Leaving Hate Behind – Neo-Nazis, Significant Others and Disengagement

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the oral history of disengagement processes of former neo-Nazis in Sweden. The main aim is to take a holistic approach to their narratives. This means that these narratives need to be placed in relation to significant others – such as teachers, parents, and siblings – in order to contextualize the individual stories and pathways and also analyze push and pull factors in a broader context. Although there is ample evidence for the importance pro-social relationship for disengagement, most studies have focused exclusively on the individual stories. This one-sided focus could contribute to the construction of a highly individualized narrative of disengagement processes. Research has shown that disengagement from extremist movements is often preceded by individuals' disillusionment with the movement, but there is also a need for the individual to reconnect with others outside the movement in order to share his or her doubts. There is, however, scarce research on how this process of interaction with significant outsiders who are present during both the radicalization and disengagement process can be understood. The empirical material of this study consists of two case studies. Each case story contains a condensed narrative of the person's own perception of push and pull factors leading into the neo-Nazi movement in Sweden and starting a disengagement process. In one case, disengagement was successful, in the other it was not. In addition to these individual narratives, a number of voices of significant others are added and analyzed to contextualize each pathway. The results show that disengagement can be understood as a combination of fateful moments and "interventions" by significant others. The non-judgmental attitudes among these significant others are rooted in their lived experiences of handling individuals grievances.

Introduction

Although numerous studies have examined the paths to and disengagement from violent extremism, the field remains theoretically underdeveloped. This lack of theory development applies particularly to disengagement processes, perhaps even more so to comparisons of individual paths and disengagement (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014; Koehler, 2016).

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The main focus has been on understanding the motivations underlying radicalization processes and on explaining paths to terror or violent extremism. However, there is also growing interest in understanding processes of disengagement and de-radicalization (Horgan et al., 2017). In our empirical case studies, we used recent theoretical developments to elaborate on the possible relations between radicalization and disengagement. To accomplish this, we mapped the paths to radicalization of two individuals (young men) who played leading roles in the same Swedish neo-Nazi organization during overlapping periods. We also mapped their disengagement processes. In one case, disengagement was completed and followed by de-radicalization; in the other case, disengagement failed and was followed by re-radicalization. The aim of the present study is to improve our understanding of how and when life trajectories shift by looking beyond push and pull factors, and instead focusing on what we refer to as fateful moments, that is, moments when the relational matrix surrounding the individual provides opportunities for change, for better or for worse.

Decisions to engage or disengage are made in a social context. Several biographical studies have shown how significant others helped to bring about behavior change among former terrorists or neo-Nazis (Bjørgå, 2009; Kimmel, 2007, 2018; Mattsson & Johansson, 2018; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011; Moghaddam, 2005; Rae, 2012; Roy, 2007; Sageman, 2004). To achieve a more nuanced understanding of the two individual trajectories, we have taken a holistic approach, which entails situating and contextualizing the two young men's narratives in relation to the stories told by their significant others, such as, teachers, parents, and siblings.

- RQ1: How and when did the crucial turning points emerge in the young men's narratives?
- RQ2: How did the interactions between the young neo-Nazis and their significant others promote or obstruct disengagement?

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we account for previous research. This is followed by a section on our theoretical approach, followed by our method and methodology. The main part of the article is devoted to the empirical study. We analyzed two case studies. Each case study begins with a condensed narrative containing a former neo-Nazi leader's own views on push and pull factors. Thereafter, a number of voices of significant others are added and analyzed. The article ends with a summary and discussion of the results.

Survey of the Research Literature

Altier et al. (2014) conducted a conceptual analysis of existing models in an effort to understand disengagement processes. Their point of departure was the need to develop a better theoretical basis for studying disengagement processes and to account for empirical research showing the presence of push and pull factors in these processes. They defined these factors as follows:

> Push factors are aspects related to individuals' experiences while involved in terrorism that drive them away. Pull factors are outside influences that lure individuals to a conventional social role (ibid. p. 648).

According to Altier et al. (2014), push and pull factors are not sufficient if we wish to understand why disengagement takes place. They pointed out, for example, that certain push factors affect some terrorists, but not others. Instead, they introduced a psychological investment theory developed by Rusbult and colleagues, whose ideas about the role of satisfaction may be helpful in understanding behavior change among terrorists. For instance, a less ideologically motivated individual may be likely to be more motivated, that is, more easily satisfied, by both pull and push factors. In our view, the notion of satisfaction has the potential to help us gain insight into why behaviour change occurs.

Nonetheless, in empirical studies of disengagement from extremist movements, *push and pull factors* have often been used as explanatory factors (Aho, 1994). In a systematic review of the disengagement literature, Windisch and colleagues (2017) found that, in more than half of the included studies, the main push factor was disillusionment and growing disappointment with the discrepancies between the movement's ideology and main ideas, on the one hand, and actual behavior, on the other. Individuals who have lost their faith in the movement are also more likely to initiate a disengagement process. Harris and colleagues (2018) found that individuals tend to lose faith in extremist movements when they fail to meet the expectations of the identity they have claimed. In addition, the great prevalence of violence and violent behavior in these movements may lead to mounting frustration and burnout (Barrelle, 2015). Growing disillusionment with former comrades in the movement can also lead to doubt, thoughts of leaving, and an often prolonged and painful process of actually leaving the movement.

Bubolz and Simi (2015) found that processes of disengagement from right-wing extremist movements are complex and multifaceted. Exiting the movement also means leaving behind important relationships with friends. Participation in a subculture and significant emotional and cognitive investments in relationships also work as a glue that keeps individuals in place. Frequently, disengaging from the movement also means leaving one's relationships and the hate milieu behind. This can lead to feelings of guilt and loneliness. Simi and colleagues (2017) suggested that disengagement processes have considerable residual effects. Hate groups appear to create a *phantom community*, that is, a formation of residual feelings connected to leaving a white supremacist movement. Moreover, having lived in a hate community for a prolonged period means that, upon disengagement, the individual must also leave hate behind. The cognitive and emotional residue can be powerful. Although there may be strong reasons for leaving a hate movement, this does not mean the person is ready to disengage from it. According to Bjørgå (2009), there is a risk for severe setbacks. It is not uncommon for individuals to decide to leave and start to disengage, only to fail and not complete the process.

Looking more closely at the *pull factors*, they often include finding new and returning to old relationships, for example, experiencing support from friends outside the movement, starting a family, or finding a job (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Windisch et al., 2017). When other roles and positions become interesting, there is also increased motivation to pursue other career paths and develop new, less toxic relationships (Barrelle, 2015). A study on exit programs for female Jihadists reveals similar results (Gielen, 2018). Consequently, relationships with significant others are important as a means of creating a new life without hate. Although this is evident when reading the literature, little research has been done on this aspect of the disengagement process. There is a shortage of studies on how significant others perceive and talk about the individual's disengagement from a hate movement.

The neo-Nazi movement usually puts "normal and ordinary" life on hold. The skills, attitudes, and feelings gained before entering the movement are now useless or occupied by the extremist ideology (Mattsson & Johansson, 2018). *De-radicalization* implies not only physically leaving the movement, but also gaining new trust, re-learning how to belong to society, and developing a new identity. Thus, the life put on hold during the radicalization phase needs to be reactivated during the crucial period of disillusionment. It would seem that this can be done by reconnecting to significant others who were present before the life of hate or by establishing new relationships outside the neo-Nazi subculture. It does not seem, however, that these relationships are what cause disengagement, but rather that they enable disengagement when disillusionment is already present.

Conceptualizing Disengagement Processes

In line with Altier et al. (2014), we are interested in understanding why and how different pull factors played out as they did in our two cases studies. As we have shown, disillusionment is the dominant push factor toward disengagement, but why and how disillusionment emerges is unclear. Altier and colleagues suggested that our current knowledge in this area is not solid enough to base future policymaking on, as it is unclear, for instance, whether and when social

or economic support should be provided. Because we have compared two cases, one of successful, complete disengagement, and one of a failed process, we are using individual experiences of *satisfaction* as our analytic concept to scrutinize *how* particular situations developed into a possible explanation for *why* a certain behavioral response took place. As mentioned, Altier et al. drew on Rusbult's investment model, in which commitment is understood as the result of satisfaction minus the availability of appealing alternatives plus the investment. Satisfaction is related to actual rewards, minus the costs, or as summarized by Altier et al. (2014):

> Satisfaction reflects how positively one evaluates the target entity, whether a job, relationship, group, etc. The model suggests satisfaction increases to the extent that the entity provides high rewards and low costs, which surpass one's expectations or comparison level. (p. 650)

However, this takes place in a concrete social setting involving a number of actors. In biographical studies of these processes, the individual recalls particular performative events when a decision was made or a behavior changed. We find that Rusbult's investment model can convincingly explain how anticipated satisfaction causes behavior change. However, to use this model, we need to isolate the moments when shifting behaviors occur, enabling us to interpret how anticipation of satisfaction contributes to initiation of disengagement. Consequently, by interviewing the significant others of formerly/currently radicalized individuals, we wish to try to explain why disengagement happens. To accomplish this analytical work, we need to define how such moments can be understood. In doing so, we also make use of Giddens' (1991) concept of *fateful moments*.

> *Fateful moments* are those when individuals are called on to take decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions, or more generally for

their future lives. Fateful moments are highly consequential for a person's destiny (p. 112).

According to Giddens, fateful moments involve a great deal of risk. These moments in life are also a threat to the individual's *protective cocoon*. The protective cocoon is the mantle of trust that enables people to exist and lead a sustainable life. The disengagement process means leaving a particular trust community and facing the risk of not being able to enter another community and create the relationships necessary to survive ontologically. Exploring the fragile, insecure situation and moment when individuals leave hate behind also involves investigating how everyday life and its relationships change. Using a social psychological approach to the disengagement process, we are interested in exploring how the relational environment surrounding the key persons in question here changes at a certain moment in time (Mattsson & Johansson, 2018).

Through retrospective interviews with the former neo-Nazis themselves, as well as with some of the persons they identified as having been important during their radicalization and disengagement processes, we hope to generate new knowledge about these complex processes. When approaching the *new relationship matrix* these young men entered into, we also investigated the often difficult and ambivalent process of *leaving hate behind*. The disengagement process involves not only a cognitive decision to change one's life, but also a spatial and socioemotional transformation. The emotional and material circumstances of the relationships left behind are interrelated, which means that the disengagement process not only requires new, less toxic relationships, but also a new social and physical environment. Development of a new relationship matrix, therefore, involves the dramatic change that takes place when the person's lifestyle becomes integrated into a new social environment.

Method and Methodology

The empirical material for this study consists of two in-depth, narrative case studies of two individuals who used to be leaders in the same Swedish neo-Nazi organization during overlapping periods. They both held crucial positions and were well known regionally and nationally as neo-Nazi spokespersons. Dumez (2015) argued that it is essential for researchers to "know their case from different perspectives" (p. 49). It is important to develop different ways of seeing and positioning the case in question. The case study involves a holistic enterprise through approaching and exploring the individual case from different angles (Yin, 2008). Dumez (2015) also claimed that the very nature of the case involves comparison. Our intention is also to explore both similarities and differences between the two individuals' life trajectories, as well as the reactions and perceptions of significant others. In addition, we use a theoretical perspective to guide our analysis of the case studies, while trying to discern and identifying recurring themes and subthemes generate from the data. Consequently, we attempted to infer the most reasonable explanations for the findings of the study, using theoretical frameworks to interpret the material, but also considering alternative explanations (Merriam, 1988). We used a narrative and biographical method, focusing on push and pull factors, fateful moments, and significant others. Verbatim transcripts were processed and coded, resulting in the emergence of a number of crucial main themes. During this process, the research team discussed the transcripts and possible interpretations to further develop our theoretical approach. New concepts were also added to the existing canon of theories of disengagement.

In the interviews, a semi-structured approach was used to ensure that we covered central themes and at the same time were able to follow participants in their verbal construction of a chronological narrative (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The data were gathered through repeated interviews with the two key informants. The interviews were retrospective, that is, they cover the period from 1996 until today.

The personal narratives were gathered with as much care as possible, leaving room for the interviewees to construct and tell their own story. All interviews were conducted one-on-one and transcribed verbatim. To avoid assuming whom the significant others might be, we refrained from specifying them in the first set of interviews with the main informants. During the first analysis, we actively looked for instances in which the main informants mentioned other influential individuals. Here, we are referring to individuals who in one way or another guided, advised, comforted, or challenged/confronted our main informants in such a way that we could see evidence of behavioral or cognitive shifts in the main informants' statements. After receiving explicit approval by the interviewees, we traced these individuals and asked for consent to interview them in the relevant case study; they all agreed to participate, apart from those who were deceased. After mapping their narratives, that is, becoming familiar with their background, we proceeded to their relations to and recapitulations of the radicalization and disengagement processes reported by our main informants. Based on this information, we conducted follow-up interviews with our main informants to compare impressions, interpretations, and recollections. This helped to acquire more nuanced data about how radicalization and disengagement had played out. It also helped in generating new knowledge about these processes and provided rich data on how the network of relations can explain the main forces underlying these processes. Altogether, the material was derived from eight informants: the two main informants, and three significant others connected to each one, mentioned in the two narrative case studies.

The study was conducted in accordance with the Swedish Research Council's research ethics principles (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011). The names and places appearing in the text have been changed. All informants were told about the purpose of the study, that their participation was voluntary, and that they were free to interrupt or terminate the interviews at any time. All transcripts have been stored securely and are only accessible to the researchers; no one else has access to the key that reveals the informants' identities.

Leaving Hate Behind – the Significance of Relations

The interviews all followed the same pattern, focusing on push and pull factors, fateful moments, and significant others. The narratives were all different, of course. It is clear that several factors, which play out at various moments, pull people into, and push them out of different affiliations with extremist organizations and groups. The structure in each case study followed the two research questions. Each case study begins with a brief life story of the young man in question. Thereafter, the voices and reactions from three significant others are recounted briefly. The case stories are then analyzed as a whole case, providing different perspectives on similar events and moments.

Case Study 1: In the Clearing Stands a Boxer

Carl grew up in a small village located in the woods in northern Sweden. His parents divorced when he was small. He visited his father every other weekend, but stopped doing so during his teenage years. His father was a racist. Carl described being afraid of his father, who exhibited violent behavior and constantly picked on Carl. He recalled a particularly harsh moment with his father after having grown a pony tail that he was proud of. His father looked at him and told him he was a faggot, and then cut the ponytail off using force. Carl gradually lost contact with his father, also because of his father's mental abuse of Carl's mother. Carl vividly described growing up in a milieu characterized by hate. There was social pressure to fit in, to be tough and hard.

> Imagine a small community with three thousand people, or maybe
> four thousand, I don't know. Everything looks the same. The houses,
> with their white corners, look the same, and people are talking about
> the same things. People lived there, and this was certainly not a place

> where you put refugees, immigrants, or something like that, only
> Swedes and Finnish people lived there, as it seemed. Everyone
> followed strict norms, and guys were guys and girls were girls. So it
> was exactly the same everywhere. I really looked down on anything
> that was different or outside this community. I don't know. You just
> grew right into this culture, at the kitchen tables, or the courtyard. You
> always heard something, something racist. Something like, you know,
> not nice things anyway. There was simply an ongoing jargon.

Carl described this relatively small place as being filled with skinheads, neo-Nazis, and rockers with racist attitudes. He described himself as quite soft and sensitive. From first grade until sixth grade, he was bullied a great deal at school. Luckily, his mother stood by him, and he always felt safe at home. He spent a lot of time alone, walking in the woods and brooding during school hours. In sixth grade, a turning point occurred in his life. He made new friends. He mentioned one young man in particular, a skinhead, who accepted Carl and gave him inspiration. Carl bought new clothes: a bomber jacket, a black leather jacket, and Dr. Martens boots. He shaved his head and got a Mohawk haircut. He was 12 years old at the time, and his mother was quite worried. She did not like him being drawn into the neo-Nazi movement. When Carl was 14 years old, he attended a meeting of the National Socialists. He was pulled into this movement; he enjoyed being a part of the subcultural space, partying, and making new friends, as well as not having to be afraid of anyone at all. Instead, people were now afraid of Carl. When he was 16 years old, he became a leader, making speeches at rallies and travelling around Sweden, spreading the message of National Socialism. After a little more than five years in the movement, one of his best friends committed suicide. Carl was confused and miserable, and he started using drugs. The drug abuse led to criminal behavior that soon escalated. He was convicted and ended up in a treatment center. At this time, a female friend recommended a boxing coach, Ohmed, and although he hesitated at first, he started taking lessons from Ohmed. He soon discovered that his racist beliefs were dysfunctional in terms of

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orienting him in this new environment. He started questioning his lifestyle and, more importantly, his priorities. After committing armed robbery, he was imprisoned. While in prison, he met a female teacher in one of the voluntary classes, and they developed a trusting relationship that gradually led to a discussion of Carl's ideas. With time, his growing disillusionment with his life conditions and ideological convictions transitioned into disengagement from the movement. One important turning point came when his mother became sick and had to be hospitalized. While talking to her over the phone from a correctional institution, after having been denied a supervised visit to the hospital, he began regretting his life. He realized his mother was the only person who would take a stand for him, as she always had in the past. Now she was close to leaving him and he could only be with her over phone, with a police officer monitoring their conversation. Carl had hit rock bottom and broke down crying.

The Mother

Carl's mother, Cecilia, did survive, and today she is 57 years old. She still lives in the small village where Carl grew up. She has a somewhat brighter image of the village. She talked to us about her strong sense of solidarity and described the village as a friendly place – a good place to live. People meet at the local pizzeria, and everyone knows each other. At the same time, she also talked about the presence of skinheads and racists, as well as unruly young people. She described her own upbringing as chaotic. Her parents were alcoholics, and on several occasions, she had to escape from her home. Her stepfather was constantly beating her mother; growing up in that kind of miserable milieu had been almost impossible. When she was 13 years old, she contacted social welfare services and asked to be placed in foster care. She was 15 years old when she left her home permanently. Soon she became pregnant and found herself in a precarious situation, with a man she did not love. The next man she had a relationship with was also Carl's father. She described this new relationship as a real catastrophe: Carl's father was manipulative and, in her view, a psychopath. Still quite young, she had several children and a man who was incapable of helping her take care of the family.

After another separation, and several years of dysfunctional relationships, Cecilia found a new man, Walter, who became Carl's stepfather. She is still living with Walter today.

According to Cecilia, Carl spent some weekends with his father, but never really felt at ease with him. Gradually he lost contact, only seeing his father on occasion. When Carl was three years old, Cecilia noticed that he was hyperactive and had great difficulties concentrating on different tasks. Carl's problems accelerated, and at school they soon became severe. The teachers tried different solutions. Among other things, they placed Carl in front of a wall in the classroom, thus separating him from his classmates. According to Cecilia, Carl was heavily medicated, making him very closed off and inaccessible. They consulted and spent a lot of time with psychologists, trying to get help. Cecilia was very disappointed with and critical of the school's various attempts to "help" Carl. In the fifth and sixth grades, Carl became acquainted with some skinhead kids, and suddenly, "he had some friends, but the wrong friends," according to Cecilia. She tried talking with Carl about his new friends, and to get him to avoid them, but, although bothered by his mother's remarks, he continued to gradually slip into the neo-Nazi movement. According to Cecilia, many people in the village were afraid of the growing number of young people with bomber jackets, neo-Nazi symbols, and shaved heads. She was never afraid, however, just upset that her son was joining these gangs.

An important turning point came when neo-Nazis beat up the principal of Carl's old school in his office, because of his commitment to fighting Nazism. Carl was involved, and this resulted in police involvement and a trial. Another incident, when Carl pulled a knife on his stepfather at home, led to an escalating situation. He was then placed in an institution, and soon became even more involved in the neo-Nazi movement. In addition, he became a leader, and soon began to tour Sweden, appearing at demonstrations and gatherings. His mother was not fully aware of this development, but was trying to cope with the domestic situation. Carl changed his style, started dressing in a suit, and stopped using alcohol. From Cecilia's perspective, this was just as unexpected as it was welcomed.

> He fooled me, I guess. He told me that he had left the movement. First, he said that he couldn't leave the movement. He told me that leaving was not tolerated, and that he would be badly beaten. I don't know. Then he said that he had already left the movement. Well, it was quite confusing. Then I heard that he was away on a demonstration, probably when he became a leader. It was hard to know. However, he started taking care better of himself, not drinking, and so on.

This new development lasted a while, but he was now entering a more criminal career, taking drugs, and eventually also doing time in jail. According to Cecilia, another turning point was when she became very sick and ended up in hospital, with a high risk of dying. The correction officers would not allow Carl to visit his mother at the hospital, but he was granted a phone call under surveillance by the police. During that call, Carl made a promise to stop taking drugs and to stay out of jail. When we asked Cecilia what role she played in the disengagement process, she became silent, and then said, "I'm not sure."

The Boxer and Mentor

Magnus is 45 years old. He has a background as a teacher, but he has mainly worked as a coach and mentor for adolescents in need of social and emotional support. He also has a background in boxing and martial arts. In 2010, he started a small boxing club. The club was successful and soon developed into a rather large enterprise. The main objective of the club was to bring together young people from different immigrant backgrounds and to promote integration. Soon, 75 boxers were training in the building. The youngsters came from twelve different nations and spoke 17 different languages. Magnus remembers when Carl contacted him, and when he visited the club for the very first time. Clearly, everyone knew that Carl was an active neo-Nazi and a leader. People were generally skeptical about inviting Carl. Magnus also knew Carl by his reputation, but he was prepared to give him a real opportunity

to change his life. Magnus told us that, "I knew that he only wanted to learn how to fight better, but I had other plans for him." Magnus told Carl he had to work with Ohmed, and Carl was perplexed and disturbed by "having to put up with an immigrant." In any event, according to Magnus, Carl decided to start training, and things slowly changed. He continues:

> Some of the young immigrant girls started to pay attention to Carl, and to like him. You know, all that, and it was difficult for him to be rude then, swimming around in it, becoming a part of it. In a bath, one eventually becomes wet, right. This was the key idea behind using boxing as an integrative tool.

Magnus also told us that he was totally convinced Carl would change and leave the neo-Nazi movement behind. "You have to believe in people and support them." He also kept to this goal, even though people questioned his strategy. He told us that a principal at one of the schools had contacted him and told him Carl was a criminal and a Nazi, suggesting he stop training Carl. This principal even threatened Magnus, telling him that if he continued supporting Carl, the principal would interfere and stop the municipality's economic support for the club. Magnus told him, "Where you close doors, I open them instead."

Magnus continued working with Carl. He explained his philosophy in the following way:

> If you've been boxing for many years, you also get to know how people work. You can "measure" them, so to speak. This is difficult to express. Say, if we were to get into the boxing ring together, I would immediately recognize you and be able to say who you really are. Very quickly, you see what the other person is made of.

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In the interview, we asked Magnus to reflect on his own role in Carl's decision to disengage from the movement. According to Magnus, several factors were involved. Carl was put in prison, and he seemed to be tired of his lifestyle. In addition, his mother was sick, and he was clearly influenced by his mother spending several weeks in a wheelchair at the hospital. Magnus also believed that the boxing club, and the friendship and love offered there, played a certain role in Carl's decision. Magnus saw that Carl had lost all meaning in life, his connections, and his beliefs, not least in himself. According to Magnus, Carl needed a nonjudgmental environment that was emotional and physical at the same time, just like the neo-Nazi movement had been before.

The Teacher

During one of Carl's convictions, he spent several months in jail. During this period, he asked to be placed in the prison's school. He wanted to study the Swedish language. This was during the period when he started doubting his role and place in the neo-Nazi movement. These doubts had grown, but he was still in a precarious situation. In prison, he met Caroline, who became his teacher. Caroline is now 35 years old, but at this time she was a young, enthusiastic teacher. She did not know a great deal about Carl's background in the neo-Nazi movement. She liked Carl, and she told us: "It was easy to work with Carl. He was a nice student, with his own ideas and an obvious talent." She also told us that Carl was a hard worker. He was not particularly interested in socializing with the other inmates in the classroom. Rather, he worked hard and was disciplined, absorbed in his writing. Although Caroline did not talk with Carl about the neo-Nazi movement and his role in it a great deal, she noticed that he had an affinity for national socialist images and symbols.

> As I remember, this was a while ago, his imagery was sometimes,
> well I understood what he was searching for and trying to write about,
> but to my mind this sounded like National Socialism. I mean, there
> were many descriptions of a Swedish nature and so on, and I told him

that – right or wrong – but this sounds very much like National Socialism. The proud nation, kind of. I know we talked about this.

Carl was eager to learn. He loved to talk and to try out his ideas on Caroline. She told us that he was craving for dialogue and interaction. He wanted to know if certain words were right, and if he formulated himself well. At the same time, he was not a demanding student; he did much of the work by himself. Caroline liked talking with the young inmates. She also received some criticism for spending too much time talking, and less time teaching. She felt that these young men needed to sort things out, to get help in discussing important topics. She told us that she tried to connect with them on a personal level. They had, for example, many questions about feminism and how to interact with girls.

Caroline told us that she found Carl to be very disciplined and absorbed in a quest to find himself. He had a strong will. According to Caroline, Carl had turned away from criminality; he wanted to change his life. Actually, she did not talk with Carl about the neo-Nazi movement, but rather took for granted that he had left it. Instead, she had an open and regular dialogue with Carl about his language and the texts he produced. When we asked Caroline what role she had played in Carl's disengagement process, she told us:

> I was a bit shocked when they called from Swedish Television. I had not reflected on my role in his disengagement process before. I can only listen to what Carl has said about this, but I have problems seeing my own role in this process. Anyway, this is what he says, and I guess he got the opportunity to deal with his own thoughts, and he got the opportunity to talk with someone else. It was never about confrontation, and this has been an important professional insight.

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Caroline has kept in contact with Carl. After a few years, he returned to the prison, but this time as a teacher, talking about his experiences of being a neo-Nazi and the disengagement process. Caroline was proud of him.

Conclusions

The three identified persons all have different roles in the narrative. Carl's mother – despite her own fragile and precarious life story – has provided unconditional love and support. She has never given up on Carl, but instead kept on trying to support him. Some of Carl's fateful moments are also connected to his mother. Magnus's story and his theories on the importance of the boxing club, and the friendship and love provided there, also coincide with Carl's own storyline. The boxing club provided support, and a *homosocial, masculine,* and *physical environment*. Magnus believed in Carl. Many others did not, but instead despised him and saw him as an outcast. Caroline provided Carl with a safe and empathic teaching environment, where he could test his ideas and create a rudimentary bridge to a more "ordinary" life. Their dialogues stimulated Carl's cognitive and emotional development. Another interesting observation is that all three persons involved in Carl's life were unsure as to their own influence on his disengagement process. Analyzing the case as a whole, it is apparent that the individual contributions were important, but it was the overall synergy effect of the relational matrix that – in complex and not always expected ways – led to disengagement. The disengagement process often extends over time and space. Fateful moments seem to involve dialogue and non-confrontational encounters with significant others. Timing, empathy, dialogue, and continuous feedback from significant others seem to be important factors.

Case Study 2: The Lonely Shepherd

Ulf was born and raised on a farm in a rural part of Sweden, living with his parents and younger sister and brother. His grandmother also lived on the farm. Ulf described his upbringing as secure and his relations with his siblings as close. In his recollection of the past, his upbringing could be portrayed as rather old fashioned and conservative in the sense that traditional gender roles were observed and the family did not watch much TV. Instead, the siblings had to make up their own games in a nearby forest. Ulf did not like school and found several of the subjects both difficult and boring.

Ulf described himself as a person who had grown up in the forest and appreciated being left alone. He also talked about himself as an oddball with an amazing talent for focusing on single issues, and becoming obsessed with them. He was somewhat of a nerd and an expert on whatever was on his mind.

> …I have always, I've noted, when I've discovered something that catches my interest I turn inward very much. Like when I had the largest collection of stamps when I was young. For a while I was listing to a music group [the name of a well-known group has been omitted for ethical reasons] and became obsessed with them, joined their fan club, and became member of the year of that club. Shortly afterward, I found my way into politics and got just as obsessed with that as with everything else before in my life. What other people, around me, were up to was seldom of any interest to me.

Ulf described how, from the outset, his interest in politics revolved around issues of Swedes' right to their own country and the notion that immigration threatened this right. He stressed that immigration could hardly be seen as a challenge in the part of Sweden where he grew up during the period he joined the nationalist movement. He was also eager to make clear that he

did not need the movement to confirm any sort of belonging. Rather he argued that his parents had brought him up to speak his mind.

Ulf was able to attract a few individuals who shared his political ideas and form a small group of likeminded individuals. Despite the small number of members, they, and Ulf in particular, caught the attention of teachers and became the focus of various discussions and attempts at pedagogical interventions. Ulf and his small circle provoked their schoolmates, who called for action. During the same period, Ulf had begun expressing more radical views about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, and had chosen to wear symbols associated with the neo-Nazi movement. This resulted in some action being taken by the school, where people in his circle were called in for special talks with teachers and the school arranged anti-racism days. Ulf described how these efforts by school officials had the opposite effect to what the officials had intended. The group came closer together, and Ulf, in particular, became more convinced that he was right. It all culminated when Ulf challenged a teacher in a public debate. The debate was attended by several schoolmates and a local newspaper, and resulted in Ulf being charged with hate speech. The trial received considerable attention, and Ulf became well known in neo-Nazi circles. At the second trial, which received national attention, organized neo-Nazis from all over Sweden supported him. This warmed his heart. Ulf was now being saluted as a martyr among the neo-Nazis and was offered a distinguished role in the movement. Many years later, Ulf said:

> You know… I could easily have gotten into the movement without this trial, but I would never have had the contacts or the reputation to do it this early. It was strange you know… back home I was still the oddball from the forest without very many friends, and in the movement I was the national martyr for freedom of speech. I couldn't really get the two images to go together. So, I had to choose one of them. I could just as well have been a farmer not known to anybody, but as you know I became someone else.

Ulf's actions did not only affect his own life. They affected his family members' lives and, to some extent, the Swedish debate on freedom of speech versus hate speech at the time. He has considered leaving the movement on many occasions, but when he tries to disengage he soon finds a new platform and returns to the movement, sometimes for financial reasons and sometimes based on his convictions. Today, he tends to choose more minor controversial positions within the movement.

The Sister

Kathrin is Ulf's younger sister; she was still a child in middle school when Ulf was pulled into the neo-Nazi movement. She has clear and strong memories of their tense relationship, especially when Kathrin took sides against Ulf during her teenage years. Her memories from before are vaguer and more episodic. She does remember a very close and caring relationship between them, and that Ulf was her role model. He used to read fairy tales to her, and her fascination with them remains today. Kathrin described growing up in a black-and-white family; it was always either-or. The family had quite a few friends, but also made sure to make new foes. As Kathrin related it, their parents were unable to admit any wrongdoing on their part, but were quick to see others' faults. The children were well cared for and their parents spent a great deal of time with them. At the same time, there was an atmosphere of constant quarreling and an almost complete lack of physical affection and explicit emotional validation.

Kathrin also talked about how both she and Ulf had difficulties making friends and that their mother made quite an effort to support them, not least by giving them rides to friends who lived far away and were willing to spend time with them. According to Kathrin, this was why their mother not only accepted it when Ulf started hanging out with skinheads, but even drove him to their activities, once actually marching in a skinhead rally. Their mother did not share the skinheads' views, but she wanted to make sure Ulf was doing fine. She did the same later when Kathrin became a punk rocker.

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When Ulf became more involved in the neo-Nazi movement and publicly well known, their parents became concerned. Apparently, they did not get any help from the school, but instead the school contributed to Ulf's radicalization. They then invited a friend over to talk some sense into Ulf. The result of this, according to Kathrin, was rather the opposite. Ulf's views should not be considered extreme, according to this friend, but rather the kind of views one could expect from a country boy. This was problematic for Kathrin, as her own political thinking and social circles had moved to the far left. Ulf and Kathrin began arguing about more or less everything, and their parents were unable to handle the domestic situation. This became a growing problem in relation to their advancement in their respective subcultures, not least concerning Ulf's growing fame. At last the situation reached a boiling point.

> Ulf and I had a huge fight about the Holocaust, whether it happened or not. Since Ulf is such a wordsmith, there was nothing I could do to counter him. I could just say that it had taken place… The fight became more and more intense, louder and louder, and finally I'm lying on the floor in the kitchen pushed into a corner and Ulf stands above me screaming, not hitting me, he would never do that, but screaming, screaming, screaming, and screaming at me. After this I left home, moved to a friend's place and a bit later I got a job far from home.

Kathrin was still in her early teens when she found the situation at home with Ulf unbearable and left. It was several years before they talked to each other again, and now they never talk politics. According to Kathrin, Ulf has made several attempts to leave the movement, not because he lost his ideological beliefs, but to build a decent life for himself, and later for his partners and children. It has always failed, because Ulf has never been left alone: either friends from the movement came with their allure or their enemies did. As an example, Kathrin mentioned that Anti-fascist Action [a left-wing militant organization] started a local campaign against Ulf when he moved back home to his parents with his former wife and child

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intent on starting a new life. No matter how hard he tried, he was either pulled or pushed back. All in all, Kathrin can see herself in her brother.

> … [he and I had a need] to show that things are wrong. That it just doesn't work as it is today and that there are other ways that will work and this should be apparent to all… where I see the climate threat, Ulf sees something else.

Kathrin then described how both of them have pushed their comfort zones far beyond what is considered normal in society, in general, and among their peers, in particular.

The First Classmate

Karin, who attended the same class as Ulf during their first year in high school, was active in a national movement against racism. She participated frequently in various activities to promote tolerance and co-existence. Karin grew up in the regional main town and did not know Ulf or many others from his rural municipality. However, she knew about him because he was already, according to Karin, a full-fledged neo-Nazi. She recalled how he appeared in skinhead style clothes at a gathering with Karin's organization, and described how intimidated she felt by his presence. This took place the summer before they met at high school. She said she had been very disappointed to find out that they had been placed in the same class.

Karin described Ulf as a strange combination of being the lonely Nazi and at the same time being quite funny and accepted by his peers from the countryside. He was, however, not well received by those from the larger town. According to Karin, Ulf's extreme views were constantly apparent and impossible to ignore. She also related with regret or even distress how the teachers failed to question Ulf's Nazi sympathies. She admitted that they may have had a different plan, but nothing she ever saw put into action. When Ulf wrote an essay in social science, denying the Holocaust, the teacher passed it with a low grade, without discussing the matter in front of the class. Finally, Karin and some of her peers in the tolerance-promoting

organization were given permission to organize a school day against racism and invited a speaker. She recalled how she had prepared to go to school that day.

> I remember that we had special t-shirts in this organization saying, "all equal, all different" and it felt good to put it on that day but I was also scared… I remember being in the auditorium and the speaker said all the right things and it felt so good to hear them. It was so liberating to see our teachers in silence, to hear someone saying what I had longed to hear them say… Then I don't quite remember what happened, but it was decided that there would be a debate between the speaker and Ulf. I'm not sure if the school approved it, but the debate was on. The speaker really made Ulf shut up, made him look small. It felt good, but it was also the first time I pitied him… Thinking about it… he was so small, young, thin, and just collapsed into his chair.

Karin remembered that Ulf left school after this debate and the trial; she did not reflect on why at the time, but later understood it was hard for Ulf to remain in school.

The Second Classmate

Maria knew about Ulf before they became classmates in high school, as their parents were acquaintances. She remembered Ulf as a regular guy, perhaps a bit shy, but quite willing to join in and be part of the social circles at hand. He was not with the popular groups, and had experienced some bullying. His friends were from the rural area, where he came from, but he was open to joining in elsewhere. Maria cannot remember any racist attitudes expressed by Ulf, and even less any neo-Nazi views before high school. Listening to so-called Viking rock was not uncommon where Ulf and Maria came from, and they both consumed that music; however, according to Maria, that was not necessarily related to their views or values. She was quite convinced that something had occurred during this period that had radicalized Ulf.

She described Ulf's steadily increasing racist ideas, which were harshly dealt with by teachers and classmates. Ulf was pushed into a corner and had to choose between admitting to being wrong or removing himself from the accepted social circles. Although these events were peripheral to Maria's everyday life, they came to her attention when the social sciences teacher divided the class into groups of three and assigned them to write one essay per group concerning the development of Swedish municipalities. Ulf, Maria, and a third person were assigned to the same group by chance, but they were instructed to write an essay on the Holocaust. Maria and this third person found the assignment more than strange; it was clear it was related to Ulf's views, and Maria wondered whether the teacher had thought the two of them could change Ulf's mind. It was impossible for the three of them to work together, and in the end Ulf wrote his part on his own, where he denied the Holocaust. After this event, Ulf was pushed aside even more, and few people chose to talk to him or even greet him. Maria told us that, at the time, she could still talk to him and remain civil. She recalled an anecdote a few years later when the two of them met in a pub, and Ulf told her she would be one of the few spared when they [the Nazis] came to power. Maria remembered finding it hard to see Ulf's social isolation; in her view, school officials had done very little to help Ulf reintegrate into the school community.

> …you know he was just an ordinary guy, while in the group he was just like anyone else. He was quite nice, tried to act in a friendly way. There was nothing special about him, what happened became special… that's how I would put it.

She concluded by stating that she understood at the time that it was impossible for Ulf to remain in the school or even in the town. She was not surprised when he left and later became a well-known neo-Nazi leader.

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Conclusion

Ulf's upbringing and the schools played a great role in his narrative; hence, we looked for informants from these environments. We could not find any relevant teachers, as they had passed away, but we did contact two classmates and his sister. It is striking how similar their perceptions were, despite the passage of more than 15 years. All of them played crucial, though different roles. The most vivid theme in the narrative, supported by all four informants, was *desolation*. While Ulf himself described having preferred being on his own, it is clear that he had few options. According to the other informants, Ulf did his utmost to find ways to be included. Is seems that Maria was one of the few who cared enough to treat Ulf well during his early stage of radicalization, while Karin joined the majority who turned their back on Ulf and used him as an example of why they needed to work against racism and extremism. Kathrin helped us understand that there was another, more important theme operating in this narrative – Ulf's black-and-white thinking. Ulf was brought up in an environment that offered few skills in settling conflicts and that was characterized by self-righteousness. The siblings learned early on that if people disagree with you, they are wrong and you should break off contact with them. Even if the siblings were surrounded by bigotry, it was an open question whether they would turn to the left or right of the political spectrum; the only thing that seemed prescribed was that they would choose an extreme view. The parents seem to have treated them equally, regardless of ideological standpoint; they cared more about helping their children avoid isolation. While Kathrin, who had a leftist worldview and belonged to an anarchist sub-culture, was of little interest to the school, Ulf was the opposite – the hateful other. Ulf came to school with the attributes needed to be radicalized, and the school provided the perfect environment for radicalization.

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Discussion and Conclusions

The case studies portray two rather different individuals who experienced two different upbringings. They were both raised in rural areas, but that is where most of the similarities end. Carl grew up surrounded by social unrest and in a troubled family. Ulf was brought up in an economically and mostly socially stable family, but his childhood was largely characterized by unsatisfied psychological needs. They shared having an *unsatisfied* desire to belong, but lacked the social skills needed to get them into a group or obtain a desirable position in groups that accepted them. While Carl spent time on his own, Ulf became "fan of the year" in an online community. Carl found his way into the skinhead movement by chance and soon made his first friends there. Ulf had a small group of friends who accepted him, but also saw him as an oddball. This small circle of friends rewarded Ulf when he began talking back to teachers and positioning himself as a racist. At the moment when they were radicalized, Ulf had a more genuine ideological conviction than Carl did. Whereas Carl was primarily looking for group belonging, Ulf had already made foes by positioning himself as a racist. Ulf was also looking for recognition and belonging, and the neo-Nazi movement was well suited to his black-and-white thinking. A key difference between the two stories lies in their outcomes. Carl succeeded in disengaging from the movement and has "built a new life." He is now *satisfied*, and this occurred through successful fateful moments. At these moments, Carl's disillusionment with the movement and his current life was balanced by the potential of having his needs satisfied elsewhere. He became committed to disengagement when his needs, formerly satisfied by the neo-Nazi movement, could be completely satisfied elsewhere at a relatively low cost. Boxing met his need for masculine and physical closeness, the teacher satisfied his desire for discussion and debate, and his mother stood by his side all the time. Given his low level of ideological conviction, Carl was willing to make the changes and pay the price of leaving the movement, confident that he would find a satisfactory new life outside it. Today, Carl can look back with perspective and use his own story as a tool to help other young men avoid being drawn into neo-Nazism and hate movements. Ulf, on the other hand,

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has made attempts to change his lifestyle and to create a decent life, but has not succeeded. He never really disengaged. Looking at his significant others and their perceptions of Ulf's life, we can observe a lack of formative dialogues with others. Moreover, we can identify fateful moments, where things could have changed but events did not turn out to be transformative. Though prepared to disengage, Ulf was not prepared to abandon his ideological convictions. We did find moments when his disillusionment with the neo-Nazi movement could have led to disengagement, but Ulf either was unable to support himself and his family economically or felt he was being pushed back by the provocations of the anti-fascist movement. The moment of disillusionment was not met with the satisfaction of either economic or psychological needs. In other words, for Ulf the wisdom of investing in disengagement was uncertain, as disengaging could very well mean ending up in a situation of poverty and loss of social recognition. Ulf's habitus was well anchored in the neo-Nazi milieu, even though he had lost faith in the movement. However, these moments of lost faith and disillusionments were never long enough to allow him to re-anchor in a new relational matrix.

Using different perspectives on the "same" storyline facilitates a more complex and nuanced understanding of the individual's social connections and relational matrix. In the two case studies, we have used the young adults' own stories to create a main narrative, then added three other voices and perspectives on this "main" story. There are, of course, many similarities between the stories told, as well as some discrepancies. For the most part, the differences are revealed in individuals' perceptions of their own role in the main narrative. Obviously, the disengagement process is highly complex and sometimes hard to grasp. An early observation when reading the material is that the key persons involved have identified a number of similar *fateful moments* in the two young adults' story about both the radicalization process and the disengagement process. If we are to understand how these moments occur and develop, we must position them in a *relational matrix*. Listening to the informants' different voices, it is clear that the fateful moments were also perceived in different ways. Although the perceptions have many similarities, focusing on the same "moment," they have played different roles and had different effects on the – at that time – young neo-Nazis' trajectory. In

Carl's case, we see dialogues and formative encounters with significant others, but in Ulf's case, we instead find a lack of such dialogues and encounters. In Carl's story, fateful moments are also turned into satisfactory new relational matrices, but in Ulf's case the fateful moments are not transformed into change.

What we have been able to show using these two case studies is the complexity of the relational matrices surrounding fateful moments. It is not only the subjects of radicalization or disengagement who recall these moments, but also their significant others. One important finding is that these significant others have downplayed their own roles and influence in these moments. We have studied two leading neo-Nazis, so it is no surprise that our informants remember them and recall their interactions with them. In Carl's case, however, it is somewhat surprising that they underestimated their role in his disengagement. The informants underestimating their roles during Ulf's radicalization is more understandable. In our view, it is not shame, guilt, or modesty that causes significant others to overlook their own importance. We argue that it is the complexity of the relational matrix itself that causes this. Carl and Ulf were obviously emotionally engaged to an extent that cannot be compared with their significant others' engagement, causing their significant others to conclude that they were more or less bystanders, with limited ability to influence the behavior or choices of these young men. This may even be a sound conclusion in relation to each case, but then only because the ability to alter the process is absorbed by the matrix and diminishes the individual's perception of influence. Based on this we will not offer any further conclusions. We do wish to argue, however, for the importance of continuing to study the relational matrices and their implications for fateful moments, as such research has the potential to generate some of the knowledge needed to prevent radicalization and promote disengagement.

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