. Expanding the study of emotions from their purely psychological context, Arlie Hochschild elaborates that a psychoanalyst might “rely on an intuitive notion of appropriate affect based on a prior notion of a mentally healthy response to this situation in this culture at this time,” and neglect the broader cultural forces that help shape emotion (Hochschild 3:2002). This is especially salient when dealing with deradicalization narratives, as in order for narratives to be accepted as authentic, an individual must perform an appropriate amount of guilt at their extremist past.

Awakening narratives also utilize the power of emotion to communicate their message and draw in audiences. The emotions of awakenings are wide ranging, but generally include a distinction between the negative feelings associated with one’s prior (in this case, extremist) self, and one’s awakened (in this case, deradicalized) self. The pre- and post-awakening selves are clearly distinct, and deradicalized individuals may look back on their past extremist selves with anger, pity, or shame (DeGloma 2014:132). Emma explains her prior self as being characterized by paranoia, fear, anger, and hatred, and her awakened self as experiencing “light, patience, peace, thankfulness, gentleness, kindness, [and] self-control” thanks to her new worldview. Emma explains that “It feels like a different life... It feels like the [Emma] I was the first 25 years of my life, I don't even know her anymore. I know her ‘cause I was her but ... I would not be friends with her.” For deradicalized individuals, this negation of their past identity is especially salient due to the social stigma attached to being part of an extremist group. In order to be redeemed, they must draw a clear line between who they were in the past and who they are now, and perform atonement for their past discretions. To analyze how the mechanism of emotion is used, we now turn to an analysis of the way emotion is conveyed in narratives that discuss interpersonal relationships as a reason for deradicalization.

### *Interpersonal Relationships and Emotion*

A prominent reason individuals cited for deradicalization was interpersonal relationships that encouraged a process of deradicalization or supported an individual along in their deradicalization journey. Interpersonal relationships created emotional push and pull factors for extremists, as they were often unable to access the emotional benefits of important relationships with individuals outside of their extremist group, as well as dealing with the shame from outside individuals for participating in stigmatized activities. Within the narratives, many people gave credit to the people in their lives who would push back against their extremism. Some of these individuals even inhabited marginalized identity categories that the extremist ideology considered to be a threat. A study of 40 former members of white supremacist groups lead by researchers Pete Simi, Steven Windisch, Daniel Harris, and Gina Ligon in 2019 revealed that for 45% of participants, “the presence of a positive familial or peer relationship represented a major disengagement theme in their extremist careers” (14). This theme is reflected in the 30 narratives

in this sample, as well, with many narratives posted to social media platforms mentioning the power of interpersonal relationships in facilitating deradicalization.

Solidarity between people is often a motivating force for both joining and leaving extremism. Some people are drawn into radical movements because they lack a community, and some leave because they are ashamed at what their community might think of them if they found out about their involvement in an extremist group. A prominent example comes from a narrator who told his story via podcast, who described wanting to protect both him and his daughter from being exposed to his extremist community. In this sense, fear can be a motivating emotion in leaving extremist groups. A few months after his daughter was born, a man in his group was shot and killed. He realizes that “if I didn't change my ways, death or prison was going to take me from my daughter.” This realization was enough to fully disengage from the hate movement he was a part of, which was motivated by both genuine love for his child and concern that he would be separated from her because of his involvement with extremism.

For many narrators, interpersonal relationships came in the form of support from close friends or family members, who were able to help in their deradicalization process. For example, in a narrative posted to YouTube, a young man describes his relationship with his aunt, who he credits with helping him “into a more sane place of mind.” This young man had been delving into some conspiracy theories around Holocaust denial, and his aunt encouraged him to talk to her about his ideas. He felt like his aunt would “actually listen” to him, rather than shutting down the conversation entirely or ridiculing him for believing in a conspiracy theory. He was arguing with her about the total death toll in the Holocaust, to which his aunt responded by asking him where he had gotten his information from. He then was forced to look back through the content he was consuming, and while trying to find the original source of his information, he describes that he “found someone who showed me how absolutely wrong I was.” He did more research into the ideologies that he believed and realized that “everything [he] had basically ruined my entire life over, was just a lie.” Without the initial prompting from his aunt, he would have never been forced to question the course of his beliefs.

For other narrators, their interpersonal relationship had an added tension, as their relationship was with someone who occupied a marginalized identity that the narrator's ideology encouraged them to oppress. In a narrative posted to TikTok, a former white Christian nationalist, named Larry, describes meeting a Black Muslim named R in prison. Larry would tell R that the reason he was incarcerated was because of the “consequences of [his] choices,” not because of any systemic issues. R would talk to Larry about being treated as a “criminal, a thug, a savage” by judges because of his race, and mention the fact that he was sentenced to a decades-long stint in jail due to a nonviolent felony. R recommended the book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander to Larry, who read it after being released from jail. The book changed Larry's life, helping him see the systemic issues behind racism in society. Both the book and the relationship were integral to Larry's deradicalization journey, as Larry would not have read *The New Jim Crow* had he not trusted R.

Emotion should be further explored in the context of deradicalization narratives, as it has been neglected by social scientists as a helpful tool for analyzing collective behavior, regulating studies of emotion to the psychological field. However, this ignores the ways that biological reactions can be structured by social norms around the “normal” response to certain situations, as well as how emotions can be a collective experience. In the context of deradicalization narratives, we clearly see people performing their guilt as a way to make amends to the communities they have hurt through their ties to extremism. In order to examine how these

mechanisms work in the context of different reasons for deradicalization, we must turn to an in-depth analysis of how one motivation behind deradicalization, disillusionment, is expressed through narrative conventions, emotion, and religion.

### *Disillusionment: Narrative, Religion, Emotion*

Disillusionment is a prominent reason cited for leaving extremist groups. People become disillusioned when “the group fails to live up to its claimed identity,” or experience “physical and psychological burnout” due to the violent tactics used by many extremist groups (Mattsson and Johansson 2020:83). This feeling can also surface for individuals when they start to notice contradictions in the extremist ideology, implying that the leaders of the extremist group are insincere or incorrect in their assumptions. Disillusionment can create more disillusionment, as “[i]f, for example, a group member is already disillusioned or disappointed by the leadership or strategic course taken, s/he might actively look for outside contacts and relationships who could support that view” (Koehler 2016:25). For policymakers in the deradicalization space, this finding is extremely important, as it suggests that planting even small seeds of doubt in the mind of an extremist may be enough to set them on the deradicalization pathway. One individual who was interviewed on a podcast was the child of a prominent figure in the white supremacist movement, and noticed early on that the actions and ideologies of her community were not in alignment. Members of the community would condemn violence, but “a lot of the heroes within this movement are people who were like assassins and vigilantes and people who robbed banks and murderers.” This was not the primary reason for deradicalization, but was one of the first inconsistencies in the ideology she noticed.

Disillusionment is a key affective stance when considering the mechanisms of the deradicalization process. DeGloma articulates that awakening narratives “reject a previously discovered worldview” by including “recantations, retractions, reconversions” that “involve vocabularies of disillusionment or disenchantment” (2019:87). Narratives often include descriptions of the exact moment in which disillusionment occurs for the deradicalized individual. Since narratives are accounts of recalled experiences, some amount of deradicalization narratives are influenced by hindsight<sup>2</sup>.

Disillusionment also has a direct link to religion, as religion often gives individuals a values system framework to abide by. When extremist ideas conflict with that original system of values, disillusionment can occur. We can see this in Emma’s case, as she noticed a disconnect between the actual teachings of Jesus and the hatred perpetuated by her community. Another individual who posted her narrative to TikTok mentioned this disillusionment process as well, saying that she “thought Jesus said ‘love your neighbor,’” and questioned why her community was speaking negatively about Mexican people. This individual also identifies as a Black woman, and that cultural experience helped her realize that “the Bible is weaponized against [her] ancestors,” furthering her disillusionment with her religious community.

Disillusionment is a helpful way of conceptualizing the first steps toward deradicalization. Employing people with the tools to help them realize that their ideologies are not only hurting the people they are targeting, but hurting themselves as well can be the beginnings of their exit from hate. This is also where interpersonal connection can play a role, as asking genuine, empathetic questions about the organization or asking the extremist to reflect on the efficacy of their actions can prompt them to consider whether or not they actually feel they belong in a hate movement. Disillusionment can also stem from having access to media with conflicting messages, or media that exposes the hypocrisies that are often present in extremist

ideology. Ultimately, fostering a sense of disillusionment helps an individual separate from extremist ideology on their own terms rather than feeling like they are being forced to leave by police, family members, or other individuals.

One narrator had disillusionment, religion, and interpersonal relationships combine in a significant way when her brother came out to her as gay. She had previously believed that “being gay was a sin,” and was taught that “gay people probably had a demon of some sort.” Her brother explained to her that he had begged God to make him straight, and she realized that “there’s no way my brother who grew up in the same homophobic household... would choose to be gay.” However, she struggled with the notion that her brother was gay because she wanted him “to go to heaven with me.” She chose to accept her brother, and even says that she “wanted [her] theology to be wrong because [she] wanted to be able to celebrate him.” She was disillusioned with the way that her community treated LGBTQ+ individuals, but also became disillusioned with the rhetoric used to justify homophobia, because she realized that “God does create queer people, and that just makes creation that much more diverse and beautiful.”

For this narrator, this experience was intensely emotional. Before her brother came out, she recalls experiencing her community’s reactions to the Supreme Court ruling in favor of gay marriage. She heard “wailing” and “lamenting,” and said that she was “pretty sure I heard someone crying.” She could not figure out why she wasn’t upset at all witnessing gay and queer people celebrate on the news feed she was watching. She witnessed her brother “bawling” as he told her about his queerness, and started crying as well. As she struggled to find a way for her to keep both her faith and her support for her brother, she “found [her]self being angry at God, like, why would God do this?” Witnessing her brother’s pain and becoming uncomfortable with her community’s homophobic stance made it easier for her to disengage.

Deradicalization narratives are often difficult to navigate because of their contradictory nature. Many individuals cite similar emotions, beliefs, and values when describing how they both got into and out of a radical movement. Often, they don’t follow a straightforward trajectory from extremist to advocate, as individuals can have setbacks that push them back into either having extremist beliefs or going back to their radical community. Some deradicalized individuals choose to disengage from politics altogether, citing their disillusionment with both sides of the political spectrum. The goal of deradicalization should never be to force anyone to the opposite side of the political spectrum, but to make sure they are not involved in an ideology that seeks to marginalize others. The key to helping more people deradicalize from extremism is to pinpoint the exact moment that their worldview shifted, and put that into use to help others. Deradicalization narratives must be analyzed not only to identify the reasons behind deradicalizing, but the way that people articulate their experiences. I plan to explore more narratives like these and analyze how various reasons for deradicalizing like disillusionment, religious beliefs, and interpersonal connection are expressed through emotional, religious, and awakening rhetoric in my senior thesis, as well as my future research endeavors.

### Endnotes

1. These narratives are pulled from a collection of over 30 narratives posted to social media platforms (TikTok, YouTube, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts), which are being coded and analyzed for my senior thesis. In this paper, I gave the narrators pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. I hope to continue and expand this work in my future studies.
2. It can be difficult to pinpoint what pieces of disillusionment an individual actually experienced while being deradicalized, or if the narrators are looking back on their previous experiences and infusing their current experiences onto them.

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