
Becoming, belonging and leaving – Exit processes among young neo-Nazis in Sweden

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Abstract

There is a growing field of studies on exit processes from extremist and militant organizations. At the same time, however, what is missing is a more developed oral history of exit processes in different European countries. Interviewing individuals who left the neo-Nazi movement five or ten years ago, we have studied and analyzed how the interviewees' narratives of exit processes are reconstructed and told today. Their reconstruction of narratives and stories on the exit process was influenced by several different factors, such as the time axis, education, intimate relations, employment situation, gender, and class. The results pointed towards a number of push and pull factors. The exit processes were seldom straightforward and linear, but instead dependent upon many social-psychological factors and processes.

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Introduction

There is a growing field of studies on exit processes from extremist and militant organizations (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Kimmel, 2018; Simi, Blee, DeMichele & Windisch, 2017). What is lacking, however, is a more developed oral history of exit processes in the Nordic countries. Inspired by Kimmel, among others, we hope to contribute to studies on the exit processes of former members of various neo-Nazi movements. Talking mainly to individuals who left the movement five or ten years ago allows us to study and analyze how the interviewees, today,

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give shape to their narratives of exit processes. Naturally, their reconstruction of narratives and stories on the exit process is influenced by several factors, such as the time axis, education, intimate relations, gender and employment situation.

Parallel to recruitment of new members to neo-Nazi movements – for example, The Nordic resistance movement (NMR) – there are also organizations and people trying to help individuals exit white supremacist milieus. The American historian Michael Kimmel (2007) interviewed a number of young people in the age group thirteen to twenty-three years. He contacted the young interviewees through the staff at one of such programs (EXIT), which is composed of former members of various neo-Nazi organizations. The results from Kimmel's study indicated that, among Swedish adolescents, participation in far-right movements is primarily connected to masculine *rites de passage* and developmental factors, rather than to any serious commitment to racist and militant ideologies.

The purpose of the present study is to contribute to the oral history of former neo-Nazis in Sweden. More specifically, we are interested in how they describe their entry into a specific movement – the becoming of a white supremacist – and their exit process. Our aim is to take a holistic approach to the individuals' stories. This means that we intend to situate the narratives in relation to a number of contextual factors, such as social background, family conditions, schooling, and societal as well as political factors. Hence, the research questions of this article are as follows:

- RQ1: How do the attractiveness of the White supremacist milieu and the push and pull factors emerge in the narratives?
- RQ2: How do the interviewees describe their participation in the movement?
- RQ3: What are the main reasons for and motivational factors behind leaving and exiting the movement?

The article is structured as follows. First, we provide a short history of the neo-Nazi movement in Sweden. In addition, we present relevant parts of previous research in this area.

Thereafter follows a section on method and methodology. In the subsequent section, we discuss the conceptual approach used to capture exit processes in general and present our take on these questions. The main part of the article is devoted to the empirical study. The article ends with a summary and discussion of the results.

A short history of the neo-Nazi movement in Sweden

White supremacists or neo-Nazis have a long history in the Nordic countries. Sweden has had organized Nazi movements ever since 1924, when the Furugård brothers founded the first Nazi party (Löow, 2004). During the interwar period, until the end of the Second World War, the various Swedish Nazi organizations developed in accordance with their conflicting attitudes toward the current state of the German Nazi party. This led to a state of constant fragmentation of the Swedish Nazi movement, which partly explains why there was never a strong united Swedish Nazi movement during that time period (Löow, 1999). In the wake of the Second World War, the Swedish Nazi movement was destitute and about to fade away when the “Nordiska rikspartiet” (NRP) was founded in 1956. NRP became the institution that collected, developed and restructured the ideas, experiences and aims of the pre-war and wartime Nazi movements to create the contemporary Nazi movements, in the form of subcultural groups and parties (Löow, 1990; 1999; 2004; 2015).

By the end of the 1970s, an ideological reorientation was initiated among individuals and splinter groups associated with the NRP, shifting it toward right-wing populist ideas. This led to a less radical position on the white race, and what developed instead was a cultural racist view aimed at criticizing immigration policy and immigrants. Out of the split, a new organization emerged called *Bevara Sverige Svenskt* (BSS, Keep Sweden Swedish) (Löow, 1999). This created polarization within the milieu and contributed to the construction of two fractions: one that remained faithful to the Nazi ideology and another that looked for support by addressing immigration issues. During the 1980s and 1990s, the right-wing movement was formed through both parliamentary aspirations and more violent revolutionary logics, as well

as formal and informal groups, parties and subcultural milieus. The white power milieu that developed during this period often erupted into violence and perpetrated well-documented violent acts, including several murders during the second half of the 1990s. This period passed, and the movements became more prominent during the early years of the new millennium. Several of the leaders were imprisoned, the world faced the 9/11 attacks on the US and, in Sweden, left-wing extremists rampaged the streets of Gothenburg during an EU summit. All this contributed to shifting the focus away from right-wing extremist movements, in general, and the Nazi movement, in particular.

The Nazi movement made use of this period by reconstructing itself; internal activities were created that ranged from rethinking their ideology and developing new exchange forums to adapting these activities to the Internet and social media (Löow, 2015). This meant that the strict division between producer and consumer of the white power ideology, esthetics and material was now becoming blurred. It became easier to be both a local leader and producer, while also being a consumer on the national level. This benefited a movement that had a difficult time being visible on the streets, but that still had to uphold networks and ongoing recruitment (Löow, 2015). During this period, the social activities continued, and by the beginning of 2010 and until 2013, there was small but significant growth in the Nazi movement's followers, activities and visibility. Two Nazi parties dominated the scene: *Svenskarnas parti* (The Party of the Swedes) and the *Nordic Resistance Movement* (NMR). Since 2015, the NMR is the only party left; it is the main hub for Nordic Nazi milieus (Löow, 2015).

NMR promotes a racist and anti-Semitic doctrine. This is a neo-Nazi organization aimed at establishing a national revolution and totalitarian rule. The organization is strictly hierarchical and militant. NMR is organized into Nordic departments, on the one hand, and national geographical zones, on the other. Sweden has seven geographical zones, called *nests*. These regions are controlled by operational chiefs. Within the regions there are local activist groups, called *fight groups*. These groups are small; there should be no more than ten

members in a fight group (www.Nordfront.se). The Swedish Security Service (SÄPO) has defined NMR as a serious threat to democratic society.

Recently, NMR has shifted from being a closed subcultural group to trying to reach out to a wider audience. This movement has moved away from its subcultural roots and developed into a more political outreach movement. The movement has also increased recruitment of new members. According to EXPO (a privately-owned research foundation), an increasing proportion of activists are new members, which indicates the ongoing and successful recruitment of younger and older members. The recruitment patterns to different white supremacists organizations in Sweden have varied over the years, and the success rates have been closely connected to wider political transformations in Swedish society. During the past ten years or so, the successes of the Sweden Democrats (a right-wing party with roots in the white supremacist movement) have made it easier to recruit new members to, for example, NMR.

Survey of the research

Along with the growing political and policy efforts to prevent violent extremism, there is also an increasing need to understand the relation between entry processes into and exit processes out of violent extremism. In this section, we present some of the more theoretical and conceptual discussions in the academic literature in this field. Furthermore, we present a survey of relevant empirical studies. Given that this is a growing field of studies, we do not claim that our survey is complete in any respect. Rather, we have selected studies that enhance and highlight interesting aspects of our own work.

Horgan (2008) calls for more research on disengagement processes among terrorists, the ultimate goal being to establish better measures for preventing violent extremism. He distinguishes between *deradicalization* and *disengagement*, concluding that deradicalization regarding ideological conviction is not necessary for disengagement from terrorism. Consequently, Horgan provides an important distinction between beliefs and behaviors in

understanding and analyzing exit processes. This would also seem to apply to entry processes. Da Silva et al. (2018) suggest that individuals tend to first join violent groups and then develop radicalized views, and not the other way around. Dalgaard-Nilsen (2013) uses this distinction in a study on exit programs. She points to differences between European Exit programs and programs in South East Asia and the Middle East, where the former pay little attention to ideological beliefs and focus more on behaviors. There is clearly a need for further empirical work if we are to better understand how behavior and beliefs interact with each other. Koehler (2016) puts forward the idea that improvements in exit programs require a better understanding of relations between entry and exit, and that there seems to be a connection between reasons for entry processes and reasons for exit among former extremists, a connection that could help us understand extremists' life trajectories. These findings are partly contradictory to claims made by Stern (2014), who points out that the reasons for joining neo-Nazi groups are as varied as the reasons for people's career choices. At the same time, she also concludes that the reasons for remaining in the neo-Nazi group are not the same as the reasons for joining the movement.

Koehler (2016) discusses the fragmentation that characterizes policy production in the area of prevention of violent extremism. He argues that considerable effort has been put into understanding the radicalization process, and less attention paid to why people remain and leave. Consequently, Koehler stresses the importance of a well-developed theory on disengagement and deradicalization from violent extremism. This will also require an understanding of what it means to reintegrate into mainstream society. Koehler states:

One important aspect is that successful disengagement or deradicalization involves both the exit from the extremist milieu and the re-engagement of the non-extremist environment. Oftentimes, programs and public observations ignore or downplay the equal importance of finding a new identity and life in the non-radical society, which is also why the use of former extremists as counselors only makes sense for a short period of time, until this activity becomes a new barrier for building a new life without any ties to the extremist past. (p.80)

Another stream in the academic literature strives to explain neo-Nazi trajectories using subcultural theories. Hamm (2004) presents a case study of two individuals with very different entry processes into neo-Nazism. He argues that their extreme convictions [apocalyptic thinking] should be explained in terms of how these ideas got into their minds rather than using the ideas as an explanation for their behavior. In theorizing his study, he also refers to previous studies he conducted on skinhead gangs and states:

Their common path to extremism begins to take shape when they are introduced to a homologous international youth subculture with a specific *ideology* (white supremacy), supported and sustained by a specific paramilitary *style* (shaved or closely cropped hair, white power regalia and an obsession with weaponry) and *musical expression* of ideology and style (white power rock). (p. 326)

According to Hamm, this helps explain how networks, symbols, language and knowledge bring meaning to an extremist subcultural belonging. Pisiu (2015) conducted a study on four former jihadists and three neo-Nazis to investigate how subcultural theories could provide a theoretical basis for explaining entry processes into violent extremism. She concludes that her results partly confirm Hamm's findings, but that subcultural theories fall short when trying to explain radicalization. The meso-level analysis conducted within the tradition of subcultural theory is not up to the job of explaining violent extremism. In her case study, the informants had middle-class backgrounds. She also argues that in studies where the individuals belong to the working or lower classes, there are no data that help in explaining why they were subjects of radicalization. Still, subcultural theory can provide insights into how identity is formed within extremist groups.

In the following section, we present important empirical studies on push and pull factors into and out of white supremacies groups. Harris et al. (2018) examined push and pull factors for disengaging from ideological violent groups. They conclude that individuals start losing faith and a sense of belonging when their expectations of their group are not met by

their experience, i.e. when the group fails to live up to its claimed identity. This is confirmed in a study by Barrelle (2015) on 22 former extremists and their disengagement. These case studies centered on individuals who had disengaged without any public support; the aim was to understand the relation between disengagement and reintegration into society. She found that the reasons for leaving the extremist movements could be summarized as follows:

Disillusionment with the behaviour of group leaders was the most commonly cited reason for leaving, followed closely by disillusionment with the behaviour of group members and then physical/psychological burnout. Closely related but separately referenced was the detrimental impact of using violence. Once disillusioned by in-group behaviour, burnt-out, repelled by violence or frustrated with the lack of impact from radical method, other activities and roles became relevant and attractive. Examples include paid employment, returning to a career, having a relationship or family and/or pursuing other interests. (Barrelle, 2015 p. 132)

Bubolz and Simi (2015) interviewed 34 former white supremacists in the US. Their results indicate that exit processes are complex and multifaceted. There are also a number of difficulties involved in exit processes, such as guilt feelings for leaving the movement, ideological relapses and strong ties to current members. It is not unusual, for example, for a number of members to decide to leave at the same time. Thus, friends can both reinforce the decision to leave and serve as support in the exit process. Furthermore, a new partner outside the movement can contribute to an exit process. In an American interview study including 89 former white supremacists, Simi et al. (2017) found that residual effects involving emotional and cognitive processes often affected the role exit. Leaving can be a highly ambiguous process. Hate groups appear to create a phantom community, that is, a formation of feelings that linger on after leaving a white supremacist movement. The authors also describe this as an addiction to feelings of hate. A common distinction is made between *social push* from hate

and *social pull* from hate (Aho, 1994). In an American ethnographic study on the Aryan Nation, the author states:

Voluntary exiting from hate groups thus entails both a social shove from and a being allured to certain social bonds. Once the social links to hate groups have been cut, the plausibility structures undergirding hate dogma disappear, making reconversions to new, less hostile belief patterns possible (Aho, 1994, p. 128).

There are a few studies on people leaving white supremacies movements in Sweden and Norway (see, e.g., Kimmel, 2007, Bjørgå & Horgan, 2009). Kimmel discusses the difficulties involved in the exit process. It is common for the young men to become the targets of constant threats from their former ‘friends.’ Comparing the entering and exit processes in Sweden and the US, Kimmel also found that the Swedish Nazis left the movement at the same time as the American white supremacists entered into a movement. Consequently, there seem to be generational and national differences in the patterns of recruitment to these movements. The age patterns in Sweden are changing, however, and today recruited members are generally older than before.

According to Bjørgå (2009), it is important to make a public break with the neo-Nazi movement. Otherwise, there is a risk for skeletons and setbacks. Many exit processes are supported by either municipal social workers or civil organizations, such as EXIT in Sweden, or the various programs in the *Radicalization, Awareness Network* (RAN), where the latter mainly targets Islamist extremism. There is growing criticism of different counter-radicalization strategies and the whole anti-radicalization business that is growing in this area (see, e.g., Fekete, 2015).

Findings from a systematic review of the literature on de-radicalization and disengagement from ideologically motivated violent groups (Windish et al., 2017) show that, in a third of the studies, a reoccurring factor is disapproval of violence, and in more than half of the studies the factor is disillusionment, i.e. realizing the gap between the idea/ideology and

the actual content and behavior. Another important factor is physical confinement, found in about a fourth of the cases. These factors could be understood as push factors, but there are also frequent pull factors, such as support from friends outside the movement, starting a family or finding a job.

In conclusion, the body of literature in this field of research is growing. The results from a number of studies are also highly consistent. Still, there is a need for more national studies as well as studies focusing on both entry and exit processes. Our ambition is to add more empirical research, and hopefully interesting analyses, that can further strengthen this field of research.

Method and methodology

The sample was strategic. A total of 10 individuals (7 men and 3 women) participated in the study. We chose to interview young adults who had left the movement in their twenties and had some perspective on their former identities. One of our informants was still active in the movement, but had tried to leave twice. In another case, the informant had left but was considering joining again. We also chose to interview individuals who were not active in the same circles, at the same time, our goal being to increase the likelihood of unique and varied narratives. We are aware that what we heard was a ‘constructed’ version of the individual’s life biography. However, we are mainly interested in how these young adults understand and relate to the fact that they have been members of neo-Nazi organizations. The sample consists of seven individuals who had formal roles, i.e., as local leaders, within neo-Nazi organizations and three individuals who were more loosely connected to an organization, but who actively took part in organization activities and were a part of the sub-cultural social sphere associated with the organizations. Two of them were recruited during the 1990s and the others during the period 2005-2010. For ethical reasons, we cannot name the organizations they were affiliated with, belonged to, or may still be part of.

During the interviews, a semi-structured approach was used to ensure we covered specific themes (such as, different forms of exit processes, influential events and persons, threats and ideological content), and at the same time were able to support the participants in their verbal construction of a chronological narrative (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We are aware that such a narrative needs to be understood as partly sanitized (Pink, 2009). Consequently, participants were not interrupted if a conversation moved away from a specific theme. In this sense, the personal narratives were gathered as carefully as possible, leaving room for the interviewees to construct and tell ‘their’ story. All interviews were conducted individually, recorded and transcribed verbatim. Names appearing in the text are fictitious.

Methodologically, we used a narrative and biographical method, focusing on entries, subcultural affiliation and exit processes. We were interested in the processes leading into and out of a subcultural belonging. The data analysis concerned the verbatim transcripts, which were read, discussed, processed and coded into themes. We made notes imbued with theory during this process, aiming to identify shared understandings and similar phrases, abstracting their meanings in order to contextualize the excerpts, and also to further develop our theoretical approach. Thereafter, we re-read the excerpts, attempting to check and refine our understanding of the data as well as applying our theoretical framework. Although, we are partly influenced by the fundamentals of a grounded theory approach, we also combine this inductive approach with a theoretical and analytical perspective on entry and exit processes. By adding new concepts to the already existing theoretical canon of exit theories, we can hopefully also contribute to the refinement and development of theories of entry and exit processes.

The study was conducted in accordance with the Swedish Science Council’s research ethics principals (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). This means that all informants were told about the purpose of the study, that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to interrupt or terminate the interviews at any time. So as not to reveal the informants’ identity, their names have been changed and their Nazi affiliation not mentioned. All transcripts are kept

safe and are only accessible to the researchers; no one else has access to the key that reveals the informants' identity.

Conceptualizing exit processes

Helen R.F. Ebaugh (1988) begins her book on exit processes by saying: "Most of us in today's world are exes in one way or another" (p.1). There are many different ways of being an ex, of course. All exes have in common that they once identified with a social role and identity they no longer have.

The process of disengagement from a role that is central to one's self-identity and reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one's ex-role constitutes the process I call role exit (p.1).

Leaving a role means disengaging from values, social networks, friendships, norms and certain ways of thinking about central issues in life. Ebaugh analyzes the exit process using the idea of stages. She is aware of the critique against stage theories, but nevertheless argues that this is the easiest way to organize and analyze the material.

The first stage of the role exit occurs when the individual begins questioning a role commitment. *The doubting stage* is characterized by a reinterpretation of meanings and a critical attitude towards the role. There are a number of factors involved in this stage: degree of awareness, social context, degree of control over the process, and the institutionalization of doubts. The next stage is defined by a *search for alternatives*. Now an exploration of alternative ways of living and thinking is initiated. The support of significant others is of crucial importance in this stage. As part of the process of weighing alternatives, individuals at this point also begin to rehearse and try out new roles. Stage three is *the turning point*. There are five major types of turning points, according to Ebaugh: specific events, time-related factors, excuses, either/or alternatives and what she calls "the straw that broke the camel's back" (p.125). *Specific events* can be deaths in the family or other emotionally charged

moments in life. Many role exits can be related to *time*, that is, the individual's age. Finding an *excuse* to leave a movement can also be a way out of a social commitment. *Either/or* alternatives often concern questions of life and death. Either one leaves a subcultural organization, or the violence involved in participating in it will lead to prison or early death. *The last straw* means events that, after a long process, finally lead to an exit process.

The last stage, *creating an ex-role*, is characterized by the struggle to leave a role and create a new life.

The essential dilemma involved in the ex-role is the incongruity and tension that exists between self-definition and social expectations. The individual going through the exit process is trying to shake off and deemphasize the previous identity. An important moment in the exit process occurs when one's friends, family, and co-workers begin to think of one as other than an ex (ibid., p.150).

These kinds of stage models have been heavily criticized. Basically, the critique is that it is impossible to use preconceived stages to map out an individual's life. A similar critique has also been directed at developmental psychology (Burman, 2008). Altier, Thoroughgood and Horgan (2014) highlight the importance of taking a flexible approach to exit processes. For example, they suggest that push factors may be more important during the early stages of disengagement, whereas pull factors play a central role once disillusionment has set in.

In order to complement and re-vitalize theories of disengagement, we suggest that we also need to connect to theories of subcultures. When addressing questions regarding subcultures, we often think about young people and youth culture. If we study contemporary subcultures, it becomes apparent that there are strong inter-generational connections. Many leading profiles are middle-aged or older. To study subcultures, we need to contextualize and investigate both the complex and contradictory structure and content of these 'cultures' and the hierarchical relations involved in organizing subcultures. We would like to propose that entry into a *subcultural space* – that is, a social, cultural and material context defined by

certain values, behaviors, attitudes and taste cultures – also marks the transition into a period of life where young aspirants become involved in a number of defining actions and ways of thinking about life (Johansson, 2017). The youth/adult binary, where subcultures are a part of a transitional process, only works partially in analyzing the entry and exit processes of young neo-Nazis. Inspired by Halberstam's (2005) analyses of queer transitional processes, we suggest that it is important to try to define and reflect upon what it means to enter into an extremist subculture at a certain point in life. Describing queer subcultures, Halberstam (2005) writes:

...what queer subcultures afford is a perfect opportunity to depart from a normative model of youth cultures as stages on the way to adulthood; this allows us to map out different forms of adulthood, or the refusal of adulthood and new models of deliberative deviance (ibid., p. 174).

Applying this to entry and exit processes among young neo-Nazis, we focus on what it means to depart from normative models of being young, and to enter into a subcultural space where schoolwork and other important means of transitioning into adulthood are put on hold for a shorter or longer period of time.

To understand this subcultural space and its specific characteristics, it is also necessary to connect to the literature on how white supremacists in different countries re-articulate white identity (Ferber, 1998). According to Ferber, the production and construction of racial and gender differences as essential and non-changeable are crucial to white supremacists. Berbrier (1999) also stresses the intellectualization of the white supremacist movement, and how a new moral and digestible rhetoric is constructed that transforms white supremacists into the victims of discrimination and violence. When we take a closer look at the young interviewees' entry processes into the movement, we also focus on the aspects that attracted them to and drew them into the subcultural space of neo-Nazis.

Becoming, belonging and leaving

The interviews all followed the same pattern, focusing on entry processes, subcultural belonging and exit processes. The narratives were all different, of course. There are clearly several factors that lead into and push people out of different forms of affiliations with extremist organizations and groups. Because of the small sample, we are not primarily interested in mapping out the various push and pull factors. Instead, we focus on dynamics, processes and anomalies. The structure follows the three research questions, as well as the narrative of entry and exit processes.

Becoming

There are various reasons why young people become attracted to right-wing extremist milieus. Often these young people are in precarious positions. A combination of problematic family situations, exposure to violence, outsider identities and failing school results leads to a search for identity and belonging. Finding a group of people who share the same precarious situation and experiences can be a revelation. A strong sense of lacking both an identity and a sense of belonging can ferment the desire to belong to something. Finding something that both resonates with an outsider position and at the same time conveys a strong feeling of identity can set things in motion. This is apparent when listening to the following narrative:

It's quite comic, actually ...I found a record with *Ultima Thule* songs, and you have to remember that at this time I was totally lacking any feeling of identity. I had no one that (laughter), confirmed who I was or what I was. So, I found this record, with these songs, and I just listened. You know, I was so disturbed, I was out on a treasure hunt, and I found this record, and it was whole, and I played it on the record player, and /.../ I got some feeling of identity from the music and listening to these songs. And I also recognized stuff, when they sang about Sweden the foster land, kings and Vikings and so on. I kind of liked when they sang about Micklegard and

Yggdrasil, this was my history lesson by Ultima Thule, when I was little. However, the music gave me some kind of identity, so I listened a lot. This made me feel less lonely, even though I was really lonely (Carl, 28 years old).

For some of the youngsters, the socialization into a white supremacist lifestyle started quite late, but there are also examples where the process was initiated quite early, already in the biological family. In certain cases, the sentiments, prejudices and hatred were incubated very early on, and later developments just reinforced the eventual recruitment and made it a more structured movement. Not infrequently, the family background was characterized by poor economic conditions.

My mother worked as a cleaning lady, a few hours now and then. We were six children and my mother, yes we were. There was simply no money. I inherited clothes from my siblings, until I was 16 or 17 years old. I always inherited clothes. I never got new clothes. Then there was this guy in my class, Jacques, he was the only immigrant in the school, by the way. He had new clothes, and my mother told me that he got his clothes from the government, but you do not get any, because you are Swedish! I was brought up in this kind of climate of hatred. My brother gave me my first music tape in the first grade. It was a mixed tape, with White Supremacy music. So very, very early I became someone else, I went from being Niklas to becoming a totally different Niklas (Niklas, 30 years old).

Niklas's socialization process was partly cognitive, partly emotional. Opinions and attitudes were formed early and then successively strengthened. In the stories told by Niklas and others, white supremacy music and lyrics played a central role in their development of a certain style, and their belonging to a specific taste culture and lifestyle. In the process of

becoming something, of changing identity and position, music, clothes and other attributes also played a central role.

It all started in middle school. I had a friend who shaved her hair on the sides, and painted SS marks and used a bomber jacket. We were three girls who started doing this already in middle school. Two of the girls stopped doing it, but I met other friends dressing like this in the seventh and eighth grade (Matilda, 31 years old).

We can also observe that, among most informants, the schools played an active and negative role in the radicalization processes. Confrontation and separation are reoccurring themes in the interviews, but also lack of efforts to help the informants stay out of conflicts with peers. In many cases, the schools actually placed the youngsters in an almost impossible position. This is clearly illustrated by Erik's story:

Yeah ... I don't know, why does the sun go up? I don't know. It became painfully obvious that my opinions were not accepted, more or less. We had a lot of theme days; I always had to sit at the front of the auditorium, together with my friends. Still, today, I think this is the wrong way to go. Just because someone has some kind of opinions, you should not put them at the front of the classroom or in the auditorium, when talking about the Holocaust or similar events (Erik, 26 years old).

Another informant, Niklas, tells a similar story. During a session in the main auditorium at his high school, a Holocaust survivor was invited to talk. Niklas and his "racist" friends decided to sit at the back of the auditorium:

So we decided to sit at the back. We... maybe ten of us on our way to take our seats at the back...and quite rapidly we are physical grabbed by a teacher who tells us that we will be seated in the front instead. And as always we stuck together and kept to the group, but sat down in the front

row. We sat there and started to laugh and make jokes waiting for it all to begin. [Later Niklas is required to make a drawing and share his feelings about the testimony in front of his own class].

All classmates cried when they talked about the testimony. Unwilling I had to follow the instruction from my teacher and present my drawing... I said to the class that the survivor was a fucking fairy-tale teller and I held up my drawing in front of me.

I: What was the drawing?

Niklas: A swastika... Then I ran out of the classroom... That very same evening we had the first meeting of what would be a formal Nazi organization. (Niklas, 30 years old)

Similar bad experiences with schools recur in most interviews. Roger even talks about being bullied by teachers.

Sure there were some teachers that I got along with that really cared about me. Most of them however just saw me as a black sheep and started systematically bullying me, and so on. Because I already had a very negative experience and image of adults, this didn't really help at all. And I renounced adults even more. (Roger, 41 years old)

Obviously, the processes leading to entry into a neo-Nazi movement consist of both push and pull factors. The school's approach to these questions plays a particularly important role. Also, entering into a new youth cultural environment, charged with music, strong affects and a particular style, is clearly an important recruitment strategy in itself. Whereas the educational approaches of schools and teachers often served to further strengthen the young men's feelings of being unwanted and different, the neo-Nazi subculture offered possibilities for belonging and identity. This subcultural space offered the young persons an opportunity for collective belonging and an alternative learning process.

Belonging

Many of the interviewees stayed within the subcultural space for a longer period of time – that is, 2-3 years – before getting more deeply involved. Through participation in actions, violent outbursts, as well as discussions, seminars and physical training, the youngsters were gradually drawn into a specific way of thinking. Among our interviewees, it is obvious that the ideological schooling was of central importance to the feeling of belonging that emerged over time. This schooling consisted of conceptions of the Other as different and dangerous, on the one hand, and of a longing for explanations and a consistent worldview, on the other. The emotional side of belonging to a movement was also boosted by intellectual arguments and ideological material. Through the arguments, logics and twisted conspiracy theories, the recruit was successively schooled into a subcultural and ideological home.

We did not party that much, actually. We talked a lot and discussed. This could be characterized as a kind of redneck racism, or whatever. It just centered around, you know, bloody immigrants, fuck, they just rape and destroy everything. I was not all that pleased with the arguments, I must say. I wanted to understand the logics behind it all, and who was behind all this. Pretty soon I landed in different conspiracy theories (Carl, 28 years old).

One important aspect is acquiring a role and a position in the movement. This is far easier for individuals who have confidence and know how to get along with people, such as Carl. Erik, on the other hand, is held back much more by his lack of confidence and shyness. In his case, a central activist discovered him via his activities on Nazi social media. It meant a lot to him to be “discovered” by higher-ranking Nazis, within a real Nazi organization.

I was moving away from the skinheads, then I met some people in a number of small groups, then, but I met them via the Nordic forum, active at that time. I wanted to arrange a demonstration against the first of May celebration, hosted by the Revolutionary Communistic Youth. I was opposed by most of the national socialists, but then there was someone who

recognized my fighting spirit, he was from the Swedish resistance movement, nowadays the Nordic Resistance Movement, which I belong to. Then I was 15, 16 years old. So I rapidly moved away from the skinheads and from the subculture too, entering more into the pure national socialist thought and that kind of grouping (Erik, 26 years old).

Intense and close friendship continues to play an important role even after the entry period. In the *belonging phase*, the informants have made their choices and been forced to face the consequences: such as domestic conflicts, losing old friends and gaining violent enemies. This situation requires access to safe havens that are both a physical place to stay, for shorter or longer periods, and a place for social recognition.

The skinheads were always there, around the clock, if you needed somewhere to sleep or if there was a fight coming up, they could come and ... If you needed to be picked up, they made their parents pick you up, or they got access to a car and picked you up and ... So, they always welcomed you with open arms (Lukas, 30 years old).

In the belonging phase, the socio-emotional support and welcoming environment played a central role in creating a sense of belonging and a feeling of being at “home.” At the same time, it became increasingly difficult to maintain relationships with family and old friends – a fact, or perhaps a circumstance, that further deepened the radicalization process during the belonging phase.

My social circles changed very rapidly and Facebook played a significant role in that... as I added new friends [neo-Nazis] the old ones disappeared. Most of them without a word... in silence. I didn't think too much about it since I had so many new friend... as I got into this [neo-Nazi] bubble and all my friends, my normal friends, had abandon me I didn't see any longer....I mean I only saw clips [in social media] from this world [the neo-Nazi] and I

consumed them and spread them. I went all in...Then I had nowhere and no one to turn to [during times of socio-emotional ill health] accept my new friends. In the back of my mind I still thought about my family, but at the same time I realized I couldn't talk to them. (Sofie, 40 years old)

Connections to people outside the movement were gradually weakened, and this undermined the informants' ability to receive help during periods of psychological distress. In addition, in many cases the hard discipline and routines helped some of the young disciples deal with their drug abuse.

So it was strict and really disciplined, and I liked it. Pretty hard rules, no alcohol ... Eh, yes, it was disciplined, and pretty hard rules, you should not drink alcohol at all, which was good, I was, or I was approaching 15 years old. Yes when we met, I had already started drinking alcohol, I was 12 or 13 years old. I continued with heavier drugs at the age of 14. They did not stop me from using amphetamine, however. I kept it as a secret, and continued using it. I used it as a medicine (Laugh). (Erik, 26 years old).

The youngsters often appreciated the disciplined and highly regulated milieu of the neo-Nazi movement. The rules and regulations that are part of the lifestyle were often seen as something positive and as support in becoming more pure, thus earning a position within the movement. Moreover, the reasons for staying were sometimes clearly connected to the need to belong, have a "family" and feel at home. At the same time, relationships with former friends and family members weakened and sometimes broke down. In order to understand the exit process, it is also crucial to understand the attractions and rewards involved in being part of a specific collective community. The subcultural space offered by the neo-Nazi movement offers many rewards – not least in relation to construct an alternative identity – but it also makes leaving difficult. Leaving this kind of tight and emotionally charged community also means leaving part of one's embodied and previously acquired identity behind.

Leaving

Waking away from the Nazi movement and friends does not involve a linear, unidirectional process. Being part of a Nazi milieu means being disconnected from most alternative sources of stimulation, both cognitive and emotional. Even when they realize that the way of life they chose is not going to work out, they still cannot see how to get out. Moreover, they may also harbor completely contradictory needs or motivations. Below, Roger talks about how he is suffering from being a Nazi, and he regrets getting his eldest sister and her family into trouble. He is even considering committing suicide, as a way out. The interviewer asks him what is motivating him to remain in the movement. He explains that he has divided himself into two parts: Roger and Nazi-Roger. Roger was in pain and did not want to live any longer, but Nazi-Roger just kept going.

Interviewer: What kept life in Nazi-Roger then?

Roger: Well...what can I say? I had my ambitions, my greed and need for power. My Nazi career, imagined goals, friends in the movement. I had crushed my old identity and created a completely new one. Also the fact that I was seen as one of the most dangerous Nazis in the country at the time, from that I got hubris ... There were so many factors that made me stay in the movement. But yes there were times when I wanted out... so badly. But then I just turned on some white power music and called some friends.

Interviewer: Were there ever any occasions when you didn't turn on that music and called for friends?

Roger: Yeah... there was this time when I called a friend and asked to borrow his gun. I planned to really get out, I mean really, I mean by committing suicide. (Roger, 41 years old)

A reoccurring theme among the informants is descriptions and narratives of entering into a totally different social setting than the Nazi one; sometimes this was a setting the informants

had been actively searching for, and at other times their choices were more the result of a series of coincidences.

A friend of mine, a girl, told me to start boxing. Her friend's father was about to start a boxing club. You should go there, since you're so bloody angry all the time... So I went. And there were only immigrants at this club [laugh] and me. And the trainer he knew pretty well who I was. Yeah, a criminal, junky Nazi leader. All perfect merits. I had called before and as it turned out he had prepared the other guys to act nicely toward me... and you know sort of leaving the door open. This I didn't know about at first and then he said we are full today, but you can box with Omed if you want to be here. I said that I would not like to fight Omed, but rather you. He just said why? And then I [laugh] started to box with Omed. It was the first time in my life that I talked to an immigrant. Unless I was fighting, yelling or something like that. It was really the first time I spoke to someone born in another country in a nice way. It took a while... I first just thought I'd use him to learn to fight... But gradually he was, kind of super social and talked constantly about anything, his children's favorite colors. I thought to myself, ok as if I give a damn about your fucking children I don't want to know about you or them... And then I started to get curious about him and somehow we became friends. Somehow I realized that he was no rapist or something like that, he just wanted to be somewhere, somewhere safe... together with his wife and children. At that time all this ideological... that racist thing inside me started to disappear...quite a lot actually. Through this interaction with him. I was still kind of a National socialist in ideologically I mean, but I could understand why he was here and not all are...yeah I mean like that. Not to lump everyone together. (Carl, 28 years old)

Even though coincidences seem to play an important role in the exit process, there is clearly a more general force of determination that enables new social contacts to be made in an unforeseen social context.

I. Why did you start to disengage?

D. There were so many double standards in the movement. Many that used drugs. Many or at least some that had sex with immigrants, when they were drunk. It was...then they could not see anything wrong with that. Then...I started to hang out with an old friend from my early childhood again, and his peers, who were all immigrants. He started bringing me to various activities, and finally we ended up at a barbeque with only immigrants. I was so tense that evening. But they just didn't care about my political views. They approached me and said...We know what you believe in and what you stand for, but we are not here to talk about that. We are here to have a nice evening. Then I allowed myself to lower my guard. (Lukas, 30 years old)

Lukas, in the quote above, clearly ends up at a barbeque by pure chance. At the same time, this event would most likely not have taken place at all, or been so ground-breaking, had he not already been having serious doubts about the movement. Finding a partner also creates opportunities. As Erik expresses in the quote below, a partner provides a deeper and more genuine sense of trust than one's fellow Nazis do. This trust enabled him to articulate his drug abuse, show his weakness and call out for help.

Interviewer: Then you left the movement...

Erik: Met a girl.

Interviewer: Met a girl...

Erik: Like all violent stories end... I met a girl [laugh].

Interviewer: Met a girl and then what?

Erik: Yeah, this is how I actually got sober. She knew that I had been addicted but that I'd managed to sober up after we spent a few months together. I had

never talked to anyone about this. It wasn't that hard to give up amphetamines either. I just quit over a day. Flushed the remaining grams down the toilet and that... yeah and then the years went by. (Erik, 26 years old)

It should also be underlined, however, that two of our informants talk slightly differently about their exit processes. Niklas, for instance, realizes seemingly by himself that he needs to alter his way of life, but without having a clue how to go about this. No happy coincidence occurred when he was questioning his way of living. He had to find his own way as a response to an urgent need for change.

...You know...this...all the violence keeps on going for so long. You know, I'm 21 first time I say no to taking part. By then violence has been so central for so long. I had almost got stuck, thinking this is how things will be. So this, this was something that followed you into adulthood before I felt that something is wrong. That it had gone too far...Then I had, you know, that is when I realized that the violence...just could not continue this way anymore. By then the small childhood Niklas inside of me managed to break through this image I had become and just...how should I put it? I felt that this must not go on anymore; it must end. (Niklas, 30 years old)

Quite the opposite of Niklas, we have Matilda who is stuck in a destructive environment and a negative spiral of hate, alcohol abuse as well as lack of social and emotional security. In her case, a persistent teacher takes the time to create trust and a space for reflection that becomes the turning point.

...It was more like people backed down and avoided approaching me, since I was very angry and clearly showed that I didn't want anything to do with the world of adults. But he...somehow never gave up. Kept asking, continued to approach me. It took a very long time before I trusted him. Even if I talked to him... the distance from accepting to talk and to trust is

huge; they are two very different things. It takes a lot, and a lot of time for a teenager who had never been able to trust any adult to feel that you can trust someone that that person will remain and stand his ground. (Matilda, 31 years old)

Obviously, disengagement processes start for different reasons and evolve in different ways. Coincidences can play a central role in these exit processes, but most often encounters with influential others, such as girlfriends or mentors, have a decisive impact on the young person's decision to leave the movement. But disengaging may not be enough to reestablish some sort of normality in life.

Then two years passed by and I just lived on my own in silence... Finally I got into a situation, I got under pressure, you know people in town they knew about me... and they wondered if I was still part of the movement. I had a situation when a friend of mine got a text message on her cell phone. She showed it to me and it said the [the sender] I won't let my children play with her Nazi-children. Then it became clear to me that people believed I was still in the movement and my children had to suffer. So I had to contact media to tell my story [that she had left both the movement and her Nazi beliefs]. (Sofie, 40 years old)

Disengaging does not seem to be enough to gain trust from the surrounding environment. Sofie also has to convince people that she is no longer a Nazi – that she is fully de-radicalized. In the end, she is accepted as part of the community, as she describes below:

I finally dared to go with my children to the open preschool. I knew that two of the women that had been my enemies when I was in the movement would be there since we had children about the same age. But I thought that this will make or break us. So I brought my children and went there. As I was entering the facilities I was so nervous and had prepared all sorts of

strategies. And there they were, but when I got into the room... everybody turned their faces toward me and despite my expectations, no one was angry; they smiled at me and welcomed me. They asked me if I felt ok and they invited me to sit at their table. For the first time ever I could talk to people about changing diapers, being a mother and all the things I had missed for so long. (Sofie, 40 years old)

What Sofie says is that her final stage of de-radicalization came about thanks to the actions of people in her surroundings, which were just as important as her own actions. When her children were no longer Nazi-children and she was a mother with a need to discuss practical issues, such as changing diapers, she could stop walking on eggshells and simply, somehow, return to society again.

Leaving the subcultural space and identity markers connected to one's "old" identity as a neo-Nazi also entails a confrontation with both the neo-Nazi movement and society. The neo-Nazi identity meant putting "normal" life on hold. In order to return to society, these young people not only have to set aside and leave an old identity and position behind, they also need to acquire a new identity. The knowledge, attributes and feelings of belonging that were once gained when entering the neo-Nazi movement are now useless. In order to return to society, these youngsters have to gain trust and take a few steps back, re-learning how to belong to a society they despised.

Conclusions and discussion

First and foremost, our study confirms the importance of distinguishing between disengagement and de-radicalization, as discussed in the literature review. The eight individuals who left the movement all passed through a stage of disengagement from the Nazi organizations, groups or peers, before beginning to de-radicalize. Carl is outspoken about still

being a Nazi ideologically after his detachment, showing that the de-radicalization process starts at some time interval after detachment. The same pattern is seen in the other statements as well, stressing the need to develop a new identity in mainstream society. This insight is important and should be taken into consideration in de-radicalization programs.

The study also sheds some light on the phase of entry into Nazi movements, or what we may call early radicalization, and how this is connected to the phase of belonging to the movement. In the informants' accounts, we can see how their identities were shaped by confrontations with parents, peers and very often schools and teachers who were attempting to prevent radicalization from taking place. The informants clearly describe the multiple social and emotional needs they had at the time of their entry, and how these needs were not being satisfied. Erik talks about absent parents, Niklas about his shame over being in poverty, Matilda about abusive parents, and so on. These became push factors toward skinhead groups or more loosely connected racist subcultural gangs. These push factors could have moved them in another direction of deviant behavior, but because they lived in a community where these groups maintained a Nazi subcultural and social practices, this became an option. In this connection, the interviews also strengthen the use of subcultural theory to explain the radicalization process. Carl and Mathilda are quoted when they talk about the importance of music, symbols and esthetics in helping them form both their individual identity and separating their group from mainstream society, while at the same time giving them to some kind of universal white supremacist belonging. This theme is also repeated in the other interviews, showing that while the informants were becoming part of the gangs, they gradually accepted the symbols, tastes, ideas and general esthetics of these groups; they developed a *Nazi habitus*. This resulted in negative reactions from their significant others, including school staff. In concrete terms, this meant the staff organizing thematic days at school focusing on racism and the Holocaust. The setting for these days, according to the informants, was to put them up front to make sure they digested the information properly, the goal being to obstruct their path toward radicalization. This pedagogical intervention itself became yet another important push factor. It is clear that the surrounding world showed much

less interest in the social and emotional needs of the informants, and instead expressed what they – the parents and teachers – needed from the informants, namely that they leave extremism behind them. We can also see how this behavior added to an already existing lack of trust in adults, which became a growing barrier to the non-extremist world, and how this lack of trust would continue to be a pattern in future attempts to socialize with the outside world.

In the radicalization phase, Lukas, Niklas, Carl, Roger and Matilda felt that the gang provided them with recognition, safety and a space where they could exist without confrontation, in other words, something quite the opposite to what was offered by significant others who were trying to prevent radicalization. At the same time, we must not underestimate the importance of ideological beliefs and the power of core racist values, which characterized our informants long before the actual radicalization process. The only exception here is Carl, who describes how he was drawn into these ideas after radicalization started, but at the same time how the community he lived in was imbued with racism. For this reason, we conclude that the push factors, from surrounding society, toward radicalization have counterparts, that is, pull factors from the gangs. Moreover, the racism already found within the families and local society provides an important background and a contextual factor.

One aspect to consider, however, is that it is likely the informants unintentionally play down their own racist and ideological convictions in both the entry and exit phase and overemphasize these convictions during the phase of belonging. In the entry phase, these convictions are described as constituting a contextual factor imbedded in the surrounding society, and in the exit phase, they point at the gap between the ideology stated by the movement and how its members actually lived. The retrospective nature of the interviews cannot easily overcome this likely reshaping of narratives among the informants, and it reminds us of the need for additional approaches to studying radicalization and deradicalization, for instance longitudinal studies and ethnographic studies.

The present results do not contradict the current research field concerning exit processes from violent extremism. We would argue, however, that our study confirms the notion that there is a connection between entry and exit. The informants talk about weak social relations and trust in significant others as push factors into the neo-Nazi gangs. According to the informants, the gangs initially met this need, but gradually this function is lost and creates disillusionment. What was a push factor into the gang becomes a push factor out of the gang. In this sense, our study partly contradicts Stern's (2014) claim that the reasons for remaining are not the same as the reasons for joining. As we interpret our informants' narratives, the neo-Nazi gang is a functioning milieu as long as it meets members' social need for recognition. The study contributes by providing more empirical data supporting previous research on exit processes as well as by pointing to factors that initiate such processes, such as disillusionment, refraining from violence, finding partners or creating a family. Furthermore, our theoretical approach – combining theories of exit processes with subcultural theory – offers a promising framework when approaching the empirical material. In particular, we would like to stress the importance of understanding the learning and identity processes that take place in the subcultural space offered by the neo-Nazi movement.

What becomes clear is that these processes started within our informants themselves. Disillusionment seems to have been a key factor for all of them, but without a concrete way out of the movement, this served more as a source of frustration they had to ward off. In the case of Roger, this became so unbearable that he was preparing himself to commit suicide, seeing it as the only way out. As we learned from Matilda, Niklas, Carl, Erik and Lukas, it was crucial to have access to someone they trusted outside the gang. For Lukas it was a childhood friend, for Carl a boxing trainer and for the other three professional teachers and a police officer. The disillusionment that they all harbored could be transformed into an exit process thanks to the trust they had in these non-judgmental individuals. It was not simply that they were non-judgmental, but they also safely guided our informants to a non-judgmental environment. Because we did not interview the persons who assisted during the exit process, we cannot say whether their attitude was well considered and professional or

whether it was more their intuitive way of approaching our informants. In any event, we wish to argue that this finding is of significance and should be considered when designing intervention programs as well as de-radicalization programs.

To conclude, although based on a limited empirical material, we would like to claim that our study has contributed to discerning a line from entry and belonging to the exit process. All the unsatisfied needs that were to become push factors in the radicalization process were converted into pull factors drawing the informants toward the Nazi gangs. The confrontations that occurred after entry shut the escape doors for our informants, especially when they realized they were only of interest to significant others when they displayed deviant behavior charged by a Nazi habitus. This sustained their belief that social and emotional recognition were only accessible within the movement, because outside they only found confrontation and deception. When they realized that confrontation and deception were just as common and present within the Nazi gang, this insight definitely led to disillusionment. This did not mean, however, that they were prepared to give up their ideological meanings or racist attitudes. Quite the contrary, their worldview was intact when they started to doubt their social practices, but they were now deprived of any secure social environment that could provide them with *recognition*.

Lukas dared to step outside the movement and reestablish contact with a former teacher, and thus he made an exit. But as time passed, and he was unable to build a functioning social life outside the movement, he chose to join again in order – in his own words – to avoid being alone and facing more betrayal. The present results call for further research with larger samples and perhaps more quantitative hypothesis testing. Moreover, they challenge the growing industry of prevention of violent extremism, which clearly contains a great deal of supervision, control and confrontation. As we have shown in these cases, the processes of radicalization and de-radicalization are twisted. One could say that at each individual twist, we find either confrontation or acceptance and recognition. Confrontation from significant others, parents, teachers, social workers and so on seems to result in radicalization, which, in turn, is met with acceptance and confirmation from

individuals in the Nazi movement. It is worthwhile to consider how vulnerable Sofie was when she stood with her two small children at the doorway to the open preschool, fully prepared to be confronted. It is clear that this moment could easily have turned into a source of re-radicalization. Koehler (2016), as mentioned in the literature review, talks about the importance of finding a new identity in mainstream society. When the other mothers treat Sofia like the mother of two small children, instead of like a former neo-Nazi, they are offering her a new identity, thus sustaining the exit process.

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