

Former Right-Wing Extremists' Continued Struggle for Self-transformation After an Exit Program

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Abstract

This article discusses the identity formation process former right wing extremists go through, during and especially after being involved in an exit program for those leaving right wing extremist environments. Based on an ethnographic investigation (and practice theoretical approach), the article argues that participation in culturally defined worlds – such as the extremist right – develops sensitivities and sensibilities that endure. This enables them to engage in social actions, gain a position and develop a correlated identity, but it is also the reason why it can be very demanding for the individual to leave an extremist environment. Perceived from the position of former right wing extremists, the article considers the challenges involved in (re)integrating into society by those stigmatized by a criminal and extremist past. It explores how individuals leaving a right wing extremist group handle themselves in a new world when their embodied knowledge and habitual responding are no longer appropriate, and investigates the many aspects individuals struggle with years after their engagement, when they do not know who to become and how to act.

Keywords: Right-wing extremism, disengagement, de-radicalization, desistance, identity transformation, exit-processes, situated learning.

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The aim of this article is to investigate the identity transformation process of former right-wing extremists when they leave the extreme right. They (often) experience a disintegration of their former worldview, which leaves them in an 'in-between world', lacking the sensitivities required of them to act in a different 'world'. Identity, in this article, is perceived as an outcome of embodied knowledge, making former extremists' development of an alternative identity and associated sensitivities and/or sensibilities key

when they seek to reintegrate in society. In this regard, the article echoes Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Pain's (1998) reading of Pierre Bourdieu (1977), in that:

[I]t is fruitless to make up a set of cultural rules to account for people's behavior. The material and social conditions of activity vary in a plenitude of ways; even in highly restrictive environments, it is difficult to avoid unusual combinations of people and things. Rules that handle 'all possible combinations' in real world settings are impossible to devise. Instead, Bourdieu suggests, our bodies are repositories of a complex set of associations—of actions (movements), figures (categories), and contexts (environments)—sedimented from experiencing concrete instances of their combination, their work together. More complicated experiences, sequences of joint action coordinated among actors as a relation to particular 'qualities,' such as honor, produce sensitivities toward a set of culturally devised games or contexts of action [...], where there are general, dispositional motives and acts and ways of faring well and faring poorly. Agency lies in the improvisations that people create in response to particular situations, mediated by *these senses and sensitivities*. They opportunistically use whatever is at hand to affect their position in the cultural game in the experience of which they have formed these sets of dispositions. (Holland et al., 1998, p. 278-279; emphasis TWC)

In this line, the article argues that navigating social life remains an enduring challenge, as after years in an extreme and criminal environment, some former extremists lack the sensibilities for the new situations with which they have to engage for change to occur; they are reduced to *neophytes* at the same time as struggling with the 'Nazism stigma'.

The difficulties involved in leaving extreme groups have prompted the genesis of exit programs both in and outside Europe. One of these is EXIT, a Swedish organization established by former right-wing extremists in 1998 to provide support specifically to those seeking to leave the extremist right. EXIT offers a self-help program based on mentor-mentee relationships, to help them develop alternative worldviews, self-understanding and new identities through a combination of therapeutic dialogues and shared activities. The mentees, described as 'clients' are connected to a mentor or coach – an employee who has been part of the extremist right themselves (cf. Christensen, 2014). EXIT is an integrated part of a larger institution called Fryshuset (cold-storage warehouse), a youth center that runs a number of projects with the overall goal of empowering youngsters through activities, the building of social relationships and interaction with adults (Carlberg, 2008, p. 80).

In 2012 the author completed a two-months fieldwork project at EXIT, following the everyday routines in the office of Fryshuset, participating in two educational sessions for the staff, and conducting 21 interviews with 15 interviewees, both clients and staff. Out of these, 11 were EXIT clients – former right wing extremists in the process of transitioning. Some had just become clients, while others had been clients for up to fifteen years.

The interview quotes in the present article are mainly from interviews conducted with 'Eva', a young woman who had been part of a neo-Nazi oriented group for four years. At the time of the interview in 2012, Eva had left the group ten years before with the help of the EXIT program. Her narrative provides a particular insight into the process of transforming a life and an identity, and illustrates how long term and demanding it can be. The time that had elapsed might be one of the reasons why Eva was able to be so reflective about her experiences as part of the Swedish extreme right wing scene and of

the process she went through after leaving it. Quotes from other interviewees illustrate the generalizability of her narrative and the many steps involved in the process.

The main analyses in the article derive from the practice-theoretical framework of *lived identities* in ‘figured worlds’. *Figured world* is an analytical concept defined as “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. (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52)

Figured worlds are the outcome of collective meaning production, which takes shape within and simultaneously grants shape to the co-production of activities, discourses, performances and artefacts. They are formed and re-formed in relation to people’s everyday activities and associated meaning-production. Figured worlds constitute the horizon of meaning, or frame within which individuals come to act and interpret themselves and others. Figured worlds can also be defined as cultural realms peopled by characters such as academia, the factory or, as in this case, the extreme right, Fryshuset and EXIT (Holland, 2010; Holland et al., 1998; Christensen, 2015a, p. 45).

The article’s main argument is that the development of an alternative identity occurs as the outcome of an interaction, in which others point out material and non-material artefacts as *signs of significance* to the individual. The individual is thus an agent who has to participate in order to gain a position in a *figured world* through a situated learning process in which *signs* and *artefacts* are perceived as *mediating devices* of figured worlds, i.e. as symbolic structures of meaning.

The theory is based on the cultural-historical school of psychology, which perceives identity and agency as specific to practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed ‘worlds’, as *figured worlds*. It merges the social and the psychological by perceiving the self and the development of identities as outcomes of both psychological and sociological processes. Identity formation is conceived as a process that figuratively combines the personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations. In an article that aims to identify personal changes, this theoretical concept makes it possible to identify how changes in a person’s identity and embodied knowledge make it possible for them to be in several figured worlds simultaneously, as well as in between them (Holland et al., 1998; Christensen, 2015a).

Why Leaving an Extreme Group is Difficult

The extreme right wing is characterized as *extreme* both due to the nature of its ideology and the methods used to obtain political goals. Such groups reject the core ideals of liberal democracy, equality and tolerance, consider inequality between people as a nature-given principle, and reject the ideals of deliberation and voting in decision-making. Those who advocate the ideology perceive violence, in general, as a legitimate means to pursue political goals, and they approve of the use of non-democratic measures such as threats, harassments and violence against political opponents and others perceived as inferior.

Thus, the concept of an extremist is relative to a particular political system and its values, in this case liberal democratic society (Bjørge, 2009; Christensen, 2015a).

To develop into a right-wing extremist the individual goes through a process of repeated social and psychological interactions within a community of practice and the ideology it engenders (however diffused or unstructured) (Horgan, 2009b, p. 8). Individuals who join extremist right-wing groups experience two parallel and mutually reinforcing processes: socialisation into withdrawn and stigmatised communities, and the severance of ties with the 'normal' community. Engagement in an extreme group make some participants develop a 'black and white' worldview with rigid categories of 'friends and enemies' (Bjørge, 2009, p. 33). This is accompanied by very intense feelings of friendship and community, but also hatred, aggression and adrenalin highs. When individuals leave this environment, they can continue to perceive violence and aggression as legitimate ways of interacting with others.

Leaving an extreme group can be demanding and the stigmatisation by friends, family and society at large often makes just the thought of it anxiety-provoking. Common to leaving all types of extremist groups are feelings of being in a social vacuum, emptiness and loneliness, trauma, anxiety and depression. Studies indicate that such individuals often have to deal with violent impulses, lack of confidence, paranoia, substance abuse and a criminal record (cf. Bjørge 2009, p. 140; see also Christensen, 2015b; Christensen & Mørck, 2017). They also suggest that the process of disengagement and deradicalisation from an extremist group is as complex as that leading to the initial radicalisation (Horgan, 2009b). People who leave extreme environments, groups and gangs generally struggle with confusing feelings of who they are, who to become, of what to do and where to go in order to establish an alternative lifestyle and identity (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Horgan 2009a; Barrelle, 2010; Christensen, 2015b; Christensen & Mørck, 2017). As Eva recounted:

I think it's very important to understand how much the one leaving the group has invested in it, for that's what people do not seem to understand. I did not just leave a group; I left an entire life, I left my views, I left my friends, or what I, moreover, had come to see as my family. They were the ones I could do anything with; at least, I thought so. I left a whole lifestyle! I may have developed a lifestyle that did not work in any other context than in the group, really, a way of being, a behaviour, a way of supporting myself which could not work afterwards. And you have invested a number of years in it, be it two years or ten, you have still invested quite a large part of your life in it, and it remains important to understand that: it's a bit like leaving oneself. So, for someone to leave such a group is as if Svensson¹ would have to pack his bags and leave his wife, children and house to go to Tunisia to live in a tent. That's almost as likely! It's not something you just do in a jiffy, and it's not easy.

When Eva decided to leave, she had been involved in the extreme right for several years. During her years as a member she had orchestrated aspects of her personal history and identity around a complex ground of sentiments, sensibilities, feelings, skills and practical knowledge, developed over time as a result of her engagement in a neo-Nazi group which made society at large position her as a Swedish right-wing extremist (Holland et al.,

¹ Svensson is a typical Swedish surname, but in this context it is used as slang to convey an image of a sort of average middle class Swedish person, working from 9 to 5 with 2 children, a wife, a villa and a Volvo.

1998).² As Eva points out, people who identify with a given figured world invest themselves in it to gain a position, to become somebody in that world, to be perceived by others as being part of it.

The Initial Questioning of an Identity as a Neo-Nazi

The formation of one's identity and sense of self is an ongoing and never-ending process. Yet, especially the first time after the individual's desire to leave an extremist group, and in the years after leaving, these processes are experienced as confusing and demanding. Immersion in the everyday practice of this sort of symbolic world, people – extremist or not – form bodily and mental dispositions towards it as their behavior becomes informed, not determined, by their figured world (Holland, 2010, p. 270-271).

Several of the individuals interviewed for this research were aware that at a point in time they had changed their hairstyle and way of dressing, recognizing this in retrospect as an outward sign of their identification with the extremist group. Yet this occurred over time and without reflective awareness (Holland et al., 1998, p. 140). It was not until the decision was made to leave the group and start the process of transformation that their social position as a (former) right-wing extremist became a conscious matter, and indeed concern. To be part of an extreme group or gang involves a high speed level of activity, including daily phone calls, social activities and alcohol and/or drug use, which prevent reflection about their engagement and the consequences of it (Christensen & Mørck, 2017). For Eva the first period she had time to reflect on her life as an extreme right-winger occurred when she was imprisoned on remand in solitary confinement. This isolation made her review her situation and the trajectory of her life, which had resulted in her incarceration facing a very serious preliminary charge while still in her early twenties, and began the process of disengagement.

As Eva's statement above indicates, people engage in activities within a culturally defined world, become familiar with it and learn its meanings, to the point that they take it for granted. They become attuned to types of people and actions relevant to that world, which reflect its particular horizon of meaning. They develop sensitivities and sensibilities that automate coordination with other participants, facilitating their engagement in it. The figured world of the extremist right wing comes, as Eva points out, to define her identity. She came to personify that world by her way of acting, her appearance and perceptions of herself and society, making it difficult to leave and start over again.

People involved in the extremist right become accustomed to a way of thinking which involves notions of conspiracy against society, and a belief that all people outside the group are enemies to be fought (Lodenious, 2014). The extreme right is – like other extremist groups – characterized by a black and white mindset with taboos and exclusive categories of 'friends and enemies', providing an explicit relation to others in society. To be categorised as a 'neo-Nazi' was – until 'Islamic state', ISIS or Daesh and the position as a Jihadist emerged – one of the most stigmatised positions in mainstream society, resulting in almost immediate isolation from family and friends beyond the extremist group (Bjørge, Halhjem & Knudstad, 2001; Christensen & Bjørge, 2018).

² I use the terms 'right-wing extremist' and 'neo-Nazi' as synonyms, although I am aware that not all right-wing extremists are neo-Nazis, whereas all neo-Nazis are right-wing extremists.

This isolation and unambiguous identity might be one of the reasons why Eva and others emphasise the difficulties involved in leaving the extremist right behind, because “*everything was so obvious, who I was and who I ought to be and what the meaning of my life was*”. When she realized that she wanted to change, she got in touch with EXIT, which started her process of disengagement, with a consequent huge impact upon her perception of herself and others.

The Disintegration of a Personal Worldview

When individuals have been immersed in the extremist right, they become used to acting according to unquestioned assumptions, as, according to EXIT staff, doubts and questions in general are discouraged by the extremist group so that participants develop a similar outlook – at least in their public pronouncements.

When Eva got in touch with EXIT, it soon impacted her perception of the world and of herself. As she said:

You learn to close your mind by classifying others as inferior [when you are active on the extremist right wing], and since they are inferior, we do not need to feel sorry for them: as they cannot compare themselves with me! That's why, for example, some people refer to Islam as AIDS, or you refer to them as animals and stuff. And that's what makes you unempathetic as they are not on a par with me and my friends. But when you start getting back to that, all people are of equal value [...] especially when I had been a lot at EXIT [...] they challenged my prejudices about immigrants, and I began to understand this about socio-economic status and the significance of living in certain places, not integrated – how hopeless it all then becomes.

Eva was a newcomer in the figured world of EXIT and in unfamiliar surroundings that operated according to a socially and culturally differently constructed realm of interpretation than the one she had shared with her friends in the extreme right. As none of the staff at EXIT referred to other people as inferior, they indirectly questioned what Eva took for granted. At EXIT and in Fryshuset, Eva experienced how people around her did not classify others in terms of a hierarchy, but rather contextualized them and their situation – such as the significance of living in deprived areas and being marginalized. The staff at EXIT introduced her to alternative perceptions of people and explanations of societal issues, which gave her a different perspective on others and their situations, as well as her own.

Initially, Eva met with her coach from EXIT during the day and her friends from the extremist right wing in the evening. This proved difficult, as she underlines:

To sit at home with my friends when they launched their usual talk, I almost felt it tickle in my tongue to repeat. But I'd started realizing, and I knew I could not do it; it would just become nonsense [...] Even though I knew it was not good for me, but when it had been hard, they [friends on the extremist right] had been there for me, and although they were no good, they had their problems. But they were the ones who had put up with me when it was hard, for example, when I had to move who then collected the furniture [...]. In a way, it is like saying that I cannot keep them, because they are not ready to handle themselves, and I cannot fix my life with them, for they will always just drag me down.

Eva got additional information on immigrants and social issues through dialogue with the staff at EXIT, but defined and understood with reference to a different horizon of meaning than the one she was accustomed to, making her question her own perceptions. She

became aware that the interaction with people at EXIT was growing her understanding of societal and personal issues. Her dialogue with her coaches and employees helped her identify new signs of significance. Through this process Eva realized how her friends' talk and actions had subjected her to a situated learning process, where approval was assigned to certain acts – e.g. violence and aggression – and particular explanations and perceptions were valued over others (Holland et al., 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The outcome was that she and her friends came to perceive some categories of people as inferior, as the quote above illustrates, which – in her perception at that time – justified her negative attitude and periodic aggression towards them, as well as violence in general (Christensen, 2015b). This insight made Eva understand that in order to change herself, she needed to change her social environment.

When people can no longer identify with their usual associates they also start to question who they, themselves, are, which brings about a sense of loss and loneliness. Eva no longer fully identified with her friends, as she was floating in between several figured worlds, without fully identifying with any one of them. She realized the huge difficulties involved and had never felt more confused in her life.

Part of this confusion was the result of EXIT coaches' dialogue with clients, which followed the model of 'motivational interviewing', which allows the client to draw their own conclusions. As Eva explained:

The thing was that I was so used to people trying to help me, the social service and stuff, that they told me what was wrong, while Joachim (Eva's coach at EXIT) taught me to tell it myself. In the sense that we talked, and instead of him expressing it for me, that I was impossible and contrary, it was I who came up with it and told him what it was I found annoying. They call it 'the Motivational Dialogue' and just that I had to form the idea myself; that what happened around me was not okay, and I had to find out myself what was wrong and see the flaws [...]. I was never angry with him when he was there, but I could be really furious with him when he wasn't, because he disturbed my world a bit all the time, and I was pissed off by it.

Eva emphasized in the interviews how her coach Joachim throughout their dialogues did not tell her what she and her friends in the extremist right-wing group did was wrong, rather he made her become aware and reflective about the potential consequences of their actions by asking her questions which made her expand her understanding of the context of the situation. When Eva was describing what she and her friends had done, Joachim would ask her further questions, which made her describe the context and thus become aware about things she, until then, had not thought about. Thereby she felt that Joachim helped her identify the consequences of her actions and choices, which she said made it much harder for her to push the new insights aside. At the same time, Joachim represented a different world – and did not confirm her views. On the contrary, he introduced her to alternative perspectives by pointing out different signs of significance, providing her with additional information, bit by bit, which supported different conclusions than her usual ones.

Eva at this point did not share Joachim's figured world, but was on the brink of knowing it, which left her in limbo. She lacked the understanding of the figured world of Fryshuset and EXIT and thus the tools to act within it, which initially made it seem undesirable for her to start investing herself in an alternative position, which she nonetheless started to question reluctantly.

This is a stressful situation, since individuals who are in a different figured world with which they do not identify, are pushed to question previously unquestioned, collectively approved truths that they have so far taken for granted. Eva was, as she said when thinking back, *“pissed off with Joachim because he disturbed me, by questioning my perception and by making me add nuances to it, exposing the flaws”*, which in turn kindled her desire to leave the extremist right.

Eva continued by emphasizing how demanding it was to be in a liminal phase (Turner, 1999/1968), in which her previous perception of herself and others had dissolved, but a new perception and identity had not yet been established:

It has probably been the most chaotic part of my life, really, also because it was up and down. I couldn't ignore the fact that I could come from Joachim, where I had formulated a thing about, let's say, hypocrisy, and even have explained to him the damned hypocrisy of it all. And then I came home, and I would almost be desperate to remove it from my head, and occasionally I succeeded. Because it is a huge step to take [...] even in brief snatches.

In the beginning, Eva managed to ignore some of the insights she had gained from her discussions with Joachim. She felt she was in a state of chaos as there was no longer an obvious frame of interpretation that determined who she was and ought to be. She experienced a very different feeling, of pure chaos and was in search of a new way to figure herself. As the extremist right is linked to a one-dimensional world view, a lot of nuances disappear, which might be one of the reasons why Eva and others felt it was obvious what kind of actors they were, and indeed were expected to be when they were active. But when Eva was in the company of Joachim, she was between two different figured worlds, with many more nuances and alternative interpretations. Her uncertainty as to which perspective to interpret from, or indeed evaluate herself and others from, also made it hard to determine how to act to obtain approval in the alternative figured world.

Eva spent time with both the staff at EXIT and her friends, so she felt that she accommodated both. As time passed she felt that EXIT had invested so much in her that she could not let them down, which was a sign that she had started the process of identifying with their world and had come to care about their perception of her. Eva's feelings reveal that she had started developing a sense of what counted in the coaches' world, which are signs of loyalty to and identification with the coach, EXIT, Fryshuset and their associated values. Both loyalty and identification with particular agents in figured worlds is what is required for people to reinforce their engagement with it.

Eva also experienced a different kind of emotional relationship with Joachim as she realized that she could talk to him about her difficult situation at home. She experienced that, even when she was sad, she did not have to *“keep a straight face, since everybody has problems and feels bad, but at EXIT, I did not need to keep up the façade”*. Eva's meetings with Joachim, EXIT and Fryshuset introduced her to an alternative realm of interpretation based on different norms, values and meaning. Since Eva was in a different world than the one she had been used to, she also had a standard for comparison. This made her question further what she had so far taken for granted. A new standard also made Eva – and anybody else on the brink of leaving the figured world of the extremist right – become a neophyte within the new figured world where she was not yet an active participant. She still needed to develop the sensitivities and sensibilities, which over time become dispositions, to obtain a position in that world – elements that finally shape an alternative identity (Holland, 2010, p. 271).

Who am I? To Develop an Alternative Identity is a Demanding Process

Participants in groups on the extreme right have developed a particular dress code, posture, habits and dispositions by their immersion in their groups and activities. The individuals' actions seem also to be performed based on the desire to reinforce their identity as right-wing extremist and their position in relation to others. Identities are claims to social categories and relationships with others (Holland et al., 1998, p. 127-128; Holland, 2010). The position of a right-wing extremist is also a claim to power, as being part of a group recognized as violent in mainstream society influences how people react to it and its members.

For many of the informants³ the development of their identity as a neo-Nazi happened without their being aware of it. Yet, their desire to leave the extremist environment was based on a reflective desire to re-transform themselves. Joachim describes the complete loss of identity many of his former clients had experienced during the process by quoting one of them:

When I left it, this closed environment that had affected me incredibly intensely during all these years, I wondered who I was. What music do I like? Because I've been groomed that White Power music is the best, but what do I really like? Have I ever listened carefully to jazz or hip-hop? Have I listened to it? No, and then to try somehow get back to it. Which style do I like? Which clothes? I have always been wearing black military clothing, but what do I really like? What films do I like? All this, literature, everything associated with my identity. WHO AM I? [...] When you leave the environment, who am I really? And who am I in relation to others when it is not about intimidation and fear, who am I, and how should I behave?

The extremist right is, like the quote illustrated, evoked by symbolic and material signs of significance, and people engaged in the environment learn to perceive certain objects and actors as being superior to others through a situated learning process. The former right-wingers in this study had also come to personalize the extreme right wing through their way of dressing, the music they listened to and the political agenda they came to identify with and be identified by, through these symbolic signs of belonging.

To distance themselves, symbols such as tattoos, flags, stickers and clothes are among the first things an individual lets go of in the transformative process. These indicators are a result of what Holland et al. (1998) term a *lived identity*, encompassing one's interests and feelings and one's active self-expression of those interests and points of view. Yet of greater importance are the dispositions accompanying a lived identity, as it encompasses a sense of what sort of actor one is or – as Bourdieu (1977) stated – to learn a feel for the game (cf. Holland et al., 1998, p. 142-143), i.e. an unarticulated 'gut' sense of one's standing in social interactions. When individuals start reflecting about themselves and their lives they realize that, without leaving the extreme right behind, it is impossible to

³ In anthropology and the present article, an informant is understood as the 'native' person, who is an indispensable source of information because he/she belongs to the group being researched and is thus regarded as a representative of the group, its views and social practices. Yet, this approach commits to a clear understanding of how the knowledge produced is the outcome of conversation between the anthropologist and the person interviewed, and the individual nuances involved when interviewing a person. This is why anthropologists often interview several people and do field observation (Hyland-Eriksen, 1998). I do not perceive my 'informants' as, e.g., 'co-researchers'.

change oneself. As Eva pointed out above, there is not much left to act upon, resulting in a loss of direction and meaning, and feelings of emptiness.

Several of EXIT's former clients underwent a radical transformation of their perception of themselves, their worldview and their position in society. Yet, who they are today is still a result of their improvisation on the sediments of past experiences, in other figured worlds with a different horizon of meaning. Many of the informants of this study continued to listen to the same sort of music, for example, but with different lyrics than those of the White Power movement. Others continued to work out and lift weights, but now in order to keep some discipline in their daily lives, whereas before they did it to develop a hyper-masculine look and strength to protect themselves and gain status. Some also kept a similar dressing style as they had before, but stripped of any references to the extreme right, and now accompany the style with an awareness of the importance of politeness and friendliness towards those around them.

The extreme right-wing offers participants a one-sided world with a political agenda that defines the world and their direction within this world. As informants explained, this struggle for a political goal had an impact on their actions, and gave them a higher meaning in their lives. Leaving the extremist scene meant the loss of a clear goal, and of a social and economic position. It also required many more competences to become part of a society consisting of many different figured worlds. The world will never again be experienced as homogeneous, so they needed to develop more skills to successfully perform the many different everyday activities linked to the multiple figured worlds of mainstream society.

How to React when I Cannot Act as I am Inclined To

EXIT makes their clients participate in diverse activities in order to help them develop rudimentary sensitivities towards the unspoken norms of social life, to be able to renegotiate their position and to (re)integrate into mainstream society. One of the outcomes of the coaches' interaction and activities with clients is that these come to constitute a sort of *mediating device* in a Vygotskian sense – a tool for reflection constructed by assigning meaning to an object or behavior as it develops within a locus of social activity (Holland et al., 1998). Coaches introduce clients to 'ways of acting' by, for example, visiting museums together, cafés, cinemas and the like so that clients can use the coach's example as a mediating device for further improvisation in the future (Christensen, 2015b).

The individual who is developing an alternative identity struggles, especially in the beginning, with the establishment of a basic sense of who they are, as well as insecurity about how they are supposed to (re)act in a given situation. Individuals' actions are informed by 'history in person', which is the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises using the cultural resources available; in response to the subject positions afforded in the present (Holland et al., 1998, p. 18). It often entails conflicting emotions and leaves the individual in a confused state as to how to react. As Eva explains:

I think the thing was that, when I came out [of the extremist right-wing], I was an adult, and this thing about grey areas, compromises – for example, to try to see both sides of the coin – took so MUCH damned time [to get to that point]. And it might be what made it so turmoilish with me in the beginning when I left, especially in my personal life, to try to find

out about all these things; that I knew, who I was, but I did not know, who I should be and how to learn it, and I can still feel confused; WHAT DO I DO NOW? Well, it has to do with having an instinct, but you also know somewhere that the instincts I have about how to behave is not like you ought to behave if you consider how society perceives it. Because I often feel like... I am in such a way that if I get mad, I can get really mad, and I realize that now I am very angry about a tiny little thing, and I need to back off. But I am still beside myself with rage over things, for example I will be furious at someone, and then I must just try to back off and say; 'I'm very sorry, I know I overreacted'. But the fact is that it is not all natural, and it may well be that it will never be in such a way that it becomes natural to think twice and see.

Identity formation entails a form of self-organization, and in the beginning Eva is dependent on social support from her coach Joachim to be able to perform in different situations. Yet, as she recounts, it can still be frustrating for her today – ten years later – to be unable to follow her inclinations, and she still becomes confused about how she is supposed to react. This quote could be interpreted as a sign of Eva acting as if she has changed, as she admits that it does not feel natural to back off when she gets angry. Yet today, she feels it is appropriate to excuse herself for her anger because she has become aware of it and feels it is not fair towards others. This is the outcome both of her perception of the extremist right as being hypocritical, which originally reinforced her motivation to change, and her dialogue and interaction with Joachim who helped her to understand this. Meanwhile, it is as much a result of her genuine desire to uphold her new social position in the different figured worlds she is part of now.

Eva has since changed her life course and political convictions dramatically; she has started an education and has a job. To gain a position in different figured worlds she has invested herself, because people's perception of her matter and have come to impact on her acts. For example, she has to control herself to keep her position, as one of the constraints in the new world is that she cannot 'win' an argument through aggression. In the figured world of education for example, she would be sanctioned and expelled if she used violence, as these strategies are not an accepted part of that world. Eva is still struggling with her temper, which can make her furious to the extent that she fears she might relapse into her old behavior. She finds her old ways of acting unacceptable now – and her old strategies will inevitably lead to her losing face, since she will be judged within the new figured worlds in which she is now positioned. Using violence would single her out and position her as a complete 'loser'.

Eva's example shows how figured worlds require people to develop strategies to gain a position in them. A coach at EXIT, Gunnar, who had been a member of both a right-wing extremist terror organization and then a gang for many years, explained:

Through the support of Passus [EXIT's sister organization for former gang members (cf. Christensen 2015a)] I have learned to handle the authorities in a wholly different way and to have a different kind of relationship with them. I think that the way I reasoned before, I had like a violence capital or threats or other tools that were indecent, and which I got a kind of confirmation or sense of power out of using. They do not really fit if you are to be a responsible parent. It had to change, and I realized that I have a lot of things [in the sense that he has to deal with a lot of things about his behaviour, perceptions, etc.] and it's going to take a long time. And it was also very frustrating to realize how much I had harmed my

children's lives, and I have struggled to face up to the fact that one thing is that I had chosen the wrong things in life, but also to have to realize that I have harmed my children.

Through his work as a coach and by his positioning of himself as a responsible father, Gunnar no longer perceived his former methods as legitimate with reference to the figured world of family life, EXIT and Passus. He is – like Eva – in an ongoing process of re-positioning himself and developing sensitivities and sensibilities within new worlds. Yet some parts of his previous life as a high-ranking gang or extremist group member can be impossible to let go of, as the individual possesses knowledge that they have agreed to keep secret from anybody outside these groups. To keep such promises may be a question of life and death as it can be a condition of a gang's acceptance of the individual's disengagement. But it can also make it impossible for the individual to fully discuss their participation, and may hinder the processing of traumas, which for many is necessary to develop a different identity. It also requires the individual to remain vigilant about what he/she says about their previous life, which allows the previous gang or extremist group to retain a degree of control over them.

Other consequences of no longer being part of an extremist group are the loss of the struggle for a higher goal, the loss of the preoccupation about enemies and the everyday kick of adrenaline involved in such a lifestyle, that makes everyday life seem boring and meaningless in comparison, even years later. As Eva explains:

Some days I am so happy just getting home from work or school and 'oh, the couch' and then just lie there, and other days I just whiz around the flat and THIS cannot be the meaning of my life! It should not be like this! It's so damned boring and pointless! And it varies somewhat. If I had a day where I have been quite frustrated or angry, I would be very restless. Some days you come home and are just happily tired due to what you've done that day. I have been good, and other days, no. [...] So some days I know for myself that I am very restless and think the world is annoying, then I have to keep myself from going out in the evening to a bar or something. Then I stay at home instead, because then I have a tendency to relapse into the old behaviour, which is not necessarily so pleasant [she says ironically]. You also learn over time to identify it and to stay away. But everyone has days when you think that life sucks and you just lean back and think 'no'. But I think for some, especially when you have a bit of aggression and there are such days [...] it is required that you resist the desire to let go of the frustration and then get out and run in the woods or something, just to get rid of it. In my world or in my experience, if I'm not doing anything to get rid of it, then it just grows, it just gets worse and worse every day until you just explode.

Even though on some days, Eva was searching for meaning in her new life, she has still invested so much in it that she actively resists any temptation to relapse into her old behavior. This is despite the fact that none of her current investments in her new figured worlds seem as 'obvious' to her as did her identification with the extreme right. This might be due to the emotional side of being a right-wing extremist, which offered very intense adrenaline highs through e.g. participation in demonstrations or 'warming up' before them by listening to hardcore White Power music. For one of the coaches at EXIT, the emotions generated by the music had been so strong that he still got sweaty palms listening to it 15 years after he had left the extremist right.

Eva has developed insight into her own reaction pattern which makes her capable of identifying her feelings – aggression, restlessness, loss of meaning – and refraining from going out when she feels restless or annoyed and thereby avoid relapsing into her old behavior of drinking and being aggressive and violent. She knows that she has to manage her level of aggression for it not to take control over her. This is despite the extremist right, in Eva's case, having no power over her to tempt her in any way into giving up her present life.

Eva's and Gunnar's examples illustrate how they have developed sensitivities and sensibilities in alternative figured worlds than the extremist right, which is an outcome of their reflective struggle to invest themselves in different worlds, with the support of others.

Historical Nazi References Stigmatize the Individuals and Hinder their Reintegration into Mainstream Society

Holland and Lave (2001) refer to how identity and 'history in person' combine the intimate subjective world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations, catching subjects in the tension between histories that have settled in them and the present. Yet, people are constrained in their identity formation, because a person's identity depends upon social support to come into existence.

Constraints are related to two different, but interconnected orders; the *time/space of local practices* and the *time/space of socio-historic productions*, which are linked to figured worlds and flow into one another in complex ways. Socio-historic productions are socio-historically produced, collectively recognized discourses, practices, policies /and artefacts that constitute history in the present and which shape local practices. The socio-historic productions, which individuals make part of their personal knowledge, transcend local networks and contexts (Holland, 2010, p. 273 – 276).

People are constrained in their identity formation because it depends upon social support to become real. Identity connects the intimate with the public, and our ability to gain a position linked to a potential identity largely depends on other's confirmation of our claim. Therefore, we cannot decide how we are categorised, but depend on others' perception of us to confirm our identity and allow us to take up a new position relative to others. Positional identities are linked to power, status, privilege and a wider moral universe as people draw upon cultural resources of socio-historic time in their identification and positioning of newcomers (Holland et al., 1998). The constraints that individuals report in this study are therefore significant, as Bjørgo and Hogan (2009) point out. Individuals with a past in racist and neo-Nazi groups are generally stigmatized by mainstream society and run a real risk of being rejected or stigmatized by their past in social and professional contexts. This is supported by my own research, as it remained an ongoing problem for my informants to handle their past in relation to new social relationships in both their private and professional lives (Christensen, 2015b).

Public perception of neo-Nazis in present day society references the totalitarian state of Nazi Germany and its crimes against humanity during World War II. This socio-historical link makes present-day members as well as former members of groups identified as neo-

Nazis some of the most reviled individuals in Western Europe, positioning them as deviants. The already very challenging process of altering their identity and position is therefore further complicated by society's vilification of what you have been, as Eva explains:

Many times leaving does not necessarily mean that you will be accepted by society. You have to prove yourselves, and I think that not all have the strength to do it, and it's not at all sure that, even if you are trying to prove yourself, you are accepted. They always say that 'once an addict – always an addict' and 'once a Nazi – always a Nazi', and it is often seen that way, which is also one of the reasons why you do not always like to talk to people about what you have been. As they nearly always question whether you are still like that. So I have full sympathy for all the people who do not come from there [mainstream society], because I have been wildly frightened and I most of all, I have just been lucky, and had I not, I would not have had a normal life. It's still a struggle to live a Svensson life.

An everyday understanding of identity, which is popularly understood to be the product of character or a core self, does not easily accommodate a complete transformation of self. An individual who undergoes a dramatic transformation is therefore hard to categorize and accept, which makes the claim to a new identity difficult to confirm. This can, as Eva points out, prevent some from even trying to leave a deviant group because they doubt they have the strength to overcome the odds. The expression that Eva refers to, 'once a Nazi – always a Nazi' is a caricature adopted by the extremist left and punk movement in the 1970s and 80s, but nonetheless conveys how people understand those adopting a Nazi identity. Terrorists and political activists are seen as marginalized people who seek out groups that confirm their ideological conviction, rather than people whose identity can develop from their participation in figured worlds (Christensen, 2015a). My research into a radical left-wing movement, as well as Bjørgo's work, confirm that individuals often develop an ideological conviction after becoming involved in a group for other reasons (Bjørgo 2009; Christensen, 2009, 2014, 2015b; Christensen & Lerche Mørck, 2017).

The everyday perceptions of identity as stable, and the stigmatization of those who have been associated with neo-Nazism, have an ongoing impact on former participants' lives. Several informants describe feeling constrained in terms of the opinions that they are entitled to express without running the risk of being judged in the light of their past. Gunnar and others with a past in extremist right-wing groups always fear being categorized along the lines of hyper-generalized 'cultural identities'. In everyday life we tend to categorize people along the lines of ethnicity, gender, race, nationality and sexual orientation (Holland et al. 1998, p. 7), but also as criminals, terrorists or right-wing extremists. These sorts of categories are broad, making stereotyping and branding an easy outcome.

Gunnar gives an example: his beliefs about the Israeli occupation of the Gaza strip, which he sees as a huge open-air prison controlled by the Israelis. A view, which in 2012 can hardly be perceived as controversial, as Gaza was then, and is still described as such by, for example, the Norwegian Refugee Council⁴ as well as mainstream media channels⁵.

⁴ <https://www.nrc.no/news/2018/april/gaza-the-worlds-largest-open-air-prison/> (28.05.2018),

Yet he would think twice about expressing it, because he fears his opposition to the political situation in the area might be interpreted along the line of him being a ‘former neo-Nazi’ and thus be understood as an expression of anti-Semitism and a ‘Nazi view’. Gunnar points out that this constitutes something of a double standard when he is judged against a single standard that does not allow for multiple viewpoints:

When I work with a client from EXIT, I have to ask the right questions because it is very easy to judge people. Part of our job is to promote a democratic view. But you also need to maintain that you are allowed to say what you think and believe – which you can't [said with reference to his experience as a former neo-Nazi]. Because you may well be misunderstood, and then you are put into a category where your views are inconvenient and which makes the ones who leave the National Socialist (NS) world understand that that's the way it is. First they leave, and they may have problems with their old mates, and secondly, if they continue to be improper in their views, if I don't express myself in the right way, then I get problems with society, and you always have a stamp on you; they will always have a stamp.

Gunnar continues: *I do not have the same freedom any more, I have to be careful what I say, now you know, I am the type who does not give a fucking damn whether people will judge me, that's their right. Therefore ... the idea is ... if you have defected, you've got a job, you have become a father and you do not think actively about it, that is, you're not active in your thoughts, because it is a slow process which is ongoing [the process of change], you do not have the time to be active, you have to change nappies, you need to work, work out what the hell do I know. You are not a potential danger to society anymore. Tina: But I guess that you have the right to think whatever you want to think, as long as you do not act upon it?.*

My comment upholds the right to freedom of speech and the importance of separating actions from words, particularly when extreme statements are not synonymous with a willingness to act (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Horgan 2009a).

Gunnar: *Yes, exactly. But I see it like this, what are human beings? They indoctrinate people and say that there is a standard. If you have a standard for how people should be, then there is a system that has given this standard, and what is the difference between that system and neo-Nazi thinking? For me it's the same, I will be a free man and able to express myself and be free, and I think that's what most people want, and they are damned tired of damned standards designed to measure what they say, how to behave, who they talk to.*

Gunnar's statement can be interpreted in several ways. It can be understood as an expression of him being disengaged without being de-radicalised, as he is asking what makes one belief system better than any other? Implying that what we say we believe is simply a matter of who holds the power. His statement can indicate that, to him, ‘a system is a system’, it being a democratic one or a National socialist regime, they are both the same as they build on an ideology, which is upheld by people in power. His statement can also be understood as an example of how he will not be able to avoid being categorised as deviant because of his past position as a neo-Nazi, at least for many years to come,

⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/tales-from-gaza-what-is-life-really-like-in-the-worlds-largest-outdoor-prison-8567611.html> (12.04.2013)

because of the recent historical association with Nazism, which makes it hard for him to express, e.g., his criticism of Israeli politics.

Gunnar's example can also be an example of how the individual's self-understanding is not necessarily reflected in other people's affordance of positions to newcomers because of strong negative sentiments towards neo-Nazis, with no distinction between active and former right wing extremists. Yet, becoming a neo-Nazi in present day Scandinavia is rarely a straightforward result of adopting Nazi ideology (Koonz, 2005; Baumann, 2001; Arendt, 2006). Rather engagement in right-wing extremist groups seems to be as much the result of the individual's participation in extremist groups that may have started benignly with identification with friends already involved in the extremist right, with a poor understanding of political processes, with a fascination with Nazi artefacts and/or social interaction, etc. (Bjørger, 1997; Arnstberg & Hållén, 2000; Fangen, 2001; Christensen & Mørck, 2017). This being said, participation entails the adoption of the ideology (Christensen, 2009; Bjørger 1997), and reasons for participation also seem to differ according to local context.

The Problem of *Becoming* in a Society Perceiving Identity as Unambiguous

Several of my informants' 'history in person' was reflected in their dispositions in the present, as they had been involved in the extremist right from between 4 to 10 years. A common problem among people who have left gangs and/or extremist groups, and who might have spent year(s) in prison, is that they have a deviant life course compared with the majority of the population. This also poses a challenge when they have to introduce themselves: when and what to – if at all – tell about the years they have been involved in the extreme right? How to handle their deviant frame of reference in relation to others? As Jeff – a coach at EXIT – pointed out:

We had some days here in Fryshuset where we were going to learn about other projects [...]. During these days I had to cooperate with two girls who come from 'United Sisters' and they were discussing quilted jackets [...] and I was approaching them, and I said, 'Hey, what are you talking about?' 'We are talking about quilted jackets', and I was kind of 'Can I sit down?', 'Sure' – and I sat down and I kind of thought about 'what is the first thing that comes to mind with quilted jackets?' They were discussing color, fit, how to get them, how much they cost and stuff like that. The first thing that came to my mind was that it is really hard to punch through a quilted jacket with a baton, you have to have like a steel pipe or something to get through to be able to hurt someone. When it is winter, you have to have a much more solid object to punch through, you have to have one of these expandable batons, it is kind of useless, it doesn't do much damage. That was the first thing that came to my mind, and I said, 'Well, you really have to have a solid baton to get through a quilted jacket.' They looked at me really strangely and said: 'Hey, you are from EXIT, right?' 'Yeah, I am from EXIT,' and they said: 'Is that your reference to a quilted jacket?', and I said: 'Yeah, that is my reference to a quilted jacket.'

Sediments from your past history might be a problem to express in the present as they position the individual in certain ways, requiring of others an openness in order to afford the other a position in his/her claim to an alternative identity – which these girls do by first asking Jeff if he comes from EXIT. By doing this, they confirm his position as coach and

part of Fryshuset, yet Jeff's references would be odd in most people's eyes and position him as a deviant. In this case Jeff's references are accepted by the girls who are able to confirm his position as coach and part of EXIT. This reference being the first thing that comes into his mind in relation to the jacket also surprises Jeff, as his first perception of the jacket is through the horizon of meaning relevant for a right-wing extremist in a fight. This action has not been part of his life for years, but nonetheless is part of his history and remains – in particular situations – in his frame of reference and interpretation.

Such everyday situations, where individuals who have entered a different figured world experience a lack of shared frames of reference in comparison to their new peers, can create feelings of loneliness, shame, guilt and the fear of expulsion. Former extremists are to some extent dependent on others' tolerance for their opportunity to gain a different social position, so need to develop strategies to handle their past in interaction with others. It is an issue of great concern to informants, as it has a crucial impact on their future relationships, and there are no simple solutions.

Per, who is both a former member of the extremist left and punk scene and subsequently of the extremist right, gives an example of the extent to which a person can lose control over his past, as he recounts:

Per: During that time [when he was a right-wing extremist] I had a complete uniform and was a skinhead and had boots and a bomber jacket, so I was completely in it and since... Well, I still think that it is tiresome to have it as part of my luggage, and always when you meet new people, then the feeling is there that: NOW... NOW it will be revealed, in a way.

Tina: In what sense or how do you think?

Per: I do not know ... well, for example, now I'm out on a dating site and the thing is that, if you google my name, it's so unfortunate that there is something about me in a Socialist forum, and it says... it is l..i..k..e... t..h..a..t... [he says very hesitantly] that I was a Nazi and such, but it says that I was a Nazi leader and things like that. It's amazing, they just speculate about me. But nowadays it is very common for managers and others to google people. It's a bit annoying.

Tina: Did you ever try to contact them and ask if they can remove it?

Per: Yes, but the group no longer exists... it is just kind of there, but it is not an active thing [he laughs a little with no joy]. I do not know how long it will exist, and there is no legal way of getting it removed. I have investigated the possibility of getting it off, and it does not seem to work.

Tina: And have you got anybody asking you why you are there? From these dating sites, for example?

Per: No, it hasn't gone that far, but I'm worried that they might figure it out because, normally, you do these days. So, it is easy to explain why or it is not simple, but there is an explanation that I can live with, why it was as it was. But if this is one of the first things that people find out about me, it's not good.

The context of Per's involvement with a neo-Nazi group, which does not appear on the internet, is his very difficult upbringing and him being a victim of mockery by a black girl and her brother in school.⁶ Prior to his involvement with the extremist right, he was a

⁶ Being mocked and attacked by individuals of darker skin is one of the reasons identified for youths' involvement in racist-oriented – or right-wing extremist groups – in marginalized neighborhoods (Bjørge, 1997; Christensen & Mørck, 2017).

dedicated member of the punk and extremist left-wing scene. By coincidence, the girl from school attacked him one day in the center of Stockholm and a skinhead from a neo-Nazi group, who later became his friend, defended him. The friendship got Per involved in the group for a little more than a year. But in the age of the internet, who would have the time or energy to investigate Per's story any further than a couple of clicks?

Another challenge for individuals transforming their identity is their loss of position and status in the extremist group and respect for their criminal competences that were part of it. When they leave they lose both status and the figured world, which rendered their criminal competences both prestigious and useful. Due to their criminal records and the interpretation of individuals with criminal and extremist records as deviants, employment is also a challenge. A job in this context is however important for reintegration and to support the individual's ongoing investment in new worlds after EXIT. However, as Gunnar says, it is:

A catch 22 to be quite newly released from prison, and you have a fairly significant status among friends, and you have work experience, and you think that it will be OK. Yet, you get a cold shoulder everywhere, it is a catch 22. I'm a vehicle body technician, and there are a lots of jobs, but I have no job, so there are forces that affect it all, or at least in that city. We are quite a few here [employees at Fryshuset, EXIT and Passus] who have the same experience.

Societies continuously discuss how to reintegrate people with a criminal record, an issue that touches upon guilt, punishment, revenge and the victims' perception of fairness. But in liberal societies the punishment of a criminal also entails their rehabilitation, as it is the only way for an individual to establish a pro-social life after serving time in prison (Marsden, 2017; Christensen & Bjørge, 2018). As Gunnar points out, where does one turn, professionally and privately, if society is unable to offer a real alternative to those with a criminal record? Without work the individual is left with a choice of surviving on welfare benefits or continuing with crime – non-desirable outcomes for both society and the individual. Leaving a gang or extremist group entails the loss of social prestige (in the group), and the giving up of criminality as a means of self-support on top of the already challenging process of changing one's lifestyle and identity. If the pathway of reintegration into society is too difficult, people in extremist groups and gangs may more easily end up not trying.

Conclusion

A radical transformation of self-understanding and identity is possible. Yet, successful reintegration of an individual with extremist experience requires both personal strength and motivation. It is also crucial that others are able to afford the person a new position in society, as personal transformation grows out of participation in figured worlds. This also requires tolerance towards others and the understanding that identity is context-dependent as much as a reflection of an inner core, and that the inner core can change in connection with different life experiences. 'History in person' is the sediment from past experiences upon which the individual improvises with the cultural resources available and within the positions afforded in the present (Holland et al. 1998, p. 18). However, as has become evident, the individual needs to abstain from improvising on some sediments of past

experiences and needs to be aware of them in order to keep the identity and position they establish after a life in an extreme group.

It is a complicated process to leave an extremist group and develop a different identity. A successful change of lifestyle and self-understanding requires participation in different figured worlds to come to embody a new identity. A successful transformation depends upon a tolerant society that is able to support the possibility of rehabilitation and the repositioning of individuals with extremist and criminal backgrounds. This bears on society's view of the function of prison as either punishment or a means of rehabilitation, or both. Rehabilitation is of benefit to both the motivated individual and society, though not perhaps easy to accept by the victims of right-wing violence, which further complicates the matter and is beyond the purpose of the discourse presented in this article.

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