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## How extremist experiences become valuable knowledge in EXIT programmes.<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

On the basis of a neo-Vygotskian approach the article analyses how former neo-Nazis, together with other staff at Fryshuset, a youth centre in Stockholm, Sweden, have developed the organisation EXIT, which helps people leave the extremist right. The article describes the processes former neo-Nazis<sup>3</sup> must go through to alter their identity and self-understanding in order to become coaches<sup>4</sup>/mentors capable of supporting others. In this connection, the article also illuminates EXIT's practice for supporting their clients. The main reason for personal change, the article stresses, is that an individual's engagement in a social practice alters his/her basis for reflection, allowing an alternative sense of identity to emerge. The reformulation of the individual's past involved in this process, the article argues, is a requirement for their extremist experiences to become useable knowledge in an organisation like EXIT aimed at helping others leave what they have come to view as a destructive and anti-democratic lifestyle.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a result of a PhD project I was working on (2011-2014) at the Department of Psychology and Educational Studies at Roskilde University in Denmark. I did two months of fieldwork at EXIT in Fryshuset in 2012 and conducted 23 semi-structured interviews of staff as well as former and present clients. I spoke English whereas informants could choose if he/she wanted to speak English or Swedish as I understand both languages.

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<sup>3</sup> I use the terms 'right-wing extremists' and 'neo-Nazis' as synonyms, although I am aware that not all right-wing extremists are neo-Nazis whereas all neo-Nazis are right-wing extremists.

<sup>4</sup> I describe coaches as males only, as I have only met two women. One of them worked briefly as a coach for EXIT. Clients, who are most often men, misunderstood her interest in them and responded as if she had an intimate interest in them rather than 'just' being their coach. Whereas the other woman has only had one client for an extended period of time.

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## Introduction

*'It's difficult to change our thought patterns. Nobody questions that it's hard to stop smoking or lose weight. If you want to stop smoking, you can call and get help or if you get divorced, there is an understanding that it is hard and it takes time. But when it comes to stopping these things, stopping participating in the White Power Movement or a criminal gang, then it's like society believes that you just stop and that's that. Like it's just something bad you've been up to. People just don't realise how big a change it is. You may have to cut your contact with everybody that you have ever known and even though it has been in a bad context they're probably your friends; you had something at least, a sort of friend who knew your name. You must leave everything and then what's left of you? You don't really have an identity, you are exposed and so of course it takes time to change'* (field note of a conversation with a social counsellor at EXIT 2012).

Fryshuset (The Freezer House) is the name of a certain type of youth centre in Sweden, which is based on a vision of how to empower (marginalised) youngsters. Fryshuset is based in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö and together the three centres offers 50 different projects, sports and cultural facilities. EXIT, an organisation supporting individuals leaving the extremist right, is one of the many social projects, NGOs and organisations linked together at Fryshuset in Stockholm and to its model for empowering young people. As EXIT's model for working with former right-wing extremists is linked to Fryshuset's vision, I will start the article by introducing the centre and its specific frame of reality. I argue that the experience the staff members of Fryshuset have gained from inviting (marginalised) youths to participate in the centre's activities, rather than excluding them, has provided the knowledge base for the establishment of EXIT. Using this argument as my point of departure I aim to show how EXIT has developed from Fryshuset and the cultural

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knowledge anchored there. Today, EXIT's model for assisting what they describe as their *clients* – people in the process of leaving the extreme right – is to connect each of them to a *coach* – an employee with a past in the extremist right (Christensen 2013, 2014).

Next, I detail how the practice of EXIT has evolved to be able to support motivated clients in a further development of their social understanding and skills helping them leave the White Power Movement socially and mentally. Few of EXIT's clients become coaches, but for those who do, their participation in EXIT's daily practice, I argue, make them internalise the position as coach and establish a convergent identity. To conclude, I argue that former right-wing extremists must reinterpret their narrative of participation in the extremist right and self-understanding for their experiences to become useful knowledge in organisations supporting clients leaving an extremist group. First, I will introduce the theoretical perspective on which the article is based.

### **Identity – the outcome of history-in-person and participation in a current social practice**

The epistemological starting point of the article, anchored in social practice theory, is *that our identity is formed through engagement in socially produced and culturally constructed collective activities* (Holland et al. 1998). Identity is a concept that figuratively combines the personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations, which constitute the resources people use in their identity formation process. Our present position is linked to our past in infinitive ways as one's history-in-person is the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject position afforded one in the present. As there are no rules that direct our behaviour in specific social situations, improvisations are the impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as *habitus*, meets with a particular combination

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of circumstances for which we have no set response (ibid. 17-18). Such improvisations, from a cultural base and in response to the subject position offered in situ, are, when taken up as symbols, potential beginnings of an altered subjectivity and identity (ibid. 18). Improvisation becomes the basis for a reformed subjectivity as identity formation moves through improvisation, conflict, embodiment and dialogue in social and historical times or *figured worlds*.

Building on Vygotsky and his conceptualisation of the process of 'semiotic mediation', Holland et al. (1998) have created a theory in which developing voluntary control over behaviour by mediating cultural devices allows humans to escape enslavement to the stimuli they happen to encounter. They do so through the active construction and use of symbols. As humans can modify the stimulus value of the environment to their own mental states (ibid. 35), possible mediating devices emerge. A typical mediating device is constructed by assigning meaning to an object or behaviour. Mediating devices develop within a locus of social activity – a place in the social world – which identifies and organises them, at first in the development of a mediated complex of thought and feeling. Mediating devices may be tangible and used voluntarily and consciously: a word said to oneself to encourage oneself to act or a chart that one consults to know what to do next in a work routine. Repeated experience with the tangible device may eventually become unnecessary and its function may be 'internalised'. This vision emphasises that identities are improvised in the flow of activity within specific social situations from the cultural resources at hand that situate identity in collectively formed activities or what is called *figured worlds* (ibid. 40).

Figured worlds are historical phenomena to which we are recruited or into which we enter and which develop through our participation. A figured world is a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are

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recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts and particular outcomes are valued over others (ibid. 52). Figured worlds rely upon artefacts as mediators in human action, as ‘psychological tools’. They are the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned and made, socially and personally. Hence they assume both a material and an ideal or conceptual aspect, an intentionality whose substance is embedded in the figured world of their use. Therefore identity in this text is regarded as a sign of a self in practice and not as sign of a self in essence (ibid. 29). The identities we gain within figured worlds are thus specific historical developments, which have emerged through continued participation in the positions defined by the social organisation of activity in those worlds (ibid. 41-42). They are characteristics of humans and societies. The concept of figured worlds thus provides a means to conceptualise subjectivities, consciousness and agency, persons (and collective agents) as they are formed in practice. It also provides the terms for answering the conundrum of personal agency (ibid. 41-42).

Fryshuset is a place in the social world that has come into existence through certain people’s activities. Fryshuset is characterised by a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others (ibid. 52). Therefore, I argue that people engaged in Fryshuset also become part of Fryshuset’s figured world, as the centre is perceived through a particular frame of interpretation among staff and others involved in the centre.

Through participation and an emotional attachment to the figured world of Fryshuset, the client-coaches come to envision a new world of human relations, find a stance that has not previously been open to them in their daily lives and develop a different perspective on themselves and their lives. They achieve their standpoint only by submitting themselves to another set of cultural forms that have their own peculiar limitations and

constraints (ibid. 64-65). This is the theoretical foundation of this article, which leads us to an introduction of Fryshuset and its figured world, encompassing the cultural resources and personal experiences that form the basis of what has come to constitute EXIT's practice.

### **Fryshuset: a particular culturally defined space**

Fryshuset – the Cold Store - was founded in Stockholm in the autumn of 1984 in a large and abandoned cold-storage warehouse on the outskirts of Stockholm; hence the name. In cooperation with the YMCA, Anders Carlberg (1943-2013), a debater active on the political left<sup>5</sup>, acquired the building to convert it into an indoor basketball court for children and young people in southern Stockholm. A rock music enthusiast among the construction workers persuaded the association to build some rehearsal rooms. In September 1984 the doors opened to Fryshuset (Stockholm), with a newly built basketball court and 50 music rehearsal rooms. From the outset, the young people themselves helped shape the house. Basketball and rock music dominated Fryshuset in the early years but social engagement, education and other activities grew. Today, Fryshuset in Stockholm is placed in a 24,000 square metre building, employs 500 people and receives 40,000 visitors a month<sup>6</sup>. Fryshuset has, as mentioned in the introduction, become a concept for working with marginalised youths and similar centres have been established in Malmö and Gothenburg.

One of Carlberg's motivations for establishing what has developed into a concept for Fryshuset was his perception of youngsters being left to themselves as he believed that communication across generations had ceased, leaving young people with few role models and grown-ups to guide them. Therefore, his vision for today's Fryshuset was to create a

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<sup>5</sup> [http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anders\\_Carlberg](http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anders_Carlberg), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anders\\_Carlberg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anders_Carlberg) - 2.6.2014

<sup>6</sup> It is a foundation headed by the YMCA of Stockholm. Public funding covers around five percent of the activities; the rest is financed by a mixture of grants, endowments and fees for services such as educational and social programmes (<http://fryshuset.se/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Årsredovisning-2013-Stiftelsen-KFUM-Söder-Fryshuset-påskriften-inkl-revisionsberättelse.pdf>).

place where youngsters could interact with grown-ups in a positive way (Carlberg 2008). His overall goal was for it to be a place in which marginalised individuals would be mobilised and come to realise that negative experiences can be turned into positive strengths (Carlberg 2008:80). As he pointed out in writings and lectures, *encouragement*, *confidence* and *responsibility* are crucial values for young people to experience so they can develop self-esteem and become responsible adults (ibid.). Therefore, Fryshuset is an association of a multitude of different projects working to promote empowerment and tolerance by building social relations and interaction. These thoughts come alive through youngsters' participation in different cultural and sporting activities, as staff members at the centre are convinced that being physically active is fun and makes it easier to relax, concentrate and learn. Social projects at Fryshuset include, for example, working to build relationships between boys and adults through activities and dialogue, focusing on including young single parents in a network and integrating young lone refugees in social networks. In addition, there are opportunities to play basketball, participate in a skateboard team and engage in projects focusing on making innovative ideas within culture and events happen, to mention just a few of the many projects at Fryshuset.

When you enter Fryshuset, you enter a particular culturally defined space (Hasse 2002) as the centre operates on the basis of specific values, which are promoted in information material, illustrations on the walls and the activities. Both Fryshuset's mission and how people involved in Fryshuset react to it are expressed in statements on the centre's webpage<sup>7</sup>: *'We provide encouragement, confidence and responsibility, which creates knowledge and self-esteem that highlights the individual's inherent power... We listen to what is happening in society and act immediately. We are not afraid of what is new and unknown. We see opportunities and mobilise forces where others see problems. We test our way, correct*

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<sup>7</sup> <http://fryshuset.se/om-fryshuset/vision-och-vardegrund/>. I have translated these statements from Swedish to English.



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*and constantly improve our techniques... and we take our point of departure in the individual's needs. Here, the door is always open for those who want to get involved and develop, whatever their background... We believe in respectful meetings where the desire to participate and the common interests of all overcome contradictions, differences and increase understanding'. These statements become mediating artifact for staff as they come to evoke the figured world of Fryshuset by constituting its vision and raison d'être as well as they frame the centers work. Staff members participating in the centre's activities over time, the statements become their personal points of references, which they used in interviews when I asked them to tell me about their work at Fryshuset. They also point out the values according to which staff members at the centre are expected to act.*

At Fryshuset, *exclusion* and *passion* also have special significance as these terms explain why youngsters develop in a positive or a negative way. Fryshuset's webpage states<sup>8</sup> that; '*young people can change the world through their passions*'. Passion is obviously perceived as a strong energy, which, as the vision these words are connected to implies, can be used in a negative or a positive way. Passion, as the director of Fryshuset explained at a conference in 2011, can: '*make you an innovative entrepreneur, but it can also be the driving force in establishing a gang or an extremist political group*'.

Passion becomes a negative driving force when an individual is or feels *excluded*. According to this vision, exclusion makes a person feel vulnerable. These notions of passion and exclusion as well as the above-mentioned statements about Fryshuset's values become *mediating artefacts* - collectively developed and individually learned and made social and personal – evoking what I have come to term the figured world of Fryshuset. They inform the staff's discourse and practice as staff through their engagement in the centre's practice come to assign significance to the explanation carried in the words (Holland et al. 1998).

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<sup>8</sup> <http://fryshuset.se/om-fryshuset/vision-och-vardegrund/>



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The staff's discourse seems to draw on specific sets of interpretations and assumptions present in this chain of causation: you will tend to engage *passionately* in extremist groups and/or gangs when you feel *excluded* and are unfortunate enough to grow up in areas where the *general conditions* make an extremist group a *possible* choice for your engagement. When *passion* and *exclusion* are framed as leading you in a negative or positive direction, it becomes evident which actions that staff at Fryshuset value over others, as by offering youngsters positive role models and hobbies they can engage in *passionately*, they can prevent the youngsters from feeling excluded. The vision for Fryshuset's work combined with the notion of exclusion linked to a double-sided interpretation of passion together set the frame for Fryshuset as a figured world and as a particular culturally defined space. At Fryshuset, the idea is that if you are passionate about something, the passion will motivate you to become engaged in an activity. Therefore, it is important for you to discover your passions by trying out different things. By offering a multitude of different activities, Fryshuset creates opportunities for individuals to become passionate about an activity, which may keep up their personal motivation for being engaged in the activity and community as a means to learn and develop.

Fryshuset's stated values of being '*open for all*' and '*acting on what is happening in society*' as well as '*not being afraid of what is new and unknown*' have led to several controversial decisions. A decision in the 1980s especially caused problems, when it was decided that Fryshuset should establish a house for skinheads on the property. The goal was to move these youngsters – some of whom were involved in the extreme right – physically closer to break their isolation. The situation resulted in a great deal of negative controversy at Fryshuset and in the media; critics argued that it had contributed to the expansion of the extremist right and that leading figures in the group would receive regular subsidies from

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municipal grants.<sup>9</sup> But the decision also made Fryshuset a place that youth defecting from the extreme right could turn to, laying the foundation for EXIT. The staff at Fryshuset already had experience in creating new projects by drawing on their own personal experience and knowledge of the causes of problems and including individuals in need of support to improvise solutions. This method is today an established practice at Fryshuset and is stated in its explicit values.

In relation to one of EXIT's present clients another controversy arose. The client is both a lifetime prisoner for murder and a painter. Fryshuset chose to exhibit his paintings and have him visit when he has been on probation. These decisions and the fact that he is a client at EXIT have created conflict among the staff from other projects at Fryshuset as some of the staff did not agree with any of the decisions made in relation to him. Some mistook the support for him by EXIT and its coaches as a sign of acceptance of his criminal act. The conflict led the leader of Fryshuset to run workshops where staff could discuss Fryshuset's values and how to act upon them, as they obviously perceived them in different ways. This emphasises that stated values do not function as fixed instructions for behaviour that people can just follow; to gain collective significance, they need to become symbolic devices through people's action and engagement. The outcome in this case was that the staff accepted that EXIT, as a part of Fryshuset, would and should support motivated clients – irrespective of the seriousness of the crime they have committed – towards a non-criminal life. The assessment of clients according to the seriousness of their crime would make Fryshuset's explicit statement of openness and tolerance for all kinds of people cease to be meaningful.

Disagreements like these are inevitable as the staff members at Fryshuset have different backgrounds that make them judge situations in many different ways, as people

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<sup>9</sup> <http://arbetaren.se/artiklar/fryshuset-en-skattefinansierad-nazilokal/> (16.5.2014)  
[http://expo.se/2003/kommunala-bidrag-finansierade-vam\\_262.html](http://expo.se/2003/kommunala-bidrag-finansierade-vam_262.html) (16.5.2014)

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perceive things as they relate to their position (Hasse 2002). Yet disagreements often create opportunities for people to acquire a deeper understanding of each other's points of view. Fryshuset strives to overcome these differences, which carry with them the seeds of conflict, through continuous discussion among staff of current issues. These situations allow staff to introduce different perspectives, which can alter established routines and notions and potentially transform them (Holland and Skinner 1997). Conflicts can transform staff members' understanding of a situation as they gain insight into how the world appears when perceived from different positions. Such discussions also tend to homogenise the different participants' frame of interpretation, as some views may be expected to be more readily acknowledged than others as the different standpoints tend to be presented and judged against Fryshuset's stated values of *'believing in respectful meetings where the desire to participate and the common interests of all overcome contradictions, differences and increase understanding'*. The stated values can be points of reference for staff, which in subtle ways may constrain their behaviour.

Fryshuset has over time developed a social practice situated in a figured world, a culturally defined realm of reality, which has laid the foundation for the work of EXIT. Fryshuset also provides a basis for the identity formation of some of EXIT's clients as they in addition to getting support during the process of leaving the White Power Movement may have the option to acquire a new position through the possibilities offered in Fryshuset and by becoming a coach at EXIT, as I shall discuss below.

### **EXIT - a practice formed through joint efforts**

EXIT was started by Kent Lindal, a former neo-Nazi, in 1998. Other programmes helping former neo-Nazis disengage were also established in Norway, Sweden and Germany during the 1990s (Bjørge 2009). The inspiration for the Swedish organisation

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came from the Norwegian EXIT project initiated by Professor Tore Bjørgo from the Norwegian Police University College (2009). Bjørgo's approach to people involved in the extreme right-wing in Scandinavia is that subjects do not necessarily join such groups because they hold extremist views; they often *acquire* extremist views because they have joined the groups for other reasons (2009). This standpoint was adopted by EXIT Sweden and still lays the ground for EXIT's approach to clients. The approach link the individual to his/her conditions is also in line with Fryshuset's notion of exclusion.

The former neo-Nazis who were involved in EXIT in the beginning had experienced the struggle with what seem to be common factors in a disengagement process, including threats from former friends, feelings of loneliness, aggression, violent reaction patterns, distrust of people and a lack of job opportunities (Bjørgo 2009, Christensen 2014). The start of EXIT was conflict-ridden as the people involved had immense problems handling the organisation and did not know how to deal with the social systems and the police, with whom they had a strained relationship after years in the White Power Movement.

As EXIT needed help to develop its programme, Ingrid, a very experienced social worker was recruited in 2002 through Anders Carlberg's personal network. When Carlberg asked her whether she would help, her first reaction was that she did not have any experience with such work and did not, as she said, in any way '*want to work with those Nazi guys that you read about in the paper*'. In line with the explicit values of Fryshuset, Carlberg questioned her perception of the problem and her view on humans in general, to make her think about whether '*she thought that some people were more entitled to support than others*'. Questions like this made her reconsider and finally agree to start. This way of engaging people in a project at Fryshuset is also a very characteristic example of how organisations evolve through staff members' reactions to a problem, which change over time

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as the staff expands through networks and new interests and staff members connect with one other as they fulfil the tasks involved in creating solutions. Ingrid entered a work climate where she, as she describes it; *'was regarded as a sick bitch by strong guys who, to end a quarrel, would throw things at each other across the room'*. Looking back, she describes the guys she meet then, some of whom she still works with, as; *'a bunch of guys with good hearts, but with their own experiences to deal with; major problems with social relations and in their lives in general. They had 'landed' here and they had not got any help to rehabilitate or reflect. Fryshuset had employed them, and they had managed part of the way, and then they were supposed to meet people here (Fryshuset)'* (interview transcript 2012).

Ingrid has, as the quote indicates, changed her perception of the people she works with. She no longer perceives them as *'Nazi guys'*, but has come to see them as *'a bunch of good guys'* with social and relational problems. Ingrid's change of perception of what have become her colleagues after having worked at Fryshuset for many years may indicate how she has integrated the perception of the figured world of Fryshuset: social problems lead youngsters to participate in the extremist right.

From the very beginning, Ingrid pointed to reflection and rehabilitation as a way of supporting individuals in leaving the extremist right. She introduced an approach that combined her experience from therapeutic social work and knowledge of the system with the young guys experience and knowledge of the extremist right wing. This cooperation made both Ingrid and the coaches *'in the becoming'* become aware of crucial issues in the exit process. By working with Ingrid the very first coaches came to realise that they needed support to be able to alter their reactions, behaviour and thought patterns. The Nazi movement is described by several of the coaches at EXIT as a political sect, in which members are schooled in black and white thinking, notions of a conspiracy against society and that all outside the group are enemies to be fought. Belonging to these groups can create

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social disability in the form of difficulty in resolving conflicts and managing stress, and former participants often need to process the ideas that they have been immersed in for a long period of time (Lodenious 2014). The staff's awareness of these problems condition EXIT's practice as efforts are made to help former extremists become reflective about their often unreflective reaction and thought patterns.

Ingrid's cooperation with the coaches was very demanding as a practice has to take form for EXIT to survive. A process Ingrid describes like this: *'We proceeded methodically and found a starting point. We established contacts with the police and we developed the organisation, while we dealt with our frustration. I took care of staff members' frustration; someone attempted suicide...the whole group was traumatised. I went to the hospital. It was like going into the eye of a storm. It was damn hard and challenging and it tested my patience to the limit, but it was really uplifting.'*

Ingrid has on several occasions remarked how EXIT could only have been established by the combined efforts, knowledge and experiences of all staff members. She recounts:

*'It was awesome to see how their skills and experience and my skills could meet, which we also work on all the time, to realise how we can work together. They thought that is was me who did it all, and I was like, 'No, this is what is happening, this is me, but there - that's you'. I would never have reached the Nazi guys if I had not had their help from the start. But we built it up together and it was really demanding and later on we formalised it. Thus, a method of learning by doing emerged that EXIT still uses today. Ingrid continues: When I had..., for example, a conversation with parents, I always had a guy with me and they learned by doing it with me, and then we talked about it afterwards'* (Interview transcript 2012).

Through collaboration with clients guided by Ingrid's and the coaches' different experiences, a practice emerged. Just by being at Fryshuset, EXIT staff members are

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introduced to an alternative world that allows them to imagine different ways of being. By being positioned as staff in EXIT's office they are subjected to a different position than the one of (former) neo-Nazis and they are treated as if they fit the position of coaches' in the becoming'. This acceptance is crucial for individuals in the process of altering their identity (Holland and Skinner 1997) as such a position tend to constrain their behaviour. They are unlikely, for example, to be able to throw things across the room without getting a negative reaction and they begin to consider whether they should do so at all if they start to become interested in becoming a coach who is taken seriously at Fryshuset and EXIT. Ingrid also helps them objectify their own behaviour by talking to them about it, making them conscious of it and thereby creating alternatives to how they can act in different situations – for example, without using violence or threats. Through their cooperation with Ingrid, they learn how to handle a conversation – in the position of a coach at EXIT – with, for example, parents of youngsters involved in the extremist right who contact EXIT for advice.

Ingrid works on the basis of a situated learning concept (Lave & Wenger 1991) but also linked the learning to internal processes of reflection and objectification. The former extremists learn to become coaches first by participating in the situation with Ingrid and then by talking about it with her, giving her the opportunity to indicate points of reference or symbolic devices that they can use in a future somewhat similar situation. The concept is not only 'learning by doing' but also about making the coaches conscious of what they have learned, as Ingrid objectifies certain aspects of that learning and thereby makes it available for the coaches to reflect upon (Holland and Skinner 1997:198). In this way she involves the coaches in a process that provides them with new experiences to help mediate their transformation, new tools they can use to deal with various situations with and devices to think with making it possible for them to objectify their own behaviour. In the process they



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gain self-esteem and develop alternative perceptions of themselves as coaches and as members of staff.

Jeff, a former neo-Nazi, describes part of the development process as follows: *‘When I started working here I asked my boss...Something happened with a client; he was going to hit a subway driver and I managed to stop him and a couple of security guys came along and they pulled out their batons, and I thought, ‘Shit, this is going to go apeshit’. But I managed to resolve it and to control the client. I called up my boss and said; ‘Holy shit this just happened, I managed to resolve it, but what if an emergency happens, what is the checklist for emergencies?’ She said, ‘Whatever you think is appropriate, do that’. ‘You complete asshole, just give me detailed instructions on how to resolve emergencies.’ And she was like, ‘No, I trust your ability to make the right decision in that situation’. And I hated her for it. But then I learned to trust my own ability to resolve issues, which until then, I was 25, I think, until 25 I didn’t know how to do.* (Interview transcript 2012).

As the quote illustrates, the path to becoming a coach requires the motivation to get through very demanding situations and to deal with feelings of doubt and anger – repeatedly. As the coaches are engaged in different – and new and demanding – situations they need to improvise to solve the situation as there are no ‘detailed instructions’. Jeff improvises a response to the problem at hand on the basis of his subject position as a coach. He learns to objectify the situation when he thinks about what happened and what he did, and in this way he creates a possibility for directing his behaviour the next time a situation arises. Thus, the situation becomes one example among many, mediating a transformation of self-understanding to the extent that Jeff today points out not only why he hated Ingrid for it but also why and how the situation made him learn. He now uses the method with his clients. Ingrid helps new coaches continuously create points of significance by making them experience concrete examples of how to handle a situation and by talking about it

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afterwards. These steps make specific situations become symbolic devices - a tool for them to think and act with – to solve the next situation. They can use this experience in a different social situation, requiring a different sort of behaviour than the one they have been accustomed to in the extremist right. In Jeff's case, the situation also made him realise that *he could trust himself* to make the right decision because of Ingrid's confidence in him. Jeff's identity and subjectivity develop as he improvises in new situations but there are some constraints: Jeff is trusted not to react as he used to, which might have involved simply following instructions, threatening the client or hitting him. The situation makes him angry and creates resistance as he feels insecure and does not know what to do. His dialogue with Ingrid encourages reflection, which over time and through repeated experience will make Jeff embody the new way of perceiving and dealing with situations like this. By applying these new ways of acting in his life, he embodies them and they become his personal knowledge (Holland et al. 1998).

How interactions with Ingrid and the cultural knowledge that constitutes Fryshuset as a figured world become personal knowledge that frames staff members' interpretation of their surroundings is also evident in this quote from an interview with Joachim, a former neo-Nazi and now a coach at EXIT. The quote shows how Joachim has come to personalise Fryshuset's explanation of exclusion in the process of leaving the extremist right wing and later on through his work as a coach. Fryshuset's perception of exclusion, rather than a personal characteristic, as one of the core reasons for youth involvement in extremist groups seems to be one of the symbolic devices that have altered Joachim's self-perception and informed his understanding of the reasons for the difficulties some young people encounter and how refocusing can empower individuals. During an interview with Joachim, I asked: *I have noticed that you talk about utanförskab – exclusion - what does that mean? Is it like a concept that you are working with?* Joachim answered: *Exclusion - the feeling of exclusion.*

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*Sometimes it can be a real situation, but it can also be a feeling of being excluded. Modern society is moving forward very quickly, and you have to be good at all these things to succeed. If you aren't, you have the feeling that you aren't part of society, or that you aren't welcome. We work a lot on that to kind of refocus; 'So okay, you feel that society let you down! 'But look at all of these things; these are things that society actually provides for you too'. He continued: 'You can take control of the situation, and you can go back to school, you can do it'. It is a shift in agency for the person; 'You can also do something about this yourself'. But putting it in a very...you know, I would not use these kind of words. But I would work on motivating people to rethink their situations. A lot of them have had bad school experiences, being bullied or robbed or... having all these experiences that have destroyed their self-esteem, I would have to kind of support them in regaining that; 'You can do it', 'It is possible, you have choices' (interview transcript 2012).*

Through the episodes described above, Jeff, Joachim and the other coaches in a disengagement process are put in the position of a trusted and skilled employee, in which they learn by doing and thereby develop skills and self-confidence. Jeff's example is illustrative of many of the situations that arise in the process former right-wingers go through on their way to becoming coaches at EXIT. This practice also introduces them to very different values and a democratic way of interaction, involving trust, negotiation and communication, as the quote from Joachim illustrates. This is in sharp contrast to the extremist right, with its hierarchical organisation and religiously organised worldview, in which some actions are acceptable while others are taboo (Bjørge:1997, Fangen: 2001, Eiternes & Fangen 2002, Christensen 2014). By participating in EXIT and being part of Fryshuset, staff members (trans)form their basis for reflection and perception of the world. As they integrate into Fryshuset's figured world they alter their self-perception as Jeff and Joachim have done, who today are highly talented coaches at EXIT, using their own

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experience combined with EXIT's approaches of helping others. EXIT is now a well-established organisation, with growing numbers of staff members, who work according to an established practice. Yet what is EXIT's formalised practice today? And how are people who have the propensity to be drawn to the organisation formed in the figured world of Fryshuset at EXIT? I will discuss these themes below.

### **EXIT's client support - and the ideas behind it**

Out of the very first instances of cooperation between Ingrid and the former neo-Nazis who contributed to starting EXIT, a practice took shape, which today has been professionalised. EXIT has employed two social counsellors, who are officially in charge of the client programme, several academics and a human resources employee. The employees have different professional competences, but common to them all is openness towards others and personal references of individuals taking action and overcoming personal challenges such as drug abuse and difficult family relations.

Client support is still linked to the coaches' personal processes, combined with further experience in working with clients, which has proven that a client's motivation in combination with personal relations to the coach and the support of the coach are all-important factors in the client's further development. This is why EXIT's work first and foremost aims at helping clients maintain their motivation for change, as altering one's lifestyle to the extent required in these cases is often an extremely demanding task. Coaches at EXIT involve clients in different activities, such as visits to museums, weightlifting, walking and talking, informal café meetings and paintball. The aim is to inspire clients to engage in alternative activities and potentially to identify new activities to be (passionately) interested in (Christensen 2014, Lodenious 2014). The strategy reflects EXIT's approach to personal change, which is based on the conviction that engaging repeatedly in a variety of

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activities gives individuals a wide range of experiences and emotions that create new connections in the brain, which, as Ingrid and the coaches explain, is a precondition for people to be able to start (re)acting in new ways.

EXIT is now formally defined as a self-help programme with specific functions associated with client support, including various forms of therapy sessions and emergency accommodation to escape potential harassment from the movement. As the coaches at EXIT have experienced through their own stories, clients are often misinformed about society and unaware of their basic rights, which is why they have immense difficulties approaching public institutions when they disengage. They may struggle with not becoming aggressive and using threats when they deal with formal institutions, as they are often unaware of alternative ways of getting an answer or a result. Therefore, EXIT also provides social support to facilitate individuals' (re)integration into society by helping them in their contact with authorities and by encouraging them to reestablish contact with their family. The organisation also provides consultative support to institutions working to prevent radicalisation of youngsters<sup>10</sup> and now has a worldwide network of people working against radicalisation and extremism.

EXIT has grown out of Fryshuset's practice of building organisations by pooling motivated people with employees with various professional and personal competences. The success of the experience has led the staff to extend their work to include clients trying to leave highly organised street and motorcycle gangs, such as Black Cobra and Hell's Angels. These clients need much the same support as former right-wing extremists. As a result, Passus, a sister organisation, has grown out of EXIT's practice and works according to the same methods and assumptions, but aims at gang members (Christensen 2014). As Ingrid explains:

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.ungdomsstyrelsen.se/sites/default/files/publikationer\\_uploads/utvardering-av-exit.pdf](http://www.ungdomsstyrelsen.se/sites/default/files/publikationer_uploads/utvardering-av-exit.pdf)

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*'Exit received an inquiry from a prison under great hush-hush. It was a gang leader who wanted to defect, and we had to consider whether we could work with him. There were people here from the prison's security department and I already had a couple of guys from the biker world who I had taken into EXIT, even though they did not belong there. We had three of these guys, so I thought we could make a pilot project out of it and see where it led us. For we knew all along that with this method, we could meet all types of people from different groups and gangs, and there were indicators suggesting that it would work, and then came the structure, and then we did the same thing with this organisation for defectors from gangs'* (interview transcript 2012). Coaches from EXIT and Passus are now part of a joint team, physically placed in the same office.

As part of the practice of working with clients, the staff of both Passus and EXIT draw a line between people's actions and them as human beings, for, as several employees have explained, *'We condemn the action, but never the human being'*. As Joachim points out; *'How can I help someone if I start by dehumanising him or her by condemning the whole person because of his or her actions?'* The view that a person is a human being, no matter what crimes he/she has committed is in contrast with the commonly expressed notion that evil acts make humans become monsters – they dehumanise them – which erases evil as an integrated part of the human experience. The view held by EXIT and Passus enables people who have committed violent acts to move on with their life. As one coach said to his client of many years, *'you can never bring people back to life, but you have done the second best thing: acknowledged your crimes'*, in this case, murder. An opening is thus created for a possible life after extreme violence, although the guilt, as became obvious in interviews with clients, remains a never ending issue to deal with. The founder of EXIT, Kent Lindahl (2000), for example, writes in his autobiography how he continued to struggle with the violent acts he

had committed years after he had stopped being a right-wing extremist and after year of therapy.

Identity and the way we perceive ourselves is, in EXIT and Fryshuset's frame of interpretation contextual and historical, a *process* rather than a *character* or *personality trait*, which is a fixed and unchangeable entity. Who we are is seen as a result of what we do, rather than something we are. From that follows that identity is viewed as an ongoing and open-ended process, formed in the process of participating in activities specific to figured worlds (Holland et al. 1998).

### Becoming an agent at EXIT

The figured world of Fryshuset emphasises how the significant interrelation of exclusion, passion, inclusion and empowerment described above is – to varying degrees – acquired by EXIT's members of staff as they participate in the community of practice at EXIT and Fryshuset. By participating in activities at Fryshuset, the employees learn to reproduce and enact cultural forms particular to this world – for example, the way terms like *identity*, *exclusion* and *condition* are used in daily communication at EXIT. Staff members take up these devices for mediating what over time becomes their own conception of issues involved in this particular world. One employee, Karin, describes what she calls her personal journey of development from her first involvement in EXIT as a trainee social worker to becoming a member of staff. Karin feels that working for EXIT has changed her and her perspective to a great extent: *It was a VERY, VERY transformative journey to do my internship here. My judgements and human perspective were questioned, and I was forced to think, "Who am I to judge?" or, "How do I judge" and, "Who am I to meet these people [neo-Nazis] in this way?" I gained a completely different understanding of it here, making me see the individual behind a person's actions and getting to understand that the individual is not ...*



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*just because you have committed an evil act, it doesn't mean that you by definition are bad for life. ... It is so easy to believe that you are open-minded because you fight for the weaker ones in society... But then when you come here you see a totally different kind of exclusion. Karin experienced, for example, how difficult it can be for clients to overcome society's stigmatisation of them as former extremists. It was a very, very positive – and as I said – quite scary journey. A lot happens along the way on a personal level during your time here. ... Really to realise that it is not always the individual who is ... that it's social conduct that is shaped by our surroundings and circumstances, and what happens around you of course, in combination with internal disposition and so on. But precisely, we are all products of our conditions in a way.'* (Interview transcript 2012)

Karin came to perceive herself in a different way as she realised how she had been judging neo-Nazis herself. Through her work at EXIT, she began to understand that there could be an alternative explanation for why people joined extremist groups, which made her question her own reasons for judging these people. By engaging ourselves in a figured world, we form and become formed when we make the symbolic meaning of the devices of the figured world our personal knowledge. These devices can be things, people, words or, as in this case, a specific perspective on people (Holland et al. 1998). Yet as will become evident, some people incorporate an identity and self-understanding as an agent in EXIT's figured world to a much greater extent than others. Karin has acquired an EXIT perspective – the separation of the human being and his/her actions and the identity formation in relation to a context – through her engagement. Over time she has come to identify herself with the organisation, where she has been presented for this frame of interpretation in different ways – through dialogue, meetings, work with clients – and it has come to constitute her perspective of not only the clients but also people in general, including herself.

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As the example above illustrates, staff at EXIT come to perceive the world in a rather similar fashion, in part because perspectives tend to become coordinated as some views and actions are encouraged and others are discouraged through subtle signs, making individuals refrain from repeating them (Hasse 2002). Some of the employees are newly arrived; they come with different professional experiences and perspectives, not only on client cases – which is encouraged – but also on the established practice surrounding the work with clients. They will reflect on explicit rules, practices as well as implicit taken-for-granted ways of doing things (Hasse 2002:201). As Karin's quote illustrates, some staff members come to identify strongly with Fryshuset and EXIT, whereas others will never come to identify with the figured world of Fryshuset – or at least not enough to interpret the issues at stake at EXIT by drawing on the cultural knowledge that brought Fryshuset into existence. Many of the former and present clients I have interviewed have expressed a feeling of gratitude and a desire to give something in return to EXIT and their coach, who they feel has made it possible for them to change their lives. Therefore, many current clients wish to become coaches. This ambition can also be a result of 'the coach' being one of the first examples of a job function they encounter as they disengage. Also, it is one of very few jobs in which they can actually use what they have learned in the extremist environment. Yet very few former clients actually become coaches.

Since EXIT became an established NGO, new coaches are recruited from former clients and they learn through cooperation with experienced ones (Christensen 2013, 2014, 2014 in press). This description from a meeting illustrates that the learning period is yet another transitional period for the coach in the becoming: *Erik, a former client, who has worked as a coach for a year points out that the staff members at EXIT are the only ones in Europe spending so much time on a single client. 'What do we do if a coach gets sick'? He asks. Ingrid answers by emphasising that he, Erik, has to learn how to do the work from more*

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*experienced coaches. Joachim and Jeff (two of the first coaches at EXIT) learned in the beginning how to work with clients in this way. She continued, 'Two client-coaches cannot learn from each other', she said, 'and you also need to deal with the emotional side of what is going on inside yourself in the process' (field note 2012).*

Coaches thus learn 'how to be coaches' by cooperating with experienced coaches – in the same way as Ingrid worked with Jeff as described above – but the coach in the becoming also needs to handle his emotions. For the new coach, the learning process is thus social in that he, through interaction with the experienced coach (and other staff), learns how to handle clients, but he also learns to enact cultural forms particular to Fryshuset and EXIT and to take up these forms as devices for mediating his own conception of himself and the world around him. This is a transitional period in which some, but not all, coaches attach themselves emotionally to the position as coach, which over time will make them internalise the interpretation of events and experiences and the appropriate behaviour and values of a coach at EXIT and Fryshuset. This is a step on the way to becoming a coach. Yet what needs to happen for a coach in the becoming to actually become a coach? What is the learning model? I will discuss these questions in more detail in the next paragraph.

### **Being a client - becoming a coach - supporting a client**

The current coaches at EXIT are characterised by a high level of energy and a devotion to their position as members of staff at EXIT and/or Passus. This enthusiasm also seems to have helped them attain status in the extremist right or highly organised criminal gangs they have been part of before they joined EXIT and/or Passus.

Clients who become coaches are required to do something between the two positions as a way of preventing them from relapsing into old patterns of behaviour because of the job and making it less painful for them to handle the clients' problems. One client-coach at

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EXIT mentioned that it remains a daily struggle to adhere to a non-criminal path in life; however, the coaches who had been there for up to ten years never mentioned this struggle. Between two of my periods of fieldwork two coaches were dismissed, as EXIT found out that they had hardly met their clients and that they had exploited them, rather than helped them. This situation highlights that even though people are at EXIT and Fryshuset they do not necessary invest emotion in and attach themselves to EXIT or their position as a coach. Most individuals engage to varying degrees in and identify themselves with the position open to them while a few never do, as in the above-mentioned case (Hasse 2002:206, Holland et al.1998).

According to the person responsible for human resources, when a client becomes a coach, he can be hired in a wage subsidy job, where the employer pays 20% of the wage and the social system the rest. Wage subsidy jobs can be held for up to five years; the maximum duration is given to people suffering from illness or who have had major personal problems like crime and drug abuse. The wage subsidy is considered a transitional benefit that can help these people return to the labour market. Over time the subsidy is reduced, so that the employer pays an increasing percentage of the wage and finally the full wage. This model gives people who have been out of the labour market for some time the opportunity to, for example, learn to take responsibility, to come on time and to develop a work identity. It also makes it possible for client-coaches to be engaged in the learning process of becoming a coach on a flexible basis, allowing them to take days off and to work part-time if they feel that the job is becoming too demanding, as a lot of the client-coaches are still struggling with their personal problems.

During my fieldwork I participated along with several coaches in a further training course called 'Crime as a lifestyle'. The course was based on group work and reflective exercises, where we had to think how a criminal we knew would react in a specific situation

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(or participants could think of themselves and their own reactions, if they had a criminal background). The idea was to discuss the result of the individual criminal reaction pattern, but seen from the perspective of others; in other words, what effect does a criminal act – for example, violence or robbery – have on other people and on the lives of close relatives of the criminal. After a few days I noticed that one of the new coaches was absent. I asked an employee where he was, and she explained: *Lars felt really bad while participating in the 'Crime as a lifestyle' seminar. He thought it was very hard and it had made him doubt whether he had distanced himself enough from his own story to be able to work as a coach, or whether he should do something else that had nothing to do with this at all* (field note 2012). The course introduced the client-coaches to exercises that can help individuals reflect on their own story with the aim of making them realise what criminal acts do to other people, including victims, family and girl- or boyfriends. Most criminals tend to avoid reflections like these on their criminal lifestyle or make excuses (Bergström 2012). Being in a group where you are expected to speak about your reflections makes it hard to avoid thinking about and discussing your feelings. These kinds of exercises create self-consciousness and self-reflection and help the person take the standpoint of others. In this way, the client-coach/coach learns to objectify himself and through the objectification gains a different understanding of his behaviour – seen from the perspective of the victim – which can help guide his subsequent behaviour (Holland et al.1998). The courses in combination with Fryshuset's frame of interpretation of the contextual reasons for youngsters participating in destructive groups, also presented at EXIT and Passus, help client-coaches understand how the context you are a part of opens up certain possibilities for you while closing others. It is, as coaches point out, much easier to become a criminal if there is a gang next door and your friends are involved in it than if it is not an option.

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Activities like courses, meetings and the daily dialogue with other staff also make the client-coach part of an interaction in which he will be introduced to words that enable him to verbalise his thoughts. This can be demanding as it can take time to develop a vocabulary for the feelings and thoughts connected with the many aspects of changing one's identity and lifestyle. The interaction also puts the client-coach in situations where he has to take others into account, for example, by paying attention to others' feelings, listening to others and responding in an emphatic way.

During yet another stay at EXIT I got to participate in a seminar that had been arranged for the staff. The idea was to discuss client work and how to handle the fact that not all clients would end up leaving the gang or extremist group for good –regardless of the coaches' effort. During the course, the teacher asked one of the client-coaches: *'What would you do if a client hit you? Lars answered; 'I would hit him back and then we could take it from there'. 'Then', the teacher said: 'you would be just like him, and you would be back to where you came from'. Another client-coach said that he hoped his appearance in itself would be enough to show what the game was about. Because, as he said, 'If you hit someone, you must also be strong enough to take one back - and that should stop you from hitting'* (field note 2012). Looks – in this case, muscles – have been created through years of weightlifting, to be able to signal; 'I'm strong, I hit hard if I have to, so think twice before you act'. The answers reflect the logic at work in gangs and demonstrate why the exercises at the seminar were designed to make the client-coach think about how to respond to clients, knowing their logic but applying a different one themselves. Yet they also make them go through their reaction patterns and then evaluate them on the basis of a new standard, which stipulates that hitting back is not socially acceptable. It is even made explicit that if a client-coach does hit someone, he will no longer be perceived as having left his old (violent) lifestyle behind.

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The client-coaches are in a new context: Fryshuset. They are addressed as trustworthy individuals and coaches in the becoming; people whose opinion counts. Thus each time a client-coach interacts in contexts such as seminars, teamwork, meetings and dialogues with other coaches, he gets additional tools – mediating devices – as a means to reflect and he is afforded a position as a coach and equal. Coaches also become emotionally attached to the identity of coach when they start to care about how other staff members perceive them. Viewed over the long term, these day-to-day practices of social positions and acts of inclusion create a situation where an individual's position and identity as a coach (if he comes to identify himself with the position) co-develop and become a disposition leading to a definitive change of self-understanding and identity (Holland et al. 1998)

During the last part of my fieldwork, I participated in a three-day course on a method called 'motivational interviewing'. According to the teacher, *'You tend to use the style of communication that you have experienced as useful'*. *'Using mockery and a condescending tone work very well in a criminal world'*. The remark made one client-coach become more aware of his own communication style, which he was very frustrated with. He said; *I have a problem if I become passionate about something; I take over the conversation, making it hard for anybody else to speak. I am tired of being that way. But it used to work well, to be able to present things factually all the time, like, 'This is it', 'I know the facts' so 'I'm right' and therefore I have the claim to power. I am so tired of being that way, but it's really difficult not to behave that way* (field note 2012).

Such remarks underline how our disposition or habitus is inscribed in our bodies (Wilken 2007). Yet they also show how the different courses and activities the client-coaches participate in are a means of becoming conscious of their embodied behaviour as well as learning the tools needed to work with clients. Courses like these help coaches



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identify their emotions and verbalise them, which is a very important part of objectifying yourself, making it possible to alter your actions and self-understanding.

Discussing with more experienced staff difficult aspects of specific clients' cases and the client-coaches' own emotions in relation to them is yet another means through which the client-coaches learn how to support their clients but definitely also get tools they can use themselves (Christensen 2014 in press). When they discuss clients, the clients-coaches' vocabulary expands constantly. Being able to verbalise emotions makes it easier to understand (one's own and the client's emotions) and handle them and make it possible to communicate with others about any difficulties. Since they were clients, the client-coaches have been going through a very intensive period of self-development perceived through the frame of interpretation at EXIT, in which they have learned more about themselves, their values and their reactions. The result is that the client-coaches begin to perceive their own story through EXIT and the figured world of Fryshuset, in which their actions are not the outcome of their character, but are recast in a frame of understanding that makes them an outcome of the client-coaches and their context.

For example, clients often have problems with social relations, yet according to EXIT's perspective, this is not because they are stupid, evil or uncaring, but because they have not learned how to interact with others. This perspective opens up the possibility that an individual – a client or client-coach – can change by learning the rules of social interaction. Moreover, client-coaches are surrounded by role models who are former neo-Nazis and/or gang members, but who are now experienced coaches, proving that it is possible to change your life for good. These role models constitute a mediating device, as the client-coaches can use the more experienced coaches' personal development and stories to understand the steps leading to a change of lifestyle and identity – and that it is possible to change. The personalisation of the identity as coach and no longer a former gang member or

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extremist takes place as the client-coach begins to identify with the other coaches. Through comparing his life to theirs, he sees that they have been where he is now and that they are like him and he is like them. Their stories become subjective mediating devices: means by which the client-coach can direct and evaluate his own behaviour (ibid. 75).

*Erik, a coach from Passus, is convinced of the importance of finding people's passions. After having found his passion- as he tells a day in the office -he has entered a whole new path in life. Initially, when he was no longer a client, he did not want to be a coach because there were many other jobs that paid much more, and he thought that it was very important to have a lot of money; he presumed that money was his driving force. But over time in Passus, he found out that money did not drive him quite as much as he thought. Now he is really passionate about his job as a coach, which he now feels is more important than money (field note 2012).*

The quote illustrates how this coach has altered his self-perception by engaging in different activities, as clients are encouraged to do while at EXIT or Passus while at the same time perceiving his story through the frame of interpretation of EXIT and Fryshuset. Erik makes the figured world of Fryshuset his personal knowledge as he explains how finding his passion has made him become a passionate coach.

Through their work at EXIT, client-coaches become an active part of numerous social relations, and are at the same time positioned as people who contribute in important ways. The old conception of self in relation to being former neo-Nazis and clients is weakened through a process of day-to-day encounters – participating in collaborative activities, engaging in conversation and interaction – on which their positions as staff members at EXIT are built. This process alters their identity as former neo-Nazis and clients, and their perception of the figured world that once gave their identity meaning: the White Power Movement (Christensen 2014). In the formation of a new identity a

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motivated individual comes, with the social encouragement and insistence of others, to interpret the world in new ways, and to position him/herself and emotionally invest him/herself in that world. (Holland et al. 1998: 73-74). To develop from a client into a coach is a journey of personal and professional change. Through the situations described above, clients become part of a learning process through which they gradually develop their identity as coaches. Yet the client-coaches also struggle with personal problems, which have an impact on their performance as coaches and their daily wellbeing. Supporting client-coaches in moving forward requires a supportive team of colleagues, as will be discussed below.

### **Learning how to solve problems in your own life by interacting with supportive colleagues**

While I was at the office at EXIT and Passus, I soon noticed the very inclusive way in which people interacted. The tone among staff is positive and the employees joke and laugh. Staff often hug each other, engage in play-fights and in other ways show physical signs of caring. The office of EXIT and Passus is not big and in the middle of it, there is a table with ten seats. The table is where all the meetings take place, the staffs eat their lunch and drink coffee and the clients of Passus sometimes sit and talk with whoever is available. As Hilde – a social counselor - once said, some of the clients do not have a family, so they try to create a homely and a caring atmosphere and make an effort to avoid resembling an institution. Many of the clients and coaches have extremely negative associations with institutions such as 24-hour youth care centres and prisons.

The employees seem to perceive their positions as something more than jobs. They meet at each other's homes and seem to know about each other's lives in great details; sometimes they phone one another at night to continue a discussion about important issues.

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One day at the office a client-coach told the staff that he did not feel well. He was feeling very down, lonely and lost and, as he said, when he felt that way, he had a tendency to isolate himself. This particular client-coach is struggling a lot with problems related to his upbringing and his past as a criminal and gang member. Several of the employees asked whether or what they could do to help him: *'Would it help if we dropped by your house? Or should we phone you?'* Several of the staff members ended up exchanging phone numbers with the client-coach and told him that he needed to let them know if he was not feeling well.

At a later stage, he and his girlfriend were beaten up one weekend. He started calling his colleagues and talked to them about the episode, and as he said, they helped him find other ways of approaching the episode. A situation like that could easily have made him relapse into an old behaviour of using violence and thinking about revenge, but he felt that talking to his colleagues had helped him handle the situation in a different way.

The combination of coaches with a criminal and/or extremist past also demands that the other staff members are open to a relationship with their colleagues that may go beyond work issues – when needed. The staff members at EXIT and Passus are familiar with the diverse difficulties client-coaches may be struggling with and the time perspective involved. It can take a long time to change behavioural patterns that may be a result of upbringing combined with a criminal lifestyle easily spanning 20 to 30 years.

The colleagues urging the client-coach to let them know if things are not going well demonstrates how the process of developing new dispositions in the client-coaches is continued during the process of becoming a coach. As the client-coaches start identifying with the coaches by interacting with them and comparing their life to theirs, they can see that the coaches have been where they are now. The other coaches seem to become a symbolic device, providing examples to think about and follow as the client-coaches become

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aware of alternative ways of reacting and interacting: being trustful, caring and showing emotions (also men). The client-coaches are also made aware of the possibility of calling a friend when things are tough, which becomes salient for them, and which they through repetition come to internalise, whereby a different reaction pattern and way of behaving becomes established (Holland et al. 1998).

Due to their different positions, some staff members have more responsibilities than others. As one of the social counsellors explains, their job is to introduce a structure to the flexible model, which can be a challenge, and to help solve legislative issues in relation to the system. Yet as Ingrid says, staff members who do not have a past as extremists or criminals also need to continue paying attention to the coaches' wellbeing and be prepared to help if support is needed. She elaborates:

*'The approach is that these guys can use their own experiences to help others; the disadvantage is that they have had the same problems and we have at times offered these employees therapy. We have also done this: we had a guy who worked here for many years and was very good at it. But each year at Christmas he suffered from depression, as he was involved in so many cases that reminded him of his own childhood and he got supervision and things like that. A friend of mine, who is a psychiatrist, who simply helps the organisation talked to him. And then he always had time off from mid-December until after New Year, as he could not find peace. But he came back in mid-January and the rest of the group had to accept that; there is difference. The rest of us can just be glad that we do not feel bad. No...but we all try to show extra consideration for those with a difficult background, and to consider how they feel. I know that both Hilde and Anna (two social counsellors) and I make an effort to help them with it. For example, Gunnar (a coach at both EXIT and Passus) had a very heavy case. When he came in the door, even though I was busy with something else, I just dropped it when I saw how he looked – he came round the corner and in here... into my office.*

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*I didn't really have time, but that's how we do it; we work like this. He talks about why it is so difficult, and I listen to him for 15 minutes and say a few words; 'Yes, that's how it can be' or something. Or maybe it takes longer, but we must always be ready to drop what we are doing, and that's the way we try to support the ones with a difficult background.*

Thus the organisation requires the employees' acceptance of different needs among staff members and a willingness to meet these needs by treating people in different ways, for example, by giving some people more days off than others and letting some coaches do work-outs during working hours. As Ingrid said during an informal conversation, staff members often discuss issues related to clients' cases during the day, as they represent the most demanding part of the job. This is also encouraged as a way of continuously getting different perspectives on the coaches' interaction with clients and issues the coach perceives as difficult and as a way of reducing the emotional pressure of client work. Through this sort of interaction the client-coaches are coming to perceive themselves, the world and what they do through the figured world of Fryshuset and the practice of working with clients at EXIT. A conversation between Anne, a social counsellor, and Magnus, a client-coach at Passus, illustrates this point: *Magnus and Anna were talking about how Magnus felt that he was lying to a client. Anna said, 'No, you are not lying. Because what does it mean to lie?' Magnus answered, 'That it's not telling the truth'. Anna continued; 'But you are not lying; you are listening to what the client says, but he is not ready to hear your opinion right now. That is not the same as lying. Magnus had had enough of lies, as he said, and he has taken an oath that he will never lie again. He has had it with lies as his father lied to everybody: his own parents, his brothers and his children (field note 2012).*

As the quote illustrates, the dialogue between the social counsellor Anna and the client-coach also add to his perspective of, in this case, lying: that lying is not necessarily the same as not telling the client exactly how you perceive the situation here and now. The

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dialogues add additional nuances to the situation, making the client-coach aware of new salient points than those he considered when perceiving the situation through the lenses of his own upbringing.

The social counsellors' are the ones who have overall responsibility for handling frustrations, anger, sorrow and insecurity and for supporting (client-)coaches who are having doubts about themselves and the way they handle their clients. The reason for having social counsellors on staff is thus to ensure the quality of the work being done with clients and to supervise the coaches. Ingrid, Hilde and Anna (all social counsellors) influence client support through their work with the coaches.

To sum up the coaches who work with clients are chosen in the first place based on the staff evaluation of their general qualifications and personality. The staff at EXIT and Passus work very closely together and the new coaches learn the skills by working and interacting with more experienced coaches and other staff as well as they get supervision and discuss their work and clients' issues in weekly meetings and daily conversations with the social counsellors about challenging issues related to the work. The clients are also in contact with several staff at EXIT at the same time as well as their first meeting is with other employees than the ones who become their personal coach. Clients can complain about a coach or change coach if the personal match is not successful. In these manners EXIT and Passus seek to secure a professional relationship between client and coaches as well as the coaches are expected to expand their skill though continuing education.

The client-coaches add pivotal knowledge and insight to the work of EXIT and Passus; the organisation would simply not be able to function the way it does without them. Yet for the cooperation to succeed it is important to have developed a practice that includes staff who are more than usually dedicated to their tasks and to the wellbeing of their fellow human beings.



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## When criminal experiences becomes useful knowledge in a diverse group of employees: concluding remarks

*'It can be hard if you've been hostile towards society for 20 years to go to the social services and ask for help. Or to go to the police you have been in conflict with and have had confrontations with and say, 'I need help'. This step can sometimes be difficult. So we think we can be the link and help take the initial contact and ensure that the meeting becomes a success' (Interview transcript 2012).*

The staff members at EXIT and Passus have created a practice in which the 'we' in the above-mentioned quote is a link that can secure a positive meeting between two agents from different figured worlds: a neo-Nazi and a representative of Swedish society, for example, the police or the social services. This is possible because the staff can understand the case from both sides. The 'we' also refers to an integrated whole: the staff, which comprises different employees who play equally important roles in making such a meeting a success.

EXIT's diverse staff members thus play the role of cultural translators and mediators between the institutions – for example, social services and the police – in Swedish society and members from gangs or extremist groups who want to leave their criminal life and reintegrate into society. Each individual employee at EXIT and Passus represents a very different incorporated experience and knowledge of how to act, which he/she has learned by being an agent in different figured worlds, as, for example, a former gang member or extremist, social counsellor or academic. Incorporated experience and knowledge of how to act acquired by participating in one figured world – for example, the White Power Movement – may, when the individual enters a different figured world, form the basis for new competences and positions. Yet the opposite may also happen; a person may find that

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he loses opportunities when he enters a different realm of interpretation or figured world precisely because of his past (Hasse 2002:242, Holland et al. 1998).

For the coaches at EXIT/Passus, their criminal and extremist experience would in today's job market and in society in general result in lost opportunities. Yet because they are engaged in a world figured by the cultural model of Fryshuset, they have developed into agents in that world. They have gradually come to perceive their story through EXIT and Fryshuset's frame of interpretation, transforming their extremist self-understanding and identity into that of a coach and social worker. During the process many of their basic assumptions have been changed or reorganised and the coaches have developed a new perspective on themselves, their (previous) problems and what the world is like. They have come to interpret their stories and themselves as part of – and as an outcome of – a specific social and historical context.

This means that the coaches, through the process described above, have undergone a reorientation – a process of not only learning, but also of valuation and elevation – of their stories, their identity and their self-understanding (Holland et al. 1998). Over time, when the figured world of Fryshuset comes to constitute the coaches' self-knowledge and frame of reality, the reorientation makes them categorise others in a different way and see their previous assumptions in a new light. People whom the coaches previously perceived as, for example, '*enemies*', might as an outcome of the reorientation become categorised as 'former enemies' and finally end as illustrated by a situation involving a coach from Passus:

*'Magnus told us how he had for months had thoughts about a person from the public authorities. He had thought about him almost daily and had always wanted to beat him up. Then he met him a few days ago - and ended up talking to him for about 10 minutes. He felt very relieved afterwards, he said, and he does not think about him – as much – any longer'* (field note 2012).

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A coach from EXIT also remarked that he has come to perceive things in a way he hardly believed possible:

*'Gunnar says that he has knee-jerk kinds of reactions when he sees people from the criminal world, and then he knows exactly what they are like and how they think – a perception he used to be so annoyed by when the police used to perceive him in the exact same way. But now – as he says – he does much of the same and feels that he can see right through the clients'* (field note 2012).

These brief examples illustrate how individuals, when they come to identify themselves with their position as coaches at EXIT and Passus, no longer act according to the logic at work in the criminal world as it is not their personal knowledge any longer. Instead, they evaluate situations and act according to the norms at adding sense to the figured world of Fryshuset and EXIT.

The coaches' changed perspective shows how EXIT's values have become their values, making them perceive their personal experiences as former right-wing extremists through these lenses. This is the crucial precondition for their work and for them to be able to use their knowledge of the extremist right wing or gang life to help others to leave what they have come to view as a destructive and anti-democratic lifestyle.

The empirical setting of EXIT is based on people in the process of transforming their identity, which implies that the individuals' self-perceptions and categorization develops from one sort of identity, associated actions and perspective to different ones. My empirical material has thus required a theoretical approach, which capture the dynamic dimension of the self, and which can account for the interplay between change and a sort of established identity (Grossen and Salzar Orvig 2011), which for the sake of simplicity, can be defined as developing a particular sense of who one is in the eyes of oneself and others (Holland 2010:271).

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As my intention has been to describe identity formation in a specific context based on a particular setting and empirical data, I have not gone through the vast literature about identity. I have chosen a theoretical approach, which highlights identity as formed in practice and helped me to focus on the practice and the multiple actions, activities and dialogues, which make people, invest themselves in different worlds and thus develop an alternative identity.

It has thus been pivotal to describe the significance of, and ways in which, actors engage in social practice, linked to a symbolic realm, to account for, how their engagement makes them transform their identity and perspectives - regardless of whether they engage in the extreme right, Fryshuset and/or EXIT.

To describe the process of developing an (alternative) identity thus requires a frame that conceptualises action and agency as having recourse to symbolic structures of meaning (Reckwitz 2002), which is a crucial aspect of social practice theory in which identities are perceived as outcomes of self-identification and self-investments in a practice linked to a culturally defined meaning-system (Holland 2010: 271).

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