

This article is an extended version (8.042 words) of an article (5.932 words) published as part of Deuchar, Ross and Bhopal, Kalwant (eds): 'The complexities and dilemmas of researching marginalized groups', Routledge 2015

## **The challenge of researching neo-Nazis struggling to leave the White Power Movement**

The aim of this article is to provide insight into the methodological challenges researchers must consider when planning an anthropological study of hard-to-reach groups such as (former) right-wing extremists who are in the process of leaving the movement. The article describes the research process from developing the research questions and describing the setting to conducting participant observations and interviews. The article points to some of the challenges involved in interviewing people with dense life stories, to whom the researcher has limited access, but also provides answers by pointing to how contextual knowledge can overcome some of these difficulties.

## **The challenge of researching neo-Nazis struggling to leave the White Power Movement**

‘To my mind, this progress from ruin to correction is intimately connected to the nature of knowledge itself, which is, at best, a process: from ignorance to awareness, from intellectual ‘ruin’ to its ‘correction’, from indistinct chaos to orderly scholarship. Knowledge therefore encompasses at once the starting point, which is empty, harmful, painful, and the end point, which is pleasure. To my mind, it is this quality of process, of development, which can only take place over time, that answers, finally, the question of why knowledge must come from a tree. A tree is a thing that grows; and growth, like learning, can only happen over and through time itself.’ (Mendelsohn 2008:58)

**Anthropological knowledge can be thought of as the outcome of a process that starts with an extended period of social interaction. Long-term fieldwork ‘out there’ has traditionally been presented as the preferred method of anthropologists in search of the ‘native’s point of view’. In recent years the *field* of anthropology has moved ‘home’, making organisations a typical setting for fieldwork. In this case, the stay in the *field* has to be negotiated, as the researcher’s activities must be coordinated with those being researched.**

**In the present study, my fieldwork was limited to three short periods, in accordance with the organisation EXIT’s<sup>1</sup> wishes. EXIT is a Swedish NGO that supports (former) right-wing extremists who are in the process of leaving the White Power Movement.**

**Using anthropological methods I strived to understand the process right-wing extremists go through when leaving the scene behind. This is a demanding task as complex stories of radical change take time to unravel. The limited possibility of continuous interaction in the field led me to reflect on how to approach informants and on the interview as a method.**

**As Daniel Mendelsohn (2008) writes, knowledge is the outcome of a process, a development that takes place over time. This made me doubt the outcome of interviews and what insight I**

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is a result of a PhD project I am currently working on (2011-2014) at the Department of Psychology and Educational Studies at Roskilde University in Denmark.

could gain during a short period of fieldwork with only limited possibilities of meeting certain informants more than once. The aim of this article is to discuss whether insight gained through fieldwork is inevitably related to time, perceived as the possibility of extended interaction. In the first part of the article I debate the outcome of ethnographic fieldwork<sup>2</sup>. Then I move on to discuss why interviewing former neo-Nazis is a challenge, especially when access is limited.

By doing so, I wish provide insight into the methods used, which I hope can shed light on the challenges researchers need to consider when conducting research among hard-to-reach people with complex life stories. Furthermore, I want to point out how contextual knowledge can overcome some of the challenges involved in this sort of study, and how I – in spite of the limited time available – gained an understanding of a wide range of issues at stake in the support of – and the undertaking of a radical change of lifestyle.

My fieldwork took place at EXIT, a Swedish NGO. EXIT's staff comprises a mix of former neo-Nazis<sup>3</sup> now working as mentors, social workers and academics, making the organisation's practice an outcome of many different competences. EXIT supports individuals in the process of leaving the White Power Movement by connecting them to a mentor: staff members who have a past as right-wing extremists. In EXIT's daily work mentees are referred to as *clients* and mentors as *coaches*. The aim of EXIT's work is to create a relationship between *clients* and *coaches* through joint activities in order to open up for a dialogue about the clients' past, present and future and help them leave the extremist right socially and mentally.

## The research questions

My fieldwork at EXIT was an outcome of my previous research into participants in a left-wing social movement – the 'Youth Movement' (*Ungdomshusbevægelsen*) — in Copenhagen in 2007. The study convinced me of the overwhelming impact social interaction, collective actions and circulating stories can have on members in a social movement, extremist group or any closed social setting with an explicit agenda. Participation in the social interaction and collective actions of the Youth Movement made the members identify with the movement and its frame of references. The vision of reality, as it was presented in the movement, appeared to condition the participants' frame of understanding and interpretation, which - to varying degrees – came to constitute their self-

---

<sup>2</sup> Ethnographic methods such as qualitative interviews sometimes combined with a few days of observation, have in recent years been applied by social scientists and researchers in humanities. These methods use the vocabulary from anthropology, but are not to be confused with an *ethnographic fieldwork* as understood in social anthropology. In the discipline fieldwork refers to a method where the researcher emerges him/herself in the field over extended periods of time to gain a profound insight in people's culture and daily life.

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

understanding and identity (Snow et al. 1986, Tarrow 1994, Porta 1998, Karpantschhof 2007, Christensen in Karpantschhof & Lindholm 2009, Christensen 2009).

As I became familiar with the group dynamics and social processes involved in the Youth Movement, I began to wonder about the significance of social interaction for a person in the process of leaving a closed group. This made me interested in EXIT and the interaction between the coach (a former neo-Nazi) and the client (the one leaving an extremist group behind). I wondered where a person in an exit process would turn in his/her search for alternative views and references. And what role would the relationship between the individual wishing to exit and the employees at EXIT play in that process? I wanted to identify what the clients themselves experience as supportive in the process and how EXIT has developed its practice on the basis of the former neo-Nazi staff members' experiences during their own exit processes and the challenges they faced on their paths to becoming social workers. I therefore found it important to observe EXIT's different approaches as they have developed in response to issues related to an exit as they provide information on points of significance in the exit process itself.

The research questions are also a result of my basic epistemological assumptions of the process people undergo in forming their self-understanding and identity, as expressed by Holland et al.

(1998): '...the development of identities and agency...is...specific to practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed "worlds"....This vision emphasizes that identities are improvised—in the flow of activity within specific social situations—from the cultural resources at hand.

This approach to identity formation has crucial features in common with social movement theory, as both theories connect identity formation to participation in a situated practice.

In an anthropological investigation, the research question in dialogue with the empirical setting is decisive for what comes to constitute the field and the methods applied. Since the methods are always an outcome of the possibilities in the field, they and the choice of what theories to apply in analysing the material cannot be decided on beforehand. Anthropological knowledge develops through a constant dialogue between the manifest and the hypothetical (Hasse 2011, Hastrup 1992, 2004).

## **The field of research**

As I wanted to focus on both EXIT's staff and the clients, choosing a method was a challenge, as the approach divided the field into different settings. On the one hand, there was the EXIT office, where I could observe the staff's social practices. On the other hand, there were the former and present clients, who had different reasons for having been involved in an extremist group and different experiences of the process leading up to their exit and finally, of being clients. The clients

were individuals, scattered in and around Stockholm, and the exit process was the only known common denominator linking them together as an analytical category. This made fixed appointment and semi-structured interviews seem the best methodical opportunity. It can take time to find people who are willing to talk about their past and present when they have been connected to neo-Nazism as (former) neo-Nazis are one of the most stigmatized groups in Sweden and elsewhere.

Originally, I planned my fieldwork as a six-month continuous stay in Stockholm. I imagined that this would allow me to follow on a daily basis EXIT's staff and four or five specific clients in the process of exiting. During the entire process, my contact person at EXIT was Joachim. When I first contacted him, he was in charge of the client programme, and agreed on me staying for six months. But he changed positions and the new head of the client programme thought that having an anthropologist stay so long would interfere in the daily routine. Therefore, we agreed on three stays of two weeks each. This huge reduction of time raised questions of how I should organise my research in terms of methodology and whether I would be able to obtain a deep understanding of the issues involved in such a complex process. On the positive side, the intervals would allow me to review my material and prepare for the next visit. The situation demonstrates how significant individuals' ideas about the effects of fieldwork can have a decisive impact on the planning of it.

My research questions made me dependent on EXIT's willingness to let me be at the office and to put me in touch with their former and present clients. Before I arrived at EXIT, Joachim had asked me for a letter that he could send to possible informants about me and the issues I would be asking them about. As Joachim became the one who found present and past clients willing to do interviews, he also became the gatekeeper. I was dependent on him making appointments for me, as I had no other possibilities of knowing about former or present clients. Whenever Joachim got a 'yes' from a present or past client, he would give that person my phone number and he/she would sometimes contact me directly. In other cases, Joachim would just give me the names and the dates of the interviews.

This arrangement had an impact on the research. I have, for example, not talked to any previous clients who had stopped their involvement with EXIT since they have not kept in touch and are impossible to contact – for me and EXIT - if they have returned to their extremist groups. The informants I ended up interviewing had been clients for different lengths of time; some for several years, while others had just recently started and yet others had gone through the process five to ten years previously.

After the first visit was agreed on, I left for Sweden. I had imagined the first visit as a kind of introduction to the field and preparation for the interviews I had planned for the visits to come.

Upon arrival, I realised that Joachim had already arranged several interviews for me. This highlights how method is nowadays an outcome of a joint venture between the researcher and the researched.

## **Participant observations as a means of broadening perspectives**

In the field I wanted to grasp the context of EXIT's work and its meaning as well as the staff's actions. I was, therefore, looking for both the reflected and the unreflected common sense and habits of the staff and the implicit meaning of their (inter)actions, doings and interpretations of themselves and the world (Hastrup and Hervik 1994).

What constitutes the 'unreflected common sense and habits' at EXIT can also be described as culture knowledge. Culture knowledge is acquired through a situated learning process, which over time shapes the participants' frame of interpretation and points out issues of central importance for the participants in the specific realm of reality. The newly arrived – anthropologist or not – in any unfamiliar realm of reality goes through a process of learning to get the 'native' sense of the world, but it is important to underscore that we do have different experiences, position and interests that give us divergent positions within the particular realm of reality (Hasse 2002).

One way of investigating a meaning system connected to a social practice is by immersing yourself in the others' world in order to comprehend as many aspects and cohesions as possible. It is, in accordance with Hastrup (1994), through dialogue (language) and non-verbal activities (body, movements, incorporated knowledge and reflective experiences) that I came to know of many of the nuances and implications of the field. As the atmosphere at EXIT is relaxed, it opens up for different ways of 'just being' somebody there, without fulfilling a clear-cut task. By being there on a daily basis, during what ended up being two months, I expanded my insight into the field. By engaging myself in the staff's daily life I was inevitably introduced to a whole range of themes that I could not have known of beforehand (Hastrup 1994) and that I needed to grasp in order to be able to understand EXIT's practice and the issues involved in the exit process.

EXIT has in recent years seen a rise in members from organized gangs struggling with issues similar to those of right-wing extremists leaving their life as neo-Nazis<sup>4</sup> behind. As a result, a sister organisation, Passus, has been established, which works according to the same methods as EXIT but is aimed at gang members. Coaches from EXIT and Passus are based in the same office and often overlap each other with client issues (Christensen 2014).

---

<sup>4</sup> I use the terms 'right-wing extremist' and 'neo-Nazis' as synonyms, although I am aware that not all right-wing extremists are neo-Nazis whereas all neo-Nazis are right-wing extremists.

As the office is small, it is easy to follow the action taking place. Every day in the office there were people with different positions. The daily staff members were there, but also somebody doing an internship and semi-employees, who were at a midway stage between being clients and coaches. Passus's clients (former gang members) also hung out there sometimes. The semi-employees had left their extremist and often criminal lifestyle behind some years ago, but were still struggling with questions related to the past to such an extent that they were neither expected to, nor able to work full time as coaches (Christensen 2013).

Many of the staff's discussions in the office were about clients. In these discussions, both coaches and social counsellors participated. The members of staff who had a past as right-wing extremists were able to bring perspectives into the discussions from both worlds: the world of the active extremist, whose mindset they knew from their own experience and from the clients, and the world of the coach, with all the tools they could use when working with the clients. They were able to provide me with insight into what it is like to be an active right wing extremist, what it does to you and the issues at stake in an exit process. I experienced situations in which I also began to understand the different perspectives and – as the example below illustrates - the social processes involved in the path from being a client/extremist/criminal to becoming, for example, a social worker/coach.

## **Learning to understand how to become a coach**

Between two of my stays at EXIT, a new coach, Magnus, had started. The aim was for Magnus to learn the practice of a coach by participating in the office's activities and discussing issues he found difficult to handle with more experienced coaches. Magnus' situation paralleled mine as we were both newcomers to the office. Through his learning process, I became aware of significant aspects of coaching, as they were pointed out to him in subtle ways at meetings, in discussions and in interactions with more experienced staff. One of the situations that broadened my understanding of the issues at stake in working with clients arose when Magnus asked an experienced coach for advice. Magnus had for years been involved in a criminal gang himself; the first client he was assigned to was therefore a former gang member. The client had problems fulfilling his role as a father, which Magnus thought affected the client's children in very negative ways. Magnus himself had had an extremely manipulative father, and this made it difficult for him to tackle the situation with the client without losing his temper. By talking to Jeff, a very experienced coach, Magnus – and I, the anthropologist, who listened in and observed – gained insight into several issues at the same time. Jeff told Magnus, using examples from his own life, of how he played with his daughter.

Jeff had come to realise that he found it boring to play with dolls with his daughter, making the situation negative for both of them. Instead he had introduced her to swings, which they both enjoyed. Jeff also told Magnus that the activity did not need to go on for long; 10 – 15 minutes was enough to fulfil his daughter's desire for activity. He explained how Magnus could help his client to reflect on what forms of interaction he thought could be fun for both him and his sons. What Jeff wanted Magnus to make his client realise – through experience – was that by finding an activity that both he and the children enjoyed, the atmosphere at home would improve, as the children would most likely be happier. Since the client would get a positive response from the children, it would make him feel better. Therefore he, according to Jeff, might want to experience that feeling again, which might incline him to repeat his actions. This, the thinking seemed to be, might make him change his behaviour and, through the help of his coach, make him realise that different actions can give different emotional experiences. But what the situation also did was to give Jeff, together with Magnus, a chance to deconstruct the social relations and the implications of different actions. Through the example of the child, Jeff indirectly found an opportunity to make Magnus understand that by making your activity correspond to what you think a person needs, you can actually prevent problems and thereby turn a potentially negative experience into a positive one. Through the talk, Magnus received advice on how to support his client and how to be a coach. He was given a concrete example of how he could talk to a client through the way Jeff talked to him – by deconstructing a situation into small pieces, making it possible to see how A might lead to B. But Magnus may also have gained an understanding of how to analyse social situations by getting a better overview of a difficult one. This could help Magnus adjust his own conduct in a social context – he was still struggling with his own past and anger – and also in relation to his work as a coach. Magnus could be inspired to reflect on tools he could use to understand how he could work not only with his client but also with himself. The situation also gave me insight into how a 'client-coach' conversation works: how coaches, by adding details and choices to a description, can help clients see social situations as open-ended, that is, as something whose outcome they are able to influence. This can help clients realise that they are part of a context and what goes on in it and provide them with tools to handle social situations. Situations like this one advanced my understanding on several levels. I understood the situation as an example of how someone in the process of becoming a coach could learn to support his client(s). But I also experienced the episode as an example of how coaches work with clients, which added to my overall understanding of the field that I would use when I interviewed clients. I would

categorise the situation as ‘one way of working with clients’ and as an example of how EXIT is based on a practice of ‘learning by doing’ and how that learning takes place.

(Christensen 2014)<sup>5</sup>.

## **Learning about EXIT’s practice through participation**

My participation in EXIT’s weekly meetings about present and potential clients was yet another situation that allowed me to experience how EXIT supports their clients. During weekly meetings, the staff would discuss potential clients, which gave me an understanding of how the employees’ pooled their different competences to create a multifaceted picture of what should be taken into consideration when assessing potential clients.

In one case, the potential client was under threat and needed a secure place for him, his wife and baby to live for a while. First, former gang members among staff were asked by the leader about their impressions of the client. How serious did they think his desire to disengage was? How serious did they think the threats against him were? Then the staff members decided who among the coaches would be able to do activities with him during the day and on some nights. As Friday and Saturday nights are the most ‘dangerous’, according to staff, in terms of the client ‘relapsing’ into old habits and calling friends in the gang. Then, a contact person was identified. The next task was for the social counsellors to assess what kind of help they would need in relation to the baby. It is standard practice in Sweden for a health care worker to visit families with a baby in their home. As the client and his family would need to live under cover for a while, they would not be able to get help from a public health care worker, so a private one - who would understand the delicate situation - would be needed. Finally, the staff discussed the furniture in the safe apartment. The client would not be allowed to bring any furniture himself or choose curtains or anything for the apartment as he was not supposed to feel too much at home, as that feeling could prevent him from moving on and taking new responsibility for his life. Situations like this, where different perspectives of success or failure for the client were discussed, gave me an understanding of the social and practical side of leaving a gang-oriented life behind and how the staff – from both EXIT and Passus –solved the issues involved together.

During one of my first visits I was informed that the coaches were going to take a course called ‘Criminality as a lifestyle’. The course dealt with the driving force behind a criminal career and possible ways of making criminals reflect on their lifestyle as a means of motivating them to change. I was allowed to join the course, which included group work with former criminals and

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://srmo.sagepub.com/view/methods-case-studies-2013/n140.xml>

social workers. This gave me even more details about 'life as a criminal', for example, the anger involved, the influence of a rough background and forms of teamwork like preparing for robbery. But more importantly, the course also taught me much more about how the coaches worked with their clients. It made me realise just how demanding it is to have a serious criminal career as it affects one's entire life and how, after leaving this lifestyle, it remains a daily challenge for years to avoid falling back into old patterns of behaviour. The participants with a criminal background made me grasp how dramatic and difficult it is to leave it all behind. The course also made me comprehend the emotional consequences the participants experienced after their involvement in gangs or extremist groups. This was indispensable background information for me to have when I interviewed coaches and former and present clients.

During my last stay I was once again told that the employees were going to do a course, this time called 'The motivational interview'. This is a type of dialogue in which one participant questions the other with the aim of increasing the other's motivation for making or adhering to a decision. But at the same time, the interviewer is careful to make the other participant draw his/her own conclusions during the conversation – without specifically telling him/her what to conclude. To give an example: a young man is using a dangerous amount of drugs. He tells the interviewer that he does not have a drug problem. His only problem, according to him, is that drugs are illegal, which makes the risk of imprisonment the problem rather than the drug abuse. The interviewer might then ask whether, since it is so nice to use drugs, he might want to give drugs to his children? Most likely the drug user will say 'No' and then he – himself -start describing all the disadvantages there are to drugs.

During the course the coaches discussed some of the problems they were struggling with. For example, one of the participants, a man I had interviewed several times and about whom I had noticed a tendency to dominate discussions, suddenly revealed how tired he was of that attitude, as he could see it made others 'give up' when talking to him. He said that it had been his way of showing power, enforcing hierarchy and gaining control over others during his life as a high-ranking gang member. This comment made me realise the extent to which gang life shapes people's self-understanding, identity and behaviour – even their (body) language – and how demanding it is to change identity and to leave what has been their social network.

By being present in EXIT's office on a daily basis, I was able to experience the different tools involved in the assessment and support of the clients, as well as the wide range of issues and institutions involved in the work. I described the different episodes in my field notes. If there were

any issues I wondered about, I asked an employee to expand on them, which gave me a more in-depth understanding of the field.

Participant observation gave me indispensable insight into a range of issues I could not have known about beforehand and that I would never have asked about by myself, as I would not have understood their significance to the people in the field. During my stay at EXIT as well as the intervals between my fieldwork periods, these insights led me to further reflection and questions, which I then explored in the interviews with employees with or without a neo-Nazi past and with former and present clients.

## **Preparing the interviews**

Before going into the field I read ethnographic descriptions of the extreme right and the disengagement of former terrorists. I also read as much as I could find about EXIT in an attempt to acquire a detailed understanding of their work and its significance. In addition, I participated in a conference arranged by EXIT and followed lectures by EXIT coaches about their work.

I knew from the start that I would have only a limited amount of time in the field. Therefore, I carefully planned the interviews I would be conducting with both staff and former and present clients to try to speed up the data collection process. I ended up conducting 35 hours of interviews with 23 individuals, six of whom were employees, including three with a past as extremist right-wingers, who now worked as coaches, and seven present and former clients.

In addition to the ethnographic readings I did in preparation for fieldwork, I spent a day in Stockholm to organize my stay at EXIT and I got hold of some of the many autobiographies written by former right wing extremists from Sweden, Germany and the US that EXIT has on their shelves. I read these books throughout my fieldwork in an attempt to enhance my understanding of as many aspects as possible of what it is like to be an active right-wing extremist and to gain insight into the emotional sense of group members experience as well as the process leading to disengagement (Egonsson 2012, Sadalin 2010, Widerberg 2001, Persson 2003, Asplund 2000, Arno 2010, Hasselbach 1994, Kimmel 2007, Eiternes and Fangen 2001, Arnstberg and Hållén 2000, Bjørgo 2009, 1997). The autobiographies gave me insight into how people join the extreme right and a neat explanation of the way of how they got out. The impressions I got from these books, combined with the understanding I had gained of participation in a social movement through my previous research, constituted my starting point for creating an interview guide. But the literature left me unprepared for the many complex and interrelated issues related to a drastic change of lifestyle and the difficult life stories that are often concealed behind the road to participation and the way out. During my

work on the interview guide, I got an impression of the difficulty of this sort of an interview, as the interviews would include three to four related but at the same time distinct themes.

One theme was the way into the extremist right. It was important to understand the interviewees' narrative about their entry into the movement, to find out why and how they had got involved, how long they had been active and in what type of group: a well-established group, a loose network of racist youths, a right-wing terror organisation or a group with a kind of political party structure? What had been their position in the group? A second theme was the process leading up to the desire to leave the extremist right, a third was the process of becoming a client in EXIT and the fourth theme would naturally cover their present life and plans for the future. When interviewing staff and coaches, I planned to address yet another theme, as I also had questions about their work with clients and how, in the case of coaches, their own past played a role in the work they do now. During my first stay at EXIT I interviewed mainly the coaches about their past, but I also did interviews of a few former and present clients. The interview session was to be arranged as an appointment for an interview, which already creates specific expectations of what will take place and assigns specific roles to both the interviewee and the interviewer.

Already during the first interview I began to think about the impact of time in relation to this specific field. When doing fieldwork, relationships to people within the field are of crucial importance to the researcher's ability to understand what is at stake. But relationships take time to establish and develop and, I would claim, cannot be hurried. Building relationships involves dialogue, engagement, humour, the discovery of a shared interest and other investments that create trust. In a field centred on stigmatized and vigilant people - as former neo-Nazis are - relationships and trust seem even more important, as they often constitute the researcher's access to understanding the field. So the question remained of how to tackle the fieldwork when time was so limited. And what kind of data can a researcher gather through an interview of this kind?

## Doing interviews

EXIT's staff members are in general open and inclusive and they received me in a very positive way from the outset. Moreover, I had many things in common with the staff: we were first and foremost interested in the same subject - their work, clients' stories, extremism, radicalisation - but we also shared, for example, a sense of humour, political views and more or less looked the same, which, I think, made my integration into the field a lot easier. In the case of the present and former clients, it was absolutely essential that Joachim was the one who contacted the informants, as they seemed to extend their enormous trust in him to me.

Nonetheless, I realised during the first interviews that some of the informants with a past in the extremist right suspected me in the beginning of judging them very negatively or of believing them to be outright idiots. I often felt that when we had talked for some time and they began to be convinced that my interest in them and their story was really genuine, they seemed to relax somewhat and open up. But still the interviews were difficult, as the interview situation made the interviewee, for whom the past seemed to be associated with feelings of shame and vulnerability, show signs of distress when asked about it, which had an impact on the interview. Some wiped their hands on their trousers and/or developed red spots on their neck. Others kept repeating the same phrases whenever I asked about the past, for example, 'No good comes of participating in the extremist right', 'No good comes of it'. In some cases, talking about the past also meant reviving memories of, for example, rape, court trials with the intense sense of being hated by everyone in the courtroom and thoughts of suicide as the only possible way out; feelings that would obviously have an impact on the interviewee, but certainly also on me, the interviewer.

My first reaction was a desire to rush through the interviews in order to let the informant and me get out of this stressful and uncomfortable situation. But my way of handling it was to remain as calm as I could and to avoid forcing conversations about issues the informants found it difficult to talk about, both because they often seemed to lack words, but especially because the memories seemed painful and their descriptions were often accompanied by verbal expressions of shame, regret, and bewilderment. For many of the informants, involvement in the extremist right was one subject in a story of a difficult upbringing, personal problems or desires to belong, which I asked further questions about. But I did not ask why an informant was showing signs of distress, and I always told the informants that they were of course in charge of the topic, in the sense that if I asked them about something they did not want to talk about, they could say so and we could change the subject and that they could stop the interview at any time. I also started each interview by explaining how I intended to use the data and that very special and easy identifiable details would not be used in any way. Nobody else would listen to the recorded interviews, as I would transcribe them myself and they did not need to mention their name or surname while the dictaphone was on. Moreover, I would answer honestly any questions they asked me, and in general tell things about myself. I always think that informants, in general, tell a lot about themselves and thereby show trust in the interviewer, and therefore the interviewer ought to do the same, if and when asked by the interviewee.

An interview of this kind is very demanding, as the subject involves a radical change of lifestyle and conviction. This means that first, you, as the interviewer, are keen to gain insight into the

informant's past and his/her meaning system at the time. Then you move on to yet another theme involving a process through which the interviewee has left his/her starting point – the engagement in the extreme right. Finally, in different ways and together with the informant, you investigate and interpret the entire process.

The change of lifestyle and – over time – perception of self-understanding and worldview creates a dense life story, but also one that at times seems very difficult for the interviewee to understand when asked to describe it in retrospective. ‘What happened?’ ‘Why did *I* end up being an extremist right-winger?’ In the case of many of the informants who had a past as extremist right-wingers, I often felt that they were still looking for words to be able to identify and thereby tell themselves and me some of the many issues involved in the process of becoming one.

These interviews were by no means my first ones. I had, as noted, carried out research projects before this study and had additionally worked as a freelance anthropologist, doing observations and conducting qualitative interviews for municipalities, large companies and ministries for years. Thus I had done several hundred interviews of very different categories of people, for example, left-wingers, Christians in Denmark and Lebanon, long-time recipients of social welfare benefits and top leaders about their way to the top.

My experience is that when you as a researcher conduct a semi-structured interview, you move from one subject to the next, in what appears to be a chain of related associations. I had created the interview guide with inspiration from anthropologists such as Spradley (1979) and Kvale (1994) and had planned to start by asking what Spradley calls ‘grand tour questions’, which are supposed to generate general descriptions, followed by questions aimed at eliciting specific examples of something. But I knew that the interviews in this study would be different in the sense that they would be characterised by the informant jumping from one topic to a completely different one, making it very exhausting to follow as the interviewer and impossible to move from one question to the next in an associative manner. These issues would, I think, have been much easier to deal with if I had stayed in Stockholm, which might have made repeated interviewing easier to organise. But I was going back and forth from Copenhagen to Stockholm, and that fact that Joachim was the one in contact with the informants, combined with the informants' distressed reactions, prevented me from making repeated appointments with the same informant. This means that I have interviewed the coaches several times, whereas I have only done repeated interviews with a few clients. As I wanted to understand as many details and nuances of the exit process, my strategy became, whenever I got to know of issues through participant observation in the office, to ask the informant to expand on that subject. Also, when I gained new insight from one informant, I would ask the next informant

further questions about the same topic. When I was not in the field, I would listen to and transcribe the interviews word for word. The transcriptions of what was actually said and not said, when the informant paused and showed sign of doubt, insecurity and other emotions gave me a great deal of information about the process. If there was anything that a client said that made me wonder, I asked one of the coaches in EXIT about it and searched for further details. For example, I asked a client about what sort of activities she had done with her coach. She found it difficult to answer. During the interview she was visibly nervous and said that she found it strange to be back in EXIT's office<sup>6</sup>. Later on, I asked the person in the office I knew had been her coach if he could remember what they had done together and why they had done precisely these activities. But there was a limit to the kind of questions I could carry from client to coach, as I had to be careful not to pass on any personal information from one informant to the other.

I wished I could have had the opportunity to spend more time with a few of the client informants so that we could have met several times and maybe even have ended up doing things together. I would have preferred to avoid having the interview situation as the first encounter, or to combine it with informal dialogue. I experienced talking to former or present clients during short walks when one of them would, for example, accompany me to the train station. In these situations they often told me more stories of the impact of their former life on the present. For example, one client told me, as we walked down the steps from his apartment, how he had had to move from the first to the fifth floor after somebody threw a stone through a window, and, he told me as we crossed the local park, how he had only recently given up carrying a knife and brass knuckles in his pocket to protect himself from former enemies. These stories carried with them details of the sort that Hylland-Eriksen (2013) refers to when he talks about the themes informants bring up in time-intensive fieldwork, because they are important to them, and that most likely would not emerge in an semi-structured interview as the interviewer cannot know about their importance and there are no references that make them relevant for the interviewee to mention. The 'unreflected common sense and habits' of the informants and the implicit meaning of their (inter)actions, doings and interpretations of themselves and the world remain difficult to obtain in a fixed and non-repeated interview setting (Hastrup and Hervik 1994).

---

<sup>6</sup> It was the only interview with a (former) client, which I did in the office. Otherwise I would meet the former or present clients elsewhere.

## Conclusion

To return to the quote by Mendelsohn (2008), knowledge is indeed connected to a process of reflection that takes place over time; I realised that, even though I had limited time to interact with my informants in the field. However, through a combination of different means I have reached an understanding of the issues related to a radical change of lifestyle and the support of that change. Now, two years after the fieldwork, I have gone through all my data several times. I have also comprehended that my research question caused me to focus on how knowledge, experience, ideas and social practice were transferred from one staff member to another through meetings, dialogues and interaction in both a very reflective and a non-reflective manner – and the significance of this transfer for staff and clients alike, as revealed in the interviews. The participant observations and interviews, in combination with my participation in the two educational sessions for the coaches, deepened my understanding of the field through contextual knowledge that I could expand on in the complex interviews with informants among former and present clients. This insight helped me overcome some of the difficulties I experienced in connection with my limited possibilities for repeated interaction with informants among present and former clients.

I have also come to understand EXIT and associated matters as *a particular realm of reality*, as constituting *my field*, scattered as it is in different settings. This perspective is also an outcome of a reinterpretation of *culture* within anthropology, which has paved the way for new approaches and methodological options. Culture in anthropological research is in general no longer perceived as singular separated wholes to be found ‘out there’, making the recognition of underlining cultural patterns defined within geographical borders the goal of the research. Culture is now understood as an analytical term focusing on social practices and processes. The aim is to understand how people can acquire culturally defined knowledge through a situated learning process and how this knowledge can shape people’s frame of interpretation over time (Hasse 2002). The informants can therefore be analysed as having provided me with distinctive nuances of the field.

This approach opens the perspective in the sense that each all interviewed, with their diverse viewpoints, can contribute with knowledge to my understanding of the exit process.

I have come to perceive the answers to my research questions as – to borrow a metaphor from Michael Cole (Cole 1996:135 in Hasse 2011:17) – a rope, composed of many individual but intertwined fibres. I have brought together pieces of understanding that I reached through informal conversations, the reading of autobiographies and participant observation, combined with interviews of employees, coaches and clients, the transcriptions of the interviews and participation

in staff training courses. These activities all provided pieces of information about what became – over time – my specific field of research.

## References:

Arnstberg, Karl-olov; Hållén, Jonas (2000): Smaka kanga. Vägen tillbaka - Intervjuer med avhoppade nynazister, Fryshuset, Stockholm

Asplund, Patrick (2000): Med Hatet Som Drivkraft, Hjalmarson & Högberg Bokförlag

Bjørge, Tore (1997); Racist and Rightwing Violence in Scandinavia, Patterns, Perpetrators, and Responses, Tano Aschehougs Fonteneserie

Bjørge, Tore (2009): 'Processes of disengagement from violent groups of the extreme right' in Bjørge,

Tore & Horgan, John, *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, Routledge, New York, 2009

Christensen, Tina (2009) A: Forrest eller bagerst i demo'en – aktivist i Ungdomshusbevægelsen, in Norsk Antropologisk Tidsskrift vol. 20 nr. 4, 236–250, Universitetsforlaget

Christensen, Tina Wilchen (2009) B, "Den ensrettede mangfoldighed" in Kampen om Ungdomshuset, studier i et oprør, Karpantschov, René og Lindblom, Martin (Red), København: Frydenlund & Monsun, 229 – 251

Christensen, Tina Wilchen: Adding a grey tone to a black and white worldview – How role models and social encouragement can lead former right wing extremists to transform their identity' in Rieker, Peter (ed.) (2014): Hilfe zum Ausstieg? Ansätze und Erfahrungen professioneller Angebote zum Ausstieg aus rechtsextremen Szenen. Weinheim/Basel: Beltz Juventa.

Christensen, Tina Wilchen (2013): To Study the Significance of Social Interaction for Former Right Wing Extremists Wanting to Disengage: Doing Participant Observation and Qualitative Interviews, <http://srmo.sagepub.com/view/methods-case-studies-2013/n140.xml>

Egonsson, Johan (2012): Ett Liv I mörker Min resa in i - och ut ur – extremhögern, Bokförlaget Forum

Eiternes, Tom Kimmo; Fangen, Katrine (2002): Bak Nynazismen, Cappelen Damm A/S, Oslo

Hasse, Cathrine (2002): Kultur i bevægelse : fra deltagerobservation til kulturanalyse - i det fysiske rum, Samfundslitteratur

Hasse, Cathrine (2011): Kulturanalyse i organisationer, Begreber, metoder og forbløffende lærerprocesser, Samfundslitteratur

- Hasselbach, Ingo; Bonengel, Winfried (1994): Afregning - En nynazist står af, Hasse og Søn
- Hastrup, Kirsten (1992): Det antropologiske projekt: om forbløffelse, Gyldendal, København
- Hastrup, Kirsten (2004): Viden om verden : en grundbog i antropologisk analyse, Hans Reitzel, København
- Hastrup, Kirsten & Hervik, Peter (Red.) 1994: 'Introduction' in Social Experience and Anthropological Knowledge, Routledge, London and New York
- Hastrup, Kirsten 1994: 'Anthropological Knowledge incorporated: discussion' in Social Experience and Anthropological Knowledge (Hastrup, Kirsten & Hervik, Peter (Red.)), Routledge, London and New York
- Holland, Dorothy, Lachicotte Jr., William, Skinner, Debra & Cain, Carole (1998): Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England
- Hylland-Eriksen, Thomas (2013): Frederik Barth, En intellektuel biografi, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo
- Karpantschof, René (2007): *Gaden og parlamentet – Kollektive aktioner, demokrati og den moderne politiks tilblivelse i Danmark 1835 – 1901*, Ph.d Afhandling, Københavns Universitet: Sociologisk Institut.
- Kimmel, Michael (2007): 'Racism as Adolescent Male Rite of Passage: Ex-Nazis in Scandinavia', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, pages 202-218
- Kvale, S. (1994). Interview – En introduktion til det kvalitative forskningsinterview. København, Denmark: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Mendelsohn, Daniel (2008): *The Lost, The search for six out six millions*, Harper Perennial
- Michales, Arno (2010) : *My Life After Hate*, Authentic press Publication, US
- Persson, Dennis (2003): *Jag brot med nazismen*, LL Forlaget, Stockholm
- Porta, Donatella Della (2009): *Leaving underground organizations: a sociological analysis of the Italian Case in Bjrøgo*, Tore & Horgan, John (Red) , *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, Routledge, New York
- Sadalin, Magnus (2010): *Den svarte nazisten En dokumentär om Jackie Arklöf*, A.Dahlin, Stockholm
- Snow, David A., E. Burker Fochford JR., Steven K. Worden & Robert D. Benford (2007): *Frame Alignments Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation*, i *Social Movements*

*Critical Concepts in Sociology*, Volume IV, Culture and Emotions, Goodwin and Jasper (red), 193–225. New York: Routledge.

Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The Ethnographic interview*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Group/Thomson Learning.

Tarrow, Sidney (1994): *Power in Movement: Social movements, collective action and politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Widerberg, Siv; Walter-Lax, Lena; Wennerstrand, Carl (2001): *En Anden Vej*, Forlaget Fremad A/S, København