
Book Review: “Social work and the psychosocial journey out of far-right extremism” by Danny Carroll II, London, Routledge, 2025 pp172, \$52.49USD (hardback) ISBN: 9781032813325.

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Abstract

This review examines *Social Work and the Psychosocial Journey Out of Far-Right Extremism* by Danny Carroll II, an American social worker and scholar whose constructivist grounded theory study explores how individuals exit white supremacist groups. Carroll’s historical analysis traces the evolution of U.S. white ethnonationalism and highlights the vulnerability of America’s fragmented P/CVE infrastructure, including debates over social work involvement in police-led Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) teams. The book’s major contribution is the “Diverse Journey” framework, which reframes disengagement as a nonlinear process shaped by biographical events, disillusionment, and identity reconstruction. While this construct offers clinical value, its transferability to multidisciplinary risk-assessment contexts is limited. The review argues that Carroll neglects to engage relevant American scholarship on far-right exit pathways and could offer stronger guidance for ethical social work practice within existing systems. Nonetheless, the book is a timely call for U.S. social work scholars and practitioners to engage with white supremacist extremism.

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Review

Danny Carroll II, an experienced social worker and assistant professor at Western Washington University, joins a new wave of social work voices speaking into the field of direct practice with individuals engaged in extremist groups. Drawing on findings from his constructivist grounded theory study, *Social Work and the Psychosocial Journey Out of Far-Right Extremism* presents a distinctly American assessment of white supremacist groups and the processes of leaving them.

The book starts by tracing the rise of far-right extremism in the United States, with particular attention to America’s investment in maintaining white supremacy. One of the

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strengths of Carroll's writing is his ability to trace the historical development of white supremacy in America—from its mainstream acceptance in both government and national organizations (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan), to its period underground, and then its reemergence as grievance-based identity groups such as the Proud Boys, Incels and QAnon (pp.14-23). Carroll then details how key extremist figures participate in the American "New Right" ecosystem to support the mainstreaming of white ethnonationalism (pp.25) in the current government.

By detailing the pedigree of modern ethnonationalism within the United States Carroll gives readers a useful historical lens from which to understand the movement. The white ethnonationalist movement in America underwent several iterations and a period of abeyance, eventually finding their footing in our current era. This analysis has implications of its own, namely that democratic institutions must remain vigilant for how white supremacists seek relevance by reinventing themselves to fit into the grievances and needs of modern citizens.

Carroll then pivots from his historical analysis in the third chapter to present an overview of theories regarding radicalization and disengagement. cursory reviews are common in countering violent extremism literature but do not connect well with the intent of the book. Carroll's focus is exit pathways for white supremacists in America, however, he reviews several theories that are traditionally used to explain religious radicalization in non-American contexts (e.g. Two Pyramids, Staircase Model, Sageman's Four-Step Process). Carroll's goal could have been better served by engaging with theories that are not specific to an extremist type and conceptualize exit pathways as well. The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective Model (Khalil et al., 2022) may have served this purpose. Or better yet, Carroll might have brought in contemporary scholarship on the rise of the American far-right and what is known about its exit pathways. Simi and Futrell (2015) have conducted extensive qualitative interviews with American white supremacists, with particular attention to exit theory and pathways. Well known American sociologist Hochschild published a recent ethnography that also conceptualizes the pathways in and out of the far right (2024). This critique is not unique to Carroll's work. Scholars within the P/CVE field sometimes silo themselves within the field's empirical and theoretical literature. Books are a good opportunity to bridge the gap between the P/CVE field and relevant scholarship from other disciplines such as history and sociology.

A central contribution of the book is Carroll's analysis of U.S. domestic terrorism policy. He grounds readers in the current political landscape under President Trump, but also analyzes a legacy of the Biden Administration, the *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism* and the Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) teams (pp. 59–61). Readers from Europe, where some countries have over three decades of P/CVE style infrastructure, will gain more insight into how dependent America's fragile P/CVE infrastructure is on the priorities of the sitting government. There is no core funding for countering far-right extremism in the United States, leaving P/CVE practitioners in a continuously precarious position.

Carroll briefly describes the BTAM model, which is the police-led model by which high-risk extremists are identified and referred to allied health professionals such as social workers. Surprisingly, Carroll recommends that social workers avoid participating in BTAM teams because of their potential to be used as tools of state surveillance and control. This is a principled position that aligns with some social work scholar calls to significantly limit the profession's involvement with P/CVE (McKendrick & Finch, 2017). The downside, however, is it effectively excludes social workers from working with extremists that have been identified by police as amendable to a non-carceral exit pathway.

What would have been more helpful is guidance for American social workers on how to practice ethically within BTAM or other mandated frameworks. Carroll could have oriented the discussion with a review of the National Association of Social Work's code of ethics and compliance with health information legislation. There are also communities of practice in the U.S. to help navigate complex issues. The Prevention Practitioners Network offers various trainings and forums to allied health professionals, including social workers. Another option, keeping with the principled approach, would be to offer recommendations on how social workers interested in this work might train their current practice settings (e.g. community mental health, child protection) how to better serve clients involved in extremist ideologies. There are also advocacy strategies to secure program funding, which usually involve starting with philanthropic sources and then petitioning the government for sustained funding commitments.

The empirical chapters detail Carroll's constructivist grounded theory study of 18 former white supremacists and their exits from extremist ideology. He should be commended

for taking the space to describe his methodology, which is rigorous. Grounded theory is designed to extract content-rich data that aids researchers in understanding the key mechanisms involved in a social experience, in this case exiting American white supremacy. This methodology supports nuanced theory development, and avoids treating people as monoliths (a concern of Carroll). A disadvantage of grounded theory studies, however, is that they are numerically small and specific samples. As such, in keeping with constructivist style epistemology, readers considering applying Carroll's findings to their setting, even if it is with far-right populations, must first consider whether their population of concern shares similar factors such as motivations, group structures and/or exit pathways. Carroll would have helped the transferability of his findings by including a more detailed section of participant demographics, which included characteristics such as location, marital status, employment status and income level. This does not mean that Carroll's findings are not transferable, but that their richness must be distilled if applied to other contexts.

A point Carroll makes throughout the book is the reductionist quality of terms like *deradicalization* and *disengagement*, which gloss over incredibly complex processes in a person's life (p. 45). Carroll's findings propose "Diverse Journey" as an alternative phrase to conceptualize the exit process (p. 119). He identifies axial themes (grounded theory terminology) including "Biographical Events," "Encounter with the (hated) Other," and "Disillusionment (with group and ideology)", all of which contribute to an "Awakening of Conscience." A "Shattered Sense of Self and Connection" (to the group) follows, propelling the "Diverse Journey." This journey is harrowed by mental health symptoms Carroll coins as "Post-Extremist Stress." The "Diverse Journey" is facilitated by social factors, help-seeking behavior, and perceptions of helping professionals. Study participants do not end in a static, deradicalized state but rather in a dynamic process in which they cultivate a new sense of self and connection.

The diverse journey's value lies in its integration of mental health, identity reconstruction, and social reintegration within the exit pathway. Scholars in the field will point out that most radicalization and disengagement theories engage with these themes as well. Carroll's challenge, however, is that his study participants did not easily see themselves in terms like "disengagement". He advises social workers to challenge tired discourse, and use language such as the diverse journey construct, which better reflects client experiences. This is

an important consideration for social work, a profession that aims to centre the needs of vulnerable clients and communities.

There are, however, implications to consider in adopting a new discourse style. For one, in a multidisciplinary environment it is necessary to do our best to use the same language. Terms like (de)radicalization and disengagement may be contested but are still helpful because they are understandable between disciplines and to the general public. Another consideration, many P/CVE professionals (social workers included) conduct risk assessments, often in the risk-need-responsivity model. The field has a duty to public safety and the diverse journey construct does not appear to consider whether individuals who are exiting ideologies still have potential for extremist violence. While not necessarily a flaw of the study, this is a significant limitation of its transferability.

Where the diverse journey construct seems immediately useful is in dialogue with clients and other program participants. Clients and their families already hold the stigma of extremist involvement. Using language that reflects the complexity of their experience maintains a strengths-based approach, key to social work principles and practice. The diverse journey construct may also facilitate the kind of conversation that opens up new possibilities. This is aligned with motivational interviewing and stages of change theory, which are often applied in social work practice settings. The new discourse style might also support P/CVE practitioners to consider whether they might be justified in using different phrases like “diverse journey” in contexts like referrals, case management or sharing client success stories.

Regarding implications for American social work, Carroll advocates for the adoption of national P/CVE frameworks that specifically target white supremacy. He points to Germany and the Nordic countries as examples, though these are nations with strong social service sectors. As noted above, the United States does not have a strong history of institutionalizing a P/CVE style response to white ethnonationalism. Carroll reasons this is because of the nation’s historic investment in white supremacy, but there is perhaps a stronger economic reason. As a capitalist, liberal market economy, the United States has commodified many of the services that P/CVE programming provides for free. For instance, mental health counselling is paid for out-of-pocket or private insurance. Community outreach and organizing services are small-scale. In the American context, the best funded P/CVE style programming (at least at this point in time), will always be tied to justice initiatives within the

police or prison services. Even democratic governments like the Biden Administration had to work within the constraints of a heavily privatized system of health and social care. Adopting national strategies with core funding commitments like those in Europe are unlikely to occur. Carroll rightly notes this is a monumental task for American social workers, who bear the burden of imagining how they might fulfill their mandate within their economic context.

Carroll states that most of his study's participants did not exit their ideology with the help of a social worker, and that some were even rejected by the social service organizations they approached (p. 120). This finding should trouble social work professionals, regardless of whether they work in the P/CVE field. He rightly calls for schools of social work to educate students not just about white supremacy, but also to prepare them for effective, ethical engagement with this population. This call aligns with the profession's commitment to competent service for all people. This reviewer fully backs Carroll's call and agrees that the complex work of supporting someone away from far-right extremism is well within the scope of the profession. Carroll's book is a must-read for American social work educators who want to ensure their students can intervene with ethnonationalists. P/CVE researchers will also benefit from reading Carroll's analysis of the state of America's far-right movement, and the current P/CVE structure's inability to respond to this threat in a meaningful way.

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