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To Study the Significance of Social Interaction for Former Right Wing Extremists Wanting to Disengage: Doing Participant Observation and Qualitative Interviews

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Link to the Research Output

The study is still ongoing.

This case study describes the process from the planning of a qualitative research to engaging in the fieldwork. I wish to illuminate how pre-understandings of the field as well as everyday practicalities play a significant role for the choice we make while in the field. I was interested in investigating the significance of social interaction for former participants in right wing extremist groups, who were in a disengagement process with the help from the organisation Exit in Stockholm, Sweden. As this field involved dealing with people in transition, it also meant dealing with people with very complex life stories and ambiguous identities and positions, which made it difficult to find an appropriate method to capture the many aspects involved in the process. As I will describe in the article, it is often necessary to change your methods numerous times as your research progresses.

Learning Outcomes

- The case shows how the methods used in a qualitative research project are a result of the research interest, but also dependent on what is feasible in the field

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- To illuminate the differences between the planning of a fieldwork and actually being in the field and how to deal with it
- To better understand the difficulties and complexities of organising and doing research including life history data, which can be stressful and painful to talk about for the interviewed

Research Question and Envisioned Method

I was trained as a social anthropologist at Oslo University and am currently working on my PhD thesis, at the Department of Social Psychology at Roskilde University in Denmark. In accordance with the ideals of classical anthropology, I planned 6 months of fieldwork at Exit, a Stockholm-based organisation providing support to people seeking to leave extremist right wing groups. The main research question I sought to illuminate was the significance of social interaction in the subjective construction of identity in a process of transition.

Those who work for Exit are a mixture of social workers, academics and former right wing extremists who use their own experiences of disengagement in helping others. The staff make use of *psykoterapeutiske* methods when working with who they describe as their clients – people seeking to leave an extreme group behind – in an attempt to make the clients go through a transitional period, challenging them to redefine and negotiate their world views, self-perception and ultimately identity. Most Exit clients contact the organisation on their own initiative. The individual is then given a coach, usually someone with personal experience as a former participant in the extremist right. One of Exit's methods of working with its clients is to build a strong relationship between client and coach, as confidence between the two is seen as crucial for the interaction between them. The issues the clients are struggling with are often related not only to the reasons for joining but also to the results of having taken part in an extremist group. As part of the trust-building method and the disengagement process, the coach and client undertake different activities together, such as weightlifting, going to cafes and museums or whatever the client wishes to do. The purpose is to strengthen the client's motivation for leaving the extremist group, broaden his or her social skills and to make him or her experience new emotions and ways of being.

To investigate my research questions, I had planned 6 months' fieldwork in order to be at Exit on a daily basis. I had envisaged following up to five clients and all activities connected to them. I wanted to grasp both the enunciated cognitive knowledge and the unspoken incorporated knowledge which would constitute Exit as the field of research in order to reach the kind of understanding that the anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup has termed 'embodied knowledge of the field'. Hastrup describes this as a particular kind of ethnographic experience where thoughts, emotions and actions are united in an experience of the field,

The data were to be generated through my daily presence and the observation of the dialogue between the staff and clients, in combination with life story-oriented interviews of both parties. Other sources of data were to stem from the readings of reports, Internet-based information and the participation in some of Exit's orientation activities, such as school meetings and conferences.

As it turned out, several obstacles made it impossible to conduct the classical form of fieldwork.

Exit is a modern organisation with employees working 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., where many client-related activities take place outside the office, and issues are often discussed in the evenings on the phone or behind closed doors in the office. Apart from these practical obstacles, it also became obvious that the dialogue between client and coach would be impossible to follow as my presence would have such an impact on the situation that it would change beyond recognition. So I had to think out new methods to allow me to understand the significance of interaction in the disengagement process. This also raised questions of how I could obtain enough information from both staff and clients to understand the very complex process taking place. As it turned out, my fieldwork started changing before I even embarked on it – a journey which nonetheless was to lead to a much deeper understanding of my research question.

My Pre-Understandings of the Field and the Design of the Research Question

Any research topic is influenced by academic and personal interests, which also condition our pre-understanding of the field we enter when we embark upon fieldwork. My research questions had developed through two previous research projects I had conducted, which focused on communities and community-sustaining mechanisms among young people within a left wing-oriented social movement and in a religious community in Denmark. As several studies by Tore Bjørgo, an anthropologist specialised in disengagement from extremists' groups, shows, ideological conviction seems in general to presuppose participation and not the other way around, and it often follows lines of friendships, emphasising the importance of social interaction in the shaping of a subjective world view.

While focusing on participants within particular groups or communities, I had also remarked how the process leading to disengagement from such groups is often understood as an individual decision. Once I learned about Exit through a conference, I started wondering what it meant for an individual to leave a closed group behind. I was wondering how one then constructs meaning, a sense of belonging and identity, or whether disengagement would also depend on social interaction. I was also wondering to what extent the clients at Exit would regard their ability to disengage as a result of their contact with one or more employees in the organisation, and how they thought the coach(es) had influenced them.

My research into the left wing social movement had given me an understanding of how participation in such a movement meant participation in activities like parties, happenings and especially demonstrations, which would often involve confrontations with the police. The participants would over time come to experience these activities through the social movement's shared frame of understanding and interpretation, which would influence the participants' position and identity, transforming a person from being a peripheral spectator to becoming a committed activist (Christensen, 2009; Karpantschof, 2007; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Robert, 1986).

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This research formed my pre-understanding of the clients that Exit works with. I saw them as former political activists with an often violent and criminal agenda who, when they contacted Exit, had a clear desire to leave the extremist right behind. I had considered that the interviews might involve descriptions of violent situations and criminality, and reflected on how I should handle that, but I had not thought about some of the informants as valuable subjects with a difficult life story that they obviously thought it stressful and painful to talk about.

My vision of the informants affected the way I prepared my interview guide, in which I only focused on arranging the questions in such a way that they led from one topic to the next in what I considered to be a natural chain of associations.

Through the interviews I had conducted with the left wing activists, I had learned that the informants' feelings about being part of something they considered very important as well as taking part in a great deal of action constituted the driving force for their continued participation. I assumed that these feelings would also be of significance for the experiences of Exit clients.

As I had not been part of any extremist group myself, I could not presume to understand the emotional part of what participation meant for the informants. I could only refer to the feelings I had become familiar with via the interviews of the left wing informants, and how what they told me had conveyed their feeling of being in the centre of action, both when I did my interviews with them and when I participated in demonstrations with a high police presence.

I started reading anthropological literature written by, among others, Katrine Fangen, a Norwegian anthropologist who has done fieldwork among right wing extremists, and reports about the extremist right as well as autobiographies written by former right wing extremists (Arno, 2010; Asplund, 2000; Egonsson, 2012; Hasselbach, 1994; Persson, 2003; Sadalin, 2010; Widerberg, 2001) in an attempt to deepen my understanding of the emotional aspect of participation and of the disengagement process (Arnstberg & Hållén, 2000; Bjørgo, 2009; Eiternes & Fangen, 2002; Kimmel, 2007). My intention was to establish a better understanding of what I thought the informants' frames of reference would be, to enable me to develop an interview guide and be as well-prepared as possible for the interviews. Based on these references, I designed a first version of the

interview guide, but as it turned out, I was going to reformulate it endlessly, a point I shall return to later.

Doing Fieldwork: From a Pre-Understanding of the Field to Being There

The ideal for fieldwork ought to be the result of those methods which seem to be most appropriate for answering the research question, but in reality, the choice of methods used is a result of different coincidences that add up to what it is possible to do in the field. Before I had even started, I had to redesign the fieldwork for the first time right after the first reaction from the leader of the client programme at Exit; she said that a 6-month stay would be too heavy a burden for the organisation. Therefore, a new approach had to be developed as it was of paramount importance for me to uphold the focus of the research and thereby the organisation as the venue for the fieldwork (As Exit was established in 1998, it is one of the oldest organisations of its kind in Europe. Many more deradicalisation and disengagement projects were established after 11 September 2001, but I was keen to perform my fieldwork at Exit as it was one of the most experienced organisations.). In recent years, the classical fieldwork paradigm has been contested by, among others, Charlotte Aull Davies, questioning whether the duration of the stay in the field necessarily indicates the level of participation and thereby the validity of the ethnographic knowledge. This circumstance and the fact that the duration of the stay at Exit needed to correspond with what Exit found acceptable influenced the structure of my subsequent fieldwork. The time frame was reduced to three visits to Exit, each one lasting for 2 weeks, and an 'extra' week where I participated in a training session with the staff.

Before carrying out the first part of my official fieldwork, I had already participated in several conferences organised by Exit. I had also read the information material produced by the organisation and an evaluation report of its work. As anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup writes, by having access to material specifically dealing with the field you are entering, it is possible to establish a preliminary understanding of the field in an entirely different way than previously, when extensive fieldwork was the norm.

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My plan for the first visit was to get to know the field in a much more detailed way. After this, I would be able to develop an interview guide which I presumed would still change during the visits to come, as my understanding of the field expanded.

But once more what finally became my methods would result from a constant reformulation of my own plans in response to what was to be offered to – and expected from – me, by those involved. One example is that just a few days before my departure, I received an email from Joachim, the director of Exit, with a list of informants whom I could interview upon arrival. Even though I did not at all feel prepared to do the interviews, I still thought it would be a good chance to learn much more about both clients and staff. At the same time, I felt that it could be a bad start and possibly create a negative attitude towards me if I tried to postpone the already arranged interviews, as I know it takes considerable time to identify possible informants and organise a time and place to meet.

The office of Exit is very small which makes it easy to follow what is going on in general. Many fieldwork situations are felt to be difficult and complex to relate to 'appropriately'. How can the researcher maintain a presence in ways which are not too awkward, without a clearly definable task or a role to fulfil? In the office, I often encountered a mixture of people, such as staff members, clients, somebody on work practice or employees who were at a midway stage between being clients and coaches. The latter had left their criminal lifestyle behind some years ago, but were still struggling with questions and problems to an extent that they were neither expected to nor able to work full time as a coach. It was accepted to sit or even lie on the sofa in the office, just to make coffee or to sit at the table talking, opening up for a lot of different ways of 'just being' somebody there without fulfilling a clear-cut task.

To do fieldwork at Exit meant to be part of a very loose organisation with a particular reflexive praxis, which can basically be described as 'learning by doing'. The employees informed me about their activities, and if I thought it could be of relevance for my research, I would ask whether I could join them and was always allowed to do so. In that way, I came to participate in several educational sessions for the staff which turned out to be of particular importance for my understanding of the coaches' different methods of working with clients.

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The fact that I felt comfortable at Exit made it easier to just ask questions and participate in meetings and to simply join in when some employees were sitting at the table talking. I would also participate in staff meetings, where the staff would discuss their work with the different clients and various other issues. These meetings would be very informative for me, as I would learn about their working methods as well as problems that the clients faced during the transition from being a gang member or/and right wing extremist to lead a non-criminal life on their own terms. Every day I would take brief notes on a piece of paper and elaborate on them later on when I returned to my room.

After my first visit, I started asking myself what exactly I should write down of the endless interplay of actions of people talking, coming, going, meeting, joking and so on. I tried different variations of writing down my observations. Reading it all after the fieldwork came to an end, I realised that what I had written down were interpretations of the things being said, of selections of how the employees interact and discuss their practices, of people coming and going and of situations related to the client work combined with my own reflections about the place, its people and myself. Being there provided me with insight into their practice, and it made me aware of various issues that I understood were of great significance to their work, themes that I would investigate further in the interviews with clients, coaches and other staff.

Despite my primary interest being the interaction of client and coach, I soon realised the impossibility of pursuing that particular form of contact; on the one hand, my presence would change the situation beyond recognition, and on the other hand, the interaction did not take place in the stereotypical and easy-to-follow form that I had previously imagined as a therapeutic dialogue with two people sitting in a room talking. The coach met the client in various everyday settings, such as weightlifting together or a trip to town.

Instead of following these coach–client meetings any further, I decided to stay just in the office, follow the events as they unfolded and say 'yes' to whatever was proposed to me. Meanwhile, I actively asked the staff questions about phenomena I came to wonder about; I read some of the books in the office and tried to learn as much as I possibly could about the methods used when working with clients, as well as the ideas guiding

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the staff when they talked about their work. My aim was to gain an understanding of what I came to perceive as the practice of Exit.

My way of working on my initial research questions became somewhat like a puzzle, as I brought together pieces of understanding by participating as far as I could, by asking questions, by taking a position where I actively made myself available to the others, by just sitting there or by actively engaging with people or doing small tasks that I could fulfil without being an employee (e.g. cutting out copies of money with an employee, while we would talk about his job as a coach and about himself being a former participant in the White Power Movement and later on a gang member for many years). I would also be very aware of things I heard that I did not understand immediately. I wrote them down and made sure I remembered to ask the staff to explain them to me.

These kinds of informal conversations, combined with interviews of employees, coaches and clients and my participation on two occasions in staff training courses, all provided pieces of information for what became my specific field of research: how Exit works and what significance this work has for its clients' construction of their identities.

Conducting the Interviews and the Impossibility of Capturing It All

As mentioned, my informants were employees with and without a past in the extreme right, and former and present clients. The interviews with informants who had been involved in the extreme right posed a particular problem irrespective of whether the person had worked as a coach or simply been a client: in both cases, their narratives were very dense.

To have been in the extreme right was problematical for all the former and present clients that I interviewed. This also meant that I would be completely dependent on the director of Exit, Joachim, as he was the one contacting former clients. Joachim had worked as a coach himself for almost 10 years, and he would therefore know whom to contact and how to do so.

This has of course influenced whom I have talked to, as all the potential informants would talk to Joachim before talking to me, and would find out from him which aspects of their experience I was going to ask about and how the information would be used later on. I had also written a short presentation of the research, which could be sent out to potential informants promising them anonymity and that I would be the only one dealing with the interviews. As Exit is a non-governmental organisation (NGO), there is also a limit to how much information it is allowed to ask for and register about its clients. As I had no need in my research to get formal personal fact and as a way of making the informants more relaxed, I did not ask either about surnames or any other details that could be connected to the particular person.

The way the interviews were organised was such that Joachim would hand my phone number to a possible informant and then we would organise a meeting. This method of access also meant that I did not come to meet anybody who had started on the process but dropped out, as Joachim would probably not have been in touch with that person long enough for him to be a potential informant. Therefore, I only interviewed people who actually thought that Exit had had significance in their way out of the extremist right. The fact that the informants got in touch with me through an employee of Exit may have prevented the informants from being critical of the organisation, but may also have positioned me as somebody to be trusted.

Before I started working on my PhD project, I had already conducted several interview-based investigations as a freelance anthropologist and researcher; hence, I did not consider that conducting the interviews in this research would pose any special difficulties. I initially planned the interviews in such a way that I would ask the informants to describe their specific life situation and to elaborate on different themes during the interview. I would organise the interview guide with inspiration from other anthropologists such as James Spradley and Professor of Educational Psychology Steinar Kvale and would start by asking what Spradley calls 'grand tour questions' which are supposed to generate general descriptions, followed by questions aiming at eliciting specific examples of something. I would, for example, ask a former client: 'What was your situation like for Exit to be relevant for you?' and more specifically questions such as: 'What activities did you do with the coach?', 'Can you tell me what it was like to go to a museum for the first time?' and 'How did that make you feel?'

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I had started working on my interview guide shortly before the first fieldwork, and according to my prior understanding of the informants as *either* a client *or* a coach, I divided the questions into three sections. One section focused on the past, that is, what the situation was like for Exit to become an alternative for the informant. Another section focused on questions about what would lead to disengagement from an extremist group. The third one investigated the methods used when working with clients.

I would have about four pages filled with questions, which I thought could be used both as questions to be asked, but also as a kind of checklist in order to lead the conversation. This method had functioned well in the other interview-based researches I have done previously. It had been a way of getting a lot of detailed explanations about the subject matter. Therefore, I also assumed that it would be a good way of ensuring that I would get a lot of detailed descriptions of the process involved in disengagement and the staff's praxis. When working with the clients, a structured interview guide seemed logical to me, at least as long as all the informants had a clear-cut position of being *either* client *or* coach or another type of employee. But the positions turned out to be much more complex as some coaches would be in a process of transition. They would be coaches but at the same time were also working with themselves with help from other employees to handle their own past. The confusing positions soon affected my interview guide, since it became unclear which questions would be the most relevant in some interviews: questions aiming at understanding the informant's own disengagement process, questions about the work as a coach or questions about the transition from one status to another. On top of that, to understand the process leading up to disengagement and the process of disengaging also means that one must understand first what the person has been engaged in as well as getting and understanding of the emotional, social and practical aspects of a particular part of the person's life. I would start each interview by explaining to the informant that I was interested in talking about the disengagement process, if the informant was a client. But if the informant was an employee, I would focus on which methods he or she used when working with the clients and why. If the informant was a coach with a past in the extremist right, I would try to conduct several interviews to cover both his or her own engagement and disengagement process and his or her work with the clients.

My first interview was completely overwhelming, as I realised that I had rather preconceived understandings of how people would become involved with the extreme

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right, and here I was sitting with a person who had been raised with grandparents reading *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler, and who in several other ways had introduced him to Nazism. Not in my wildest dreams had I imagined this could be a way into right wing extremism, a way that made my further interview guide seem completely irrelevant. Instead, I just went along with the conversation and asked whatever questions came to my mind in order to establish a frame of understanding. During the interview, I also had the feeling that we often jumped from one topic to a completely different one, which made it extremely demanding to follow the thread of the conversation.

This initial interview made me realise just how complex and chaotic a life story of this kind is to follow for the researcher and to communicate for the interviewee, and this experience was repeated in other interviews. It gave me the feeling that there was so much to learn, and that I would have to meet the informants many times, a feeling which I could not shake off during my entire fieldwork. But here, everyday practicalities played a role. I thought it might be a good idea to find four informants who I could meet with several times in order to collect as many details as possible. However, this turned out to be difficult to pursue in practice, as I would not meet the informants on a daily basis in Stockholm, but would have to organise a meeting with the help of Joachim every time I travelled to Stockholm from Denmark. I ended up interviewing any former clients whom Joachim had contacted, and I finally discarded my original interview guide. Instead, I reduced it to three main themes, asking the informant about the life situation he or she had been in before the first contact with Exit, how Exit had helped and details about the disengagement process. I used these three themes as key headings, and then during the interview, I would ask questions to get as much elaboration of the answers as possible.

I found that this method worked much better, as I became less stressed without all my prepared questions and much more attentive and ready to talk about any subject which the informant introduced. I would be careful to get details about anything which the informants thought had made a change in their lives during the disengagement process.

I interviewed a total of 11 former clients, meeting several of them more than once. I think it is very important to meet informants as many times as possible to try to understand a person's complex life story, especially when it contains aspects which the interviewee has difficulty in understanding himself or herself. When this is the case,

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I am also wondering whether we can claim that the interview is one of the best ways of understanding human beings and their explanations of their actions, especially with regard to all the processes that the informant does not understand himself or herself. It is difficult to know how to deal with answers like 'I don't know, it's more or less in a haze' or 'I still don't understand how I could end up in something like this (the extreme right wing)', because the feelings leading to, for example, participation or disengagement may still be unacknowledged or impossible to identify.

I was struggling with these questions during my fieldwork, and they remain for a large part unresolved. I am still wondering whether interviews and short periods of fieldwork are the best way to deal with matters of this kind. I am also wondering how many times one can reasonably ask a person to come for interviews, unless one is fortunate enough to meet someone with whom one can make a clear agreement about the entire process. If the researcher chooses to ignore that question, the result will be an ethical problem instead of a methodological one.

Conclusion

Even though my plan for fieldwork was clear at the outset, I ended up redesigning it in an ongoing process. When transcribing my data, I have come to realise that my data are not distinct narratives where I can identify a clear transition from one position to another in each story. Instead, what ended up being my method(s) created data about several long and very complex narratives, revealing some of the different inputs, thoughts, reflections, activities and incidents, which together reflect the transition from being active in the extremist right wing to being in a position where you meet with an anthropologist to share your story of transition and all the factors that helped you along the way.

This means that there are many possibilities in the field, but what I consider most important when being there is to be clear about what one's research question is, and then to be open to different ways to deepen one's knowledge about one's particular field of interest by asking questions and by saying 'yes' to whatever would seem to lead to a better understanding of the field even though that way is very different from the one you imagined before going into the field.

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Exercises and Discussion Questions

- How can you prepare yourself the best as possible for your particular fieldwork? Give examples.
- When you are in the field, what are you going to observe and why?
- How are you going to describe your observations?
- How can you best prepare yourself for interviewing informants, who find the subject difficult to talk about?
- What are the advantages (and disadvantages) of interviewing the same informant several times and how to organised it?

Web Resources

http://www.exit.fryshuset.se/

http://www2.ungdomsstyrelsen.se/butiksadmin/showDoc/
ff80808127e2ac190128babe13ef003c/wwwEXITrapportDel1.pdf

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