Running Head: UNDERSTANDING CYBERHATE

Understanding cyberhate: Social competition and social creativity in

on-line White-supremacist groups.

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Abstract

This study investigated the self-enhancement strategies used by on-line White-supremacist groups. In accordance with social identity theory, we proposed that White-supremacist groups, in perceiving Whites as a high-status, impermeable group under threat from out-groups, should advocate higher levels of social conflict than they would exhibit social creativity strategies. We also expected levels of advocated violence to be lower than social conflict and social creativity due to legal constraints on content imposed by law. An analysis of 43 White-supremacist web-sites revealed that, as expected, levels of social creativity and social conflict were significantly greater than levels of advocated violence. However, contrary to predictions the web-sites exhibited social creativity to a greater extent than social conflict. The difference between social creativity and social competition strategies was not moderated by identifiability. Results are discussed with reference to legal impediments to overt hostility in on-line groups and the purpose of socially creative communication.

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Increasingly, hate groups have used the Internet to express their viewpoints, sell their

products, and recruit new members (Lee & Leets, 2002; Levin, 2002). This phenomenon

called *cyberhate* has taken the form of hatred against particular social groups such as gays

and lesbians (McKenna & Bargh, 1998), and advocacy of 'terrorism' (e.g., Ballard, Hornik,

& McKenzie, 2002; Stanton, 2002). However, the most common example of cyberhate is

racial hatred as can be seen in the case of White supremacists in the USA (Beckles, 1997;

Leets, 2001; Zickmund, 1997). Cyberhate of this kind is abundant on the Internet, and Black

Americans are the primary target (e.g., Beckles, 1997). These racially motivated hate groups

are the focus of the present study.

Whilst free speech on the Internet is generally protected in the United States of

America by the First Amendment to the Constitution, theorists argue that hate rhetoric and

hate speech may lie at the border of protection when its long-term and indirect effects are

considered (Leets, 2001; Levin, 2002; Zickmund, 1997). In particular, overt hostility and

advocacy of violence are considered dangerous and unacceptable, and legal action may be

taken against web administrators who allow this sort of activity. However, cyberhate,

especially in the form of White-supremacist sites is frequently seen to be a strong presence on

the Internet (Gerstenfeld, Grant & Chiang, 2003). Despite legal impediments, White

supremacists continue their drive to recruit new members, spread their views, and sell their

merchandise. To do so successfully these groups must position themselves as legitimate and

effective exponents of their cause. It therefore becomes important to consider the strategies

that White-supremacist groups use that enable them to maintain and enhance their position

relative to others.

Social identity theory (SIT: Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Haslam, 2001) provides a useful framework to examine this issue. SIT proposes that groups in general can adopt different strategies for self-enhancement and to achieve self-distinctiveness from other groups, depending on their status, the permeability of group boundaries (i.e., the extent to which people are able to move freely between groups), and the security of relations between groups. For example, in low-status groups where members perceive that group boundaries are permeable, individual group members are likely to adopt a *social mobility belief system* and attempt to leave their group to increase their own personal status. The belief in social mobility is a strong aspect of Western democracies where people aim to 'shed' their membership as a low status group member and attempt to gain membership in the high-status group (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). It is important to note, however, that social mobility strategies are, for the most part, only available to those groups where identity is achieved rather than ascribed.

When group boundaries are seen as impermeable, an example of which is the caste system in India, group members' goals shift from maintaining positive individual identity or one's own personal status, to enhancing (for low-status groups) or maintaining (for high-status groups) the position of the group relative to the out-group or out-groups. SIT posits that two strategies are used by groups who adopt this *social change belief system* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). First, groups can adopt socially *competitive* strategies such as conflict, open hostility and antagonism. Examples of such activities are political action, protests, revolutions, and war where groups directly challenge the out-group (e.g., Milgram & Toch, 1969; Reicher, 2001; Tyler & Smith, 1998).

Second, groups can adopt socially *creative* strategies in order to maintain positive social identity and enhance group distinctiveness (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In this context, 'creative' does not carry any positive connotations. It simply means that groups will engage

in inter-group comparisons on unorthodox dimensions that tend to favour their own group.

For example, Lemaine (1974) engaged children in a competition to build the best hut.

However, some children were given inappropriate materials and could not possibly win the

competition. Lemaine found that those children emphasised their achievements on other

dimensions such as how good a garden they had made. Also, groups can engage in strategies

that create new dimensions of comparison with the out-group, or indeed compare themselves

with another out-group (Haslam, 2001). Socially creative strategies have the effect of

redefining the position of the group without directly challenging the out-group (for low-status

groups) or by indirectly reinforcing the out-groups inferiority (for high-status groups).

White-supremacist groups can therefore either adopt social competition or social

creativity strategies to maintain and enhance their position relative to their target out-group.

According to Haslam (2001)'s recent interpretation of SIT, the extent to which they should

adopt these strategies depends on the security of Whites as the dominant group, and threat

from the out-group. According to Haslam, when status is secure, groups are likely to display

magnanimity towards the out-group, or display covert discrimination. However, according to

White supremacists the position of Whites as the dominant group is insecure (Green, Abelson

& Garnett, 1999). Haslam's (2001) reading of SIT proposes that under these conditions,

social creativity strategies are more likely to take the form of 'supremacist ideologizing'

which attempt to justify the group's superiority over the out-group. This includes overt

racism. However, threat from the out-group is said to make competitive strategies such as

overt aggression and hostility more likely. As Haslam (2001) states: "Even more

aggressively, members of a high-status group who feel their relative advantage is under threat

may band together to resist change" (p. 40). This resistance to change is much more likely to

involve social conflict than creativity, because it sets the high-status group against the out-

group and directly challenges the out-group instead of accepting the status quo or avoiding confrontation.

From Haslam's (2001) reading of SIT, we might therefore predict that on-line White-supremacist groups would engage in more social competition strategies than social creativity strategies. Their insecure and threatened position as a self-perceived high-status group makes it likely that they will adopt competitive strategies such as conflict and violence, in order to maintain the status quo and promote their group as superior to the out-group. However, as already mentioned, Haslam's conceptualization of SIT also predicts social creativity under these circumstances. The key question for us then is what is the balance between these two strategies? Given that White supremacists are popularly described as 'hate' groups, we would expect that the level of advocated conflict would be higher than the level of exhibited social creativity, but that both of these would be higher than the level of advocated violence due to the constraints imposed by the law.

Based on the research of Douglas and McGarty (2001, 2002) we also aimed to investigate the role of identifiability in the display of social competition and social creativity strategies in on-line White-supremacist groups. Contrary to previous research (e.g., Dyer, Green, Pitts & Millward, 1995; Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986, 1991), Douglas and McGarty found that hostile flaming communication on the Internet was dependent on communicative context, and not simply a uniform feature of computer-mediated communication. It was found that communicators stereotyped out-group White supremacist targets more under conditions of identifiability to a like-minded in-group audience than under conditions of anonymity, or identifiability to an out-group audience. This supported hypotheses derived from the social identity model of deindividuation effects that people communicate strategically depending on their identifiability, and their audience (SIDE: Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995; see also Lea

& Spears, 1991; Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998; Reicher & Levine, 1994 a, b; Reicher, Levine & Gordijn, 1998; Spears & Lea, 1994, 1998). Therefore, although it is impossible to know who the White-supremacist writers perceive their audience to be, it is worth exploring whether the display of social competition versus social creativity strategies varies as a function of identifiability. Examining this possibility formed the second part of this research.

In this research, we sampled a number of White-supremacist web-sites based in the USA and analysed their content according to a number of dimensions including identifiability, and rated them for perceived levels of social competition (advocated violence and advocated conflict) and exhibited social creativity.

<div align="center">Method</div>

Sampling White-supremacist sites

A list of potential web-sites were obtained from the 2000 edition of The Hate Directory (http://www.bcpl.net/~rfrankli/hatedir.htm). The Hate Directory provides links to a large number of hate-related material on the Internet including web-sites, file archives, mailing lists, newsgroups, internet relay chats and electronic bulletin boards. Some of the web-sites identified by the directory are active, but the majority of links in the directory at any one time are no longer on-line. The Hate Directory includes sites that, in the opinion of the administrator: "advocate violence against, separation from, defamation of, deception about, or hostility toward others based upon race, religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation." The directory also includes links to sites dedicated to combating hate on the Internet. Forty-nine hate web-sites were identified to satisfy our criteria for inclusion in the study, in that they were administered by White-supremacist groups based in the USA. Of these, six were no longer on-line, bringing our final sample of web-sites to 43. We excluded music, merchandising sites or sites that merely echoed other sites' contents without incorporating the site owners' opinions about their validity. We also excluded Holocaust denial sites, sites that

were primarily devoted to other issues (e.g., anti-gay sites) or which contained clear indications that they were actually run by people outside the USA. Our dataset therefore represents a snapshot of the population of active White-supremacist sites in late 2000. Not all sites that we surveyed are still active.

Coding

Two coders independently rated the content of the web-sites. Where a charter or statement of beliefs was included specifically, this was coded exclusively. Otherwise, the pages were checked for statements of beliefs about relations between 'Whites' and the out-group targets (primarily African Americans and Jews). Only those statements that could be strictly classed as being attributed to the owners of the sites were coded. Music, images, articles by people who were not identified as operators of the site, and links to other sites were excluded.

The web-sites were first coded for their use of social competition. This was based on two factors: advocacy of violence and advocacy of conflict in general. Advocacy of violence was defined as the extent to which the web-sites advocated violent strategies against the out-group. A clear example of advocated violence was:

ACTIVE SELF-DEFENSE is the answer for the white race WORLDWIDE. ALL threats to our racial existence should be handled with ACTIVE SELF-DEFENSE! We can no longer sit back and watch our race being destroyed without taking ACTIVE SELF-DEFENSE! Our people MUST be awakened to the fact that we are at WAR for our very racial survival! If you are not with us - YOU are the ENEMY! If you are with us it's time to take part in ACTIVE SELF-DEFENSE of our race!

Two independent raters coded the degree of advocated violence for each site on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 was 'unambiguous opposition to violence', 25 was 'vague opposition to violence', 50 was 'neutral about violence', 75 was 'implicitly endorsing violence or

suggesting that violence might be an understandable response', and 90+ indicated 'explicit and strong advocacy of violence'. Inter-rater reliability was acceptable at $r = .87$ and the mean difference between raters was 1.86, indicating that means were valid within that dimension.

Clearly, violence is a strategy for social competition but other forms of conflict exist. Web-sites were also rated for advocated conflict (with or without advocacy of violence) by the same raters as before. This was defined as the extent to which the web-sites advocated conflict between the in-group and out-group. Conflict was coded on a scale from 0 to 100 where 0 was 'unambiguous opposition to conflict', 25 was 'vague opposition to conflict', 50 was 'neutral about conflict', 75 was 'implicitly endorsing conflict or suggesting that conflict might be an understandable response', and 90+ indicated 'explicit and strong advocacy of conflict'. An example of advocated conflict without strong advocacy of violence was as follows: "That all immigration should cease until all Americans are gainfully employed. Troops should be positioned at all borders to stop the flow of illegal aliens." Inter-rater reliability was again acceptable at $r = .77$ and the mean difference between raters was 2.79, again indicating high validity of means within that dimension.

The same two independent raters also coded the web-sites for evidence of social creativity strategies. We defined social creativity as the extent to which the web-site content showed evidence of strategies that redefine or alter the elements of the comparative situation (from Haslam, 2001). Here, we included statements in which groups compared themselves with the out-group on less orthodox dimensions that generally favour their own group. We also included statements where groups created new dimensions of comparison with the out-group, or indeed made favourable comparisons with other out-groups. All statements were deemed to serve the purpose of altering the position of the group without direct hostility or competition towards the outgroup. An example of social creativity as coded here was: "No

one race or culture is "superior" to others, but they are all different. Racial integration threatens all Peoples. Humane efforts towards separation and self-determination are better for us than endless repression, tension, and racial violence."

Social creativity was rated on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 was 'total absence of social creativity', 25 was 'vague use or suggestions of social creativity, 50 was 'moderate use of social creativity', 75 was 'extensive use of social creativity or a small number of extreme arguments', and 90+ was 'highly detailed and extreme use of social creativity or high elaboration of arguments used to alter the comparative context'. Inter-rater reliability was acceptable at $r = .81$ and the mean difference between raters was 4.07, indicating high validity of the construct.

We also coded whether the sites were anonymous or identifiable. We considered anonymous sites to be those that did not include a name or e-mail address, or that used an apparent pseudonym. These were the same criteria applied by Douglas and McGarty (2001, Study 1) to classify *internet anonymity*. Out of the 43 websites, 24 were anonymous and 19 were identifiable.

Finally, the web-sites were coded on a number of dimensions to examine the general features of the web-sites. Our initial overview of the content had suggested that many of the sites appeared to be the work of one individual. Others were, or purported to be, the work of communities that were claimed to be active on the Internet and other domains. The sites also varied in their tone: some being opposed to African Americans, others to Jews and others to immigrants and still others to all of these groups. The tone of the content of different sites also varied markedly: some material referred to religious beliefs, other sites focused on scientific or statistical arguments. First, we coded the hate site's target out-group (e.g., Blacks, Jews). The in-group was always White Americans. We then sought to identify whether the web-site was ostensibly an on-line community by checking whether the site

maintained bulletin boards or mailing lists, and whether the site had an existence outside the

on-line world depending on whether or not it supplied a postal address or other evidence that

it was more than a web-site. We also coded a group as an action group if it mentioned its role

in organising rallies and other activities such as protest demonstrations. We rated the group

for the presence or absence of extremity markers such as calls for extreme actions and

sacrifices. We also noted where the arguments for the superiority of the in-group contained

divine, pseudo-scientific or social science justifications.

Results

Of the 43 web-sites sampled, 91% targeted Black Americans as their out-group. Fifty

one percent were on-line communities and 72% were physical communities. Seventy nine

percent of web-sites appeared to be associated with action groups. Sixteen percent included

extremity markers, and 37%, 21%, and 11% used divine, scientific, and social scientific

justifications respectively for in-group superiority.

To test our main hypothesis, we conducted planned comparisons comparing the levels

of advocated violence with the levels of advocated conflict and social creativity in the on-line

White-supremacist groups. We found that the web-sites contained higher levels of social

creativity ($M = 67.85$, $SD = 16.28$, $Range = 20$-90) than violence ($M = 22.56$, $SD = 21.27$,

$Range = 0$-75), $t(42) = 11.85$, $p < .001$. Sites also exhibited higher levels of advocated

conflict ($M = 59.88$, $SD = 18.71$, $Range = 20$-90) than violence, $t(42) = 16.93$, $p < .001$.

However, contrary to predictions, websites also exhibited higher levels of social creativity

than advocated social conflict, $t(42) = 2.17$, $p < .05$.

We examined the correlations between the three constructs to see if they were related

or distinct. As expected, we found that advocated violence and conflict were significantly

correlated, $r(43) = .75$, $p < .001$. Also as expected, neither of these socially competitive

strategies were significantly related to social creativity, $r_{(conflict)} = .05$, $p > .05$, and $r_{(violence)} = .13$, $p > .05$.

To examine the potential role of identifiability, we conducted a 2 (rating: social creativity/social competition) x 2 (identifiability: anonymous/identifiable) mixed ANOVA. Social conflict and violence ratings were averaged to obtain a measure of overall social competition. We found a main effect for rating (creativity or competition), such that levels of social creativity were higher than competition as already shown, $F (1,41) = 135.72$, $p < .0001$. However, there was no main effect for identifiability (anonymous or identifiable) such that overall ratings of competition and creativity were no different in anonymous ($M = 43.13$, $SD = 17.57$) and identifiable ($M = 47.83$, $SD = 20.22$) websites, $F (1,41) = 1.17$, ns. There was also no interaction between rating and identifiability, indicating that the difference between social creativity and social competition strategies was not moderated by identifiability, $F < 1$, ns. Advocated conflict was higher under conditions of identifiability ($M = 66.44$, $SD = 17.76$) than anonymity ($M = 54.69$, $SD = 18.12$), $t (43) = 2.13$, $p < .05$, but this was not the case for violence or social creativity.

Discussion

The sites we selected had been chosen by the administrator of the listing on the basis of their advocacy of violence, conflict or hostility. The populations studied included many groups claiming to be affiliated with organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi Party (to name just the two best known ones) that are infamous for their historic support for racial intolerance. Given these selection criteria we would expect that if hate speech involving the advocacy of violence and conflict were to be found anywhere on maintained web-sites then we should find it here.

We were not surprised that the advocacy of violence was less common than the others, but it is remarkable that we found little evidence of the advocacy of violence in

absolute terms. The content of these sites contained many instances where people were being encouraged to engage in other conflictual strategies (legal, economic, social) but more common even than that was the exhibition of strategies of social creativity. These included examples where Whites were presented as victims of conspiracies organized by Jews, often involving using African Americans in some way, and policies of segregation were justified in terms of Biblical injunctions, individual freedom, and even to the purported benefits to other races.

Predictably, advocacy of social competition and violence were related to each other and unrelated to exhibited social creativity. This is not surprising as violence is simply one strategy for conflict and both these items measure perceived advocacy of a strategy rather than the presence of the strategy. However, we do need to explain the relative levels of these phenomena.

The low levels of advocated violence in this context are relatively easy to explain, and are, in fact, consistent with a recent content analysis of extremist Internet sites in general, indicating that very few websites (16.6% of those analysed) urged violence (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003). American courts have convicted people who use the Internet to communicate threats rather than simply ideas, so that advocating violence poses a risk for the White-supremacist wanting to advocate violence on-line (Levin, 2002). The legislative context also means that sites that advocate violence can be shut down by their service providers or by action against those service providers (see Leets, 2001). These sanctions do not depend entirely upon identifiability (and our results show no relation between identifiability and advocacy of violence). The anonymity of a web-site may make it more difficult for the FBI to prosecute the owners, but it does not necessarily make it harder for the web-site to be closed down. We might expect therefore that the majority of communications on the Internet

that do actually advocate violence will be appearing on e-mails and bulletin boards rather than web-sites.

As we noted, identifiability was associated with advocacy of social conflict. We would advocate caution, however, in interpreting this relationship. It is difficult to ascertain which names provided on sites were the names of real people and which ones were realistic sounding pseudonyms. Indeed it is possible that we may have witnessed examples of pseudo-identifiabilties where White supremacists adopt the guise of a courageously identifiable champion of the White race in contrast to the stereotypically anonymous racist.

The high levels of social creativity are more surprising in these White-supremacist groups. We suspect that the reason for this is that social creativity in these domains is not so much aimed at bolstering or creating a positive social identity but to help foster doubts amongst European Americans about relations with other groups as a means of promoting long-term conflict. In some respects, this is similar to the concept of 'new racism', whereby separation is justified on the basis of supposed incompatibility between groups rather than superiority (see Barker, 1999; Durrheim & Dixon, 2001; Hopkins, Reicher & Levine, 1997).

To take an example, a statement such as "the White race is under threat of extinction in the USA" is a socially creative redefinition of social reality but it is not comforting for people who define themselves as Whites, and it could hardly serve to create a positive social identity. Indeed it suggests that Whites are the low-status group, but it does *justify* conflictual relations towards out-groups without advocating them. As we have noted above a White supremacist who advocates taking up arms risks legal sanctions, but a White supremacist who advocates other forms of conflictual action or inter-group hostility still runs the risk of alienating potential supporters. A White-supremacy sympathiser may be happy to see their prejudices confirmed on their computer screen but they may not be ready to take the further steps towards actual participation in conflict.

Under this view, social creativity may serve the communicative function of helping to create a climate which is conducive to conflict: one where European Americans feel righteously aggrieved on the basis of the information supplied about the out-groups. The clearest examples of this kind of strategy are probably to be found in Holocaust denial sites (these were excluded from the current analysis by the focus of our selection criteria). Holocaust denial sites do not, in general, advocate violence against Jews but instead challenge the authenticity of certain historical claims and suggest that Jews either invented these claims to gain sympathy or even that they perpetrated the violence against themselves. The power of this tactic is that it serves to redefine Jews who survived the Holocaust from being victims worthy of pity to villains worthy of scorn. A similar argument is run in other sites in relation to African Americans who the web-sites authors claim should be seen as inherently predisposed to violence, crime and indolence rather than regarded as disadvantaged and often marginalized members of American society.

In line with Reicher's (2000) reconceptualization of the SIDE model as a Social Identity theory of Definition and Enactment, we would suggest that the evidence of social creativity in these settings probably has less to do with how social identity is defined (in positive or negative ways) but with the need to enact social identity in ways which help to achieve long-term goals and bolster group cohesion. The tactic is also consistent with the work of Veenstra and Haslam (2000) who showed that communications which referred to threat from an out-group tended to increase the level of commitment to group action, even for group members who identified less strongly with the group.

The evidence here that social creativity is distinct from social competition, and the possibility that social creativity may serve an intermediate tactical role in adversarial group relations deserves fresh consideration in other contexts. This could be done in other on-line

forums or in experimental work and may lead to a further reformulation of some ideas in social identity theory.

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