Talk is silver and silence is gold? Assessing the impact of public disengagement from the extreme right on deradicalization

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between disengagement and deradicalization processes among 15 individuals who have left the neo-Nazi movement. The participants in this study were initially interviewed in 2015, and the interview process is still ongoing. In this particular study, the differences between individuals who disengaged publicly, that is, those who did not or could not conceal their engagement with the movement, and individuals who were able to and/or wanted to keep their past a secret, are studied. The analysis of the interviews has focused on the outcomes of revealed or concealed stigmatization, in particular in relation to how disengagement was or was not followed by deradicalization. The findings suggest that those who disengaged publicly followed a clear path from disengagement to deradicalization, whereas those who tried to conceal their former involvement in the neo-Nazi movement showed a more complex pattern. Among the latter are individuals who are not yet deradicalized. However, they want to live "ordinary" lives and to have a family, free from fear that neighbours or people at work will stigmatize them and dissociate themselves from them. It is also clear that these participants were to a greater extent less satisfied with life in general. The findings also stress the ethical problems involved in using former neo-Nazis as public examples, as this traps them into a former neo-Nazi identity, thus creating new trauma.

Introduction

There is a growing body of research interested in understanding disengagement processes and pathways to deradicalization. The need for a more solid theoretical basis for analysing these processes has been indicated, as has the need for more empirically driven studies that compare individuals' disengagement processes (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014; Horgan et. al.,

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2017; Koehler, 2016). In this study, we analyse the relationship between the disengagement process and the deradicalization process in 15 individuals, all of whom have disengaged from the neo-Nazi movement but only some of whom have deradicalized. The participants in this study are part of a larger long-term research project focusing on the life trajectories into and out of neo-Nazi organizations, i.e. contemporary groups and movements with an outspoken national socialist ideology. They were initially interviewed in 2015, and the interview process is still ongoing. Some findings from the research project have already been published (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020). This study is partly retrospective, i.e. refers to interviews about the participant's past; and partly based on observations of ongoing processes, i.e. in the course of our research programme several of our participants are still undergoing processes of deradicalization.

In this particular study, we scrutinize the difference between individuals who disengaged publicly, that is, who did not or could not conceal their engagement with the movement, and individuals who were able and/or wanted to keep their past a secret. In the previous part of the research project, we observed that processes of stigmatization are a vital force that drive the radicalization process (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020). The vast majority of our participants were stigmatized because of their upbringing, i.e., they came from families exhibiting unacceptable social behaviours and/or values from the perspective of their close surrounding communities, i.e. neighbours, teachers, etc. In addition, many participants were also subjected to physical and psychological abuse. This made it challenging for them to fit in among their schoolmates, a situation described as *primary stigmatization*. To hide their primary stigmatization, they actively developed behaviours that could conceal this stigmatization, leading to their *secondary stigmatization*. By becoming neo-Nazis, they not only found a sense of belonging and peers but also overcame their deprecated role as a deprived child. Instead, they became *the hateful other*, someone who was seen as something awful but also as powerful. Stigmatization continued to play a role throughout their careers as neo-Nazis and – as we will examine more closely in this study – played a key role in how the disengagement process took place. Whether or not they had the ability to choose to reveal or

conceal their past as neo-Nazis, the interviewees have all been forced to come to terms with the stigma of being a former neo-Nazi. In this study, we analyse the outcomes of revealed or concealed stigmatization in relation to how disengagement was or was not followed by deradicalization.

This article builds on earlier research on disengagement and deradicalization from neo-Nazi movements. Through the analysis of 15 interviews with former neo-Nazis, two categories were formulated based on how the individuals handled stigmatization. Using these categories as a starting point, the aim was to investigate the following question:

- How do confessional versus concealing strategies relate to and influence deradicalization?

In the following section, the relevant research is presented and discussed. This review is followed by sections on theoretical and methodological questions.

Survey of the research

Koehler (2016) argues that research on violent extremism has focused mainly on the radicalization process, and less attention has been paid to why people leave. Koehler stresses the importance of developing theories on disengagement from violent extremism. This requires an understanding of what it means to reintegrate into society. Koehler states:

> Oftentimes, programs and public observations ignore or downplay the equal importance of finding a new identity and life in the non-radical society, which is also why the use of former extremists as counsellors only makes sense for a short period of time, until this activity becomes a new barrier for building a new life without any ties to the extremist past. (Koehler 2016, p.80)

Today, there is a growing field of research on the process of disengagement from violent extremist organizations (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014; Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Kimmel, 2018; Koehler, 2016; Sieckelinck et.al., 2019; Simi, Blee, DeMichele & Windisch, 2017; Windisch et al., 2017). There is also a growing number of qualitative interview studies on people leaving neo-Nazi movements in Sweden and Norway (Bjørgo, 1997a, b; Bjørgo, 1998; Bjørgo & Horgan, 2009; Kimmel, 2007; Kimmel, 2018; Mattsson & Johansson, 2020).

Many researchers distinguish between *deradicalization* and *disengagement,* concluding that deradicalization with respect to ideological conviction is not necessary for disengagement from violent extremist movements (Horgan, 2008). *Deradicalization* implies not only physically leaving the movement but also relearning how to belong to society and developing a new identity. In addition, the individuals are also prepared to reject their ideological convictions and leave their engagement in a violent extremist movement behind them. Deradicalization implies a transformation of the individual's world view (Windisch et. al., 2016). Thus, the life put on hold during the radicalization phase needs to be reactivated during the crucial period of disengagement.

Consequently, a substantial portion of the research on exit processes focuses on the difficulties involved in leaving a violent extremist organization. The results from several studies show that exit processes are *complex and multifaceted* and feature a high degree of ambivalence. Leaving can be a highly ambiguous process. Research has also shown that role conflicts and role strain for example can increase an individual's willingness to leave a terrorist organization (Altier, Boyle & Horgan, 2020; Sieckelinck et.al., 2019). Neo-Nazi groups appear to generate a core of emotions that linger even after departure from such a movement. The authors describe this as an addiction to feelings of hate. There are a number of difficulties involved in exit processes. Among these are feelings of guilt about leaving the movement, ideological relapses, and strong ties to members. Residual emotional and cognitive effects often have an impact on the exit process (Simi et.al., 2017). Friends outside

the movement can reinforce the decision to leave and provide support in the exit process. Finding a new partner and forming an intimate relationship outside the movement can also facilitate exit (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Simi et, al., 2017).

Another strong finding in this research field is that different forms of *disillusionment* play a central role in the disengagement process. Disillusionment with the behaviour of leaders is a common reason for leaving an extremist organization (Simi & Windisch, 2020; Windisch, Ligon & Simi, 2019). Individuals start losing faith when the group fails to live up to its claimed identity. A growing disappointment with the obvious gap between ideology and actual behaviour is a common factor in separation from these types of organizations. (Barelle, 2015; Harris et.al., 2018). In addition, physical and psychological burnout – in particular regarding the use of violence in a movement – are also frequently cited as reasons for leaving. In a systematic literature review of disengagement processes, Windisch and his colleagues (2017) show that, in a third of the studies, a central factor is disapproval of violence and, in more than half of the studies, disillusionment is a factor (see also Barelle, 2015).

Support from friends outside the movement, starting a family, or finding a job are often found to be effective push factors. Decisions to disengage are made in a social and cultural context. *Significant others play a key role* in bringing about behavioural change among former neo-Nazis (Bjørgo, 2009; Kimmel, 2007, 2018; Mattsson & Johansson, 2018; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011; Moghaddam, 2005; Sageman, 2004; Sikkens et.al., 2017; Rae, 2012; Roy, 2007). For their part, *pull factors* often include finding new and returning to old friendships (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Simi et al., 2017; Windisch et al., 2017). When other roles and positions become interesting, there is also increased motivation to develop new career paths and develop fewer toxic relationships (Barrelle, 2015, cf. Gielen, 2018). Violent extremist movements usually put "normal and ordinary" life on hold. The skills gained as well as the emotions experienced are now useless (Mattsson & Johansson, 2018). However, when the social links to neo-Nazi groups dissolve, plausibility structures with less hostile, aggressive, and violent behavioural patterns are made possible (Aho, 1994). It has also been recognized that former members of violent extremist groups may play a vital role in both

preventing engagement and encouraging disengagement as well as informing policymakers on how to improve preventive efforts against extremism (Clubb, 2014; Scrivens, et al., 2019; Gaudette et al., 2020).

The aim of this article is to shed further light on the complex relationship between disengagement and deradicalization and to contribute new conceptual tools to this field of research. The article's theoretical contribution lies in its intimate empirical and conceptual approach to how former neo-Nazis deal with stigmatization and how they develop different strategies to reintegrate into society.

Theoretical and conceptual perspectives

To analyse the transcribed interviews, we mainly adopted phenomenological and biographical perspectives. However, we will also discuss the key role of confession and of therapeutically informed ideas of exit processes out of the neo-Nazi movement. Whereas the phenomenological approach will help us to gain insights from participants' narratives, theories of confession will facilitate an understanding of how the participants handle societal pressures to conform and adapt to societal norms.

Following the participants' narratives of their biographical development also means engaging with questions of identity, emerging adulthood, and turning points. Using Giddens's concept of self-identity, we approach the narratives of disengagement and the individual biography in terms of the self as reflexively understood by the person (Giddens, 1984, 1991). This means that we are studying how our participants relate to and integrate events, responses from others, and societal norms in their attempts to reintegrate into society. When trying to make sense of their lives and to come to terms with their choices and acts, they also construct a certain timeline and biographical narrative. To analyse these processes, we will both zoom in on certain *turning points* – as explained by the participants – and zoom out and discuss how identity is developed and restructured in relation to *significant others*, societal norms, and

psychological and policy-oriented ideas of how a 'sound and healthy' disengagement process should evolve.

In zooming in on the disengagement process, we will look more closely at key moments and decisions. The concept of *turning points* is used in life course theory to refer to key events and transformations in life, such as marriage and employment (Walters, 2018). In this article, we will instead use the concept of *fateful moments*. Fateful moments are "times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroad in his existence; or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences" (Giddens, 1991, p. 113). Modifying this definition somewhat, we argue that fateful moments consist of a chain of interrelated events and acts that successively lead to a dramatic and significant change in life. Most of our participants were in what is called *emerging adulthood* when they began to disengage (Arnett, 2014; Wood et.al. 2018). According to the theory of emerging adulthood, this period stretches between adolescence and adulthood. During this time, individuals start to develop the capacity to become self-sufficient – to explore their identity and to try out different lifestyles – and to gradually assume more adult roles and responsibilities. In contrast to this, our participants usually have to reconstruct and repair their lives in order to gradually enter 'normal' life again.

In the case of disengagement from violent extremist movements, reconstructing a life and establishing the fundamentals of a functioning lifestyle mean confronting one's past and "sins". As a part of this process, it is common for ex-neo-Nazis to confess their past and seek redemption. Using the concept of confession in a Foucauldian way, we will zoom out and try to understand how the participants adapt to and deal with societal norms and therapeutic ideas of a sustainable disengagement process (Foucault, 1979). Besley (2005) describes confession as follows:

> Confession is a deep-seated cultural practice in the west that involves declaration and disclosure, acknowledgement or admission of a fault, weakness or crime and is expected to be the 'truth' that discloses one's actions and private feelings or opinions. In

confessing our selves, an *other* (real or virtual) is required as an audience that will hear, understand, possibly judge and punish and maybe accept and forgive as they reflect back to us who we are (Ibid, p. 369ff).

Following Foucault, Besley (2005) argues that confession is a form of self-mastery. This means that the person engages actively and reflexively in constituting himself or herself as an ethical subject. In this sense, confession becomes an intrinsic and central part of the reconfiguration and reconstruction of a sustainable self and lifestyle. Confession also becomes part of engaging with the challenges of emerging adulthood. In confessing, the individual is subjectified by another. This also involves that the more intimate regions of personal life coming under scrutiny and being exposed to normative regulation. When confessing, the individual has to follow certain cultural rules and norms, and gradually modify and adapt their story to certain conventions regarding how to talk about disengagement and deradicalization. Consequently, confessions have the potential of transforming the individual's self-identity, and to recreate the individual.

There are possible connections between Foucault's theory of confession and the literature on desistance (cf. Bazemore, 1998). In this literature, confessions are described in terms of *redemption scripts* (Maruna et.al., 2006). These scripts are not written in a vacuum but are instead developed in close encounters with significant others. Being able to tell one's story and to confess clearly works as a way of dealing with trauma, guilt and identity (cf. Gadd, 2006). The literature on confession and that on desistance both emphasize the importance of the narrative and on the possibility of rewriting and reworking one's identity. In this article, we will closely examine how these processes manifest themselves in the disengagement of 15 former activists in the neo-Nazi movement.

Research design

The study is a part of a larger research effort seeking to provide knowledge about trajectories of entry into and exit from neo-Nazi subcultures, milieus and organizations. As noted by Horgan (2011), how interviews with former terrorist have been conducted is underreported, a fact that may compromise the validity of the collected data and that risks perpetuating weak theoretical development in the field. Thus, we will take some space to clarify who we have approached and interviewed and how and when. For this article, we selected the *life biographies* of 15 former activists in the neo-Nazi movement in Sweden and the US. The interviewing started in 2015 and is ongoing. For this sample, the precondition was that each of the participants had disengaged from the movement and remained disengaged and that we had a mixture of individuals who had and had not deradicalized. In this context, deradicalization is understood as either cognitive deradicalization and/or behavioural deradicalization, in line with Neuman's perspective on cognitive and behavioural radicalization (Neuman, 2013). Some of the participants, as revealed below, are still ideologically convinced but not engaged, and these are easy to distinguish from those who have deradicalized. In the latter case, we find those who publicly refute neo-Nazism and racism; these we consider to be both cognitively and behaviourally deradicalized. Others disengaged and turned to other forms of criminal behaviour or to other ideas that uphold radical, often violent, behaviour. This group we do not consider to be behaviourally deradicalized, even if they often disavow neo-Nazism and thus are cognitively deradicalized from it. Out of the 15 individuals, 9 have been open about their pasts and 6 have chosen to conceal their pasts in the neo-Nazi movement. To confirm that our participants have disengaged and, in some cases, also deracialized, we used the following criteria:

- Have talked about their past in the neo-Nazi movement openly in the media and acknowledged it as regrettable.

- Disappeared from the on-line and real-life neo-Nazi forums they were previously active in at least 24 months ago and when contacted by the researcher stated that they have disengaged. At least one individual still active in the movement has verified this.

- Have been identified by active members or former members of the movement as disengaged. The researcher followed up on this by contacting the individual. This was then confirmed by at least one individual living in close relationship (partner) with the individual.

- Individuals who were active at least 10 years ago and at the time were public but have not been heard from since were identified, and they themselves confirmed their disengagement.

The participants were identified in multiple ways, but always using the logic of snowball sampling. Those whose disengagement is public were contacted by e-mail or social media, and these individuals recommended their former peers who have not been public about their past. Some of the participants contacted one of the authors, who is well known for his comments on the far right in Swedish news reports. Other participants were identified in on-line forums and contacted by the authors when they seemed to have disengaged from those platforms. None of the participants were active in the same neo-Nazi circle at the same time, but most of them knew about each other during the time they were active in the movement. We made sure that none of them where in conflict with each other and that none of them were under criminal investigation. For ethical reasons, we will not provide individual details about organizations, ages and when they were active; they were all active in the violent circles of neo-Nazi organizations in the period ranging from the mid-1990s until 2012. They were between 14 and 25 years of age when they became engaged in the movement and their time in the movement lasted between three and eight years. The 15 participants constitute the total number of participants to whom we have access and who fit the criteria for the study. All but three participants have been interviewed multiple times during the study period. The interviews in this sample were individual interviews conducted with one or both researchers

present. All the interviews were semi-structured and based on questions about the participant's trajectories from early childhood to the present.

The average interview lasted slightly more than 1.5 hours. First and foremost, with regard to the content value of interviews of this kind, knowledge about our participants' pasts is not produced by asking them direct questions and expecting direct answers (Holstein & Gubrium 2004). We recognize that the individual is constantly processing his or her past in relation to current needs and contexts. The sociologist Barbara Adam describes this as follows: "The past is continuously recreated and reformulated into a different past from the standpoint of the emergent past" (Adam, 1990, p. 39). The fact that our participants are reconstructing their pasts does not mean that their statements are untrue. Their individual narratives reflect their social environment and collective values and norms concerning how the past can and cannot be talked about. Moreover, we understand the collection of narratives from our participants in the context of a larger interwoven narrative on how young adults disengage from the neo-Nazi movement.

Through thematic analysis and comparison of individual and repeated narratives from multiple individual interviews, we detected recurring themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes and patterns led us to conduct further interviews and to set up focus groups. The starting point was a set of in-depth interviews focused on remorse for prior violent and other criminal deeds. We found that our participants had a tendency to neglect their own agency as perpetrators (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020). They did not mind sharing violent events that they had been part of, but they always understood and explained their own actions as determined by the circumstances rather than by their intentions. This is more or less how most of us relate to our undesirable behaviour; in social psychology, this is known as *the fundamental error of attribution* (Jones & Harries, 1967). To reach beyond these social mechanisms, we had our participants talk about their violent pasts with each other so that we could obtain a better understanding of individual agency in the exercise of violence.

During this process, we noticed recurring patterns that distinguished individuals who made their disengagement public from those who quietly left the movement and had never

before shared their narrative. By public disengagement, we mean disengagement where the individual talks openly, in newspapers, in lectures or on social media, about his or her past. We also noticed that those who shared their past publicly had a clear tendency to alter major parts of their narratives across our series of interviews. In this sense, we claim that our research is based not only on the interviews but also on our observations of an ongoing process of deradicalization among some, but not all, of our participants. In this study, we have chosen to scrutinize the differing patterns between those who are involved in an ongoing public disengagement process and those who are hiding their past in order to understand the mechanisms within the disengagement process that might sustain a subsequent deradicalization process.

A study of this kind is always sensitive from an ethical point of view and challenging in the sense of gaining access to participants. We have spent many years building up our access to the field. It is particularly challenging to access participants who are not open about their past and in some cases are also still ideologically radicalized. By carefully building reputations as serious, non-judgmental, empathic researchers who never disclose information that may compromise our participants, we have managed to interview individuals who have never before shared their stories, sometimes not even with their own families. The participants have also been well informed about the purpose of our research, their right to remain anonymous and to abort any interview. As the research design developed to include focus groups, new consent was obtained by explaining to each of them who would be part of the focus group and underlining how important it was that none of them disclosed information about the other participants. During the focus group interviews, we asked them to refrain from being active on social media or revealing by any means where they were and who they were meeting with in order to safeguard the integrity of each and every one of them. The research programme is fully compliant with the ethical standards of the Swedish Research Council (*Vetenskapsrådet*, 2017) and has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. All our participants' names have been changed to aliases or omitted, as have place names, institutions, or any other information that might identify our participants.

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Findings

In the first part of this section, we will give an account of those who have revealed their pasts, followed by an account of the concealment group under a new heading. All of the participants share the experience of being caught up in a fateful moment when they had to choose if they should disengage or remain engaged. These moments arose differently for each of them and consisted of events such as the end of a relationship, the death of a close friend or family member, a betrayal by peers in the movement, and exposure to ultra-violence and hospitalization. The point is that these fateful moments occurred at a point in time when our participants had already become disillusioned and that the combination of disillusionment and personal crisis initiated their disengagement. In this section, we scrutinize the patterns that developed from those fateful moments up until the present moment.

Becoming destigmatized

Although our participants' stories of disengagement show considerable variation – concerning fateful moments, the importance of significant others and psychological motives – it is also possible to identify common patterns and trajectories. In this section, we will focus on the long process of leaving a neo-Nazi movement and becoming destigmatized. There are often different reasons why a person decides to disengage and reintegrate into society and to develop a more "normal" lifestyle. Research has shown that significant others, such as partners, relatives, children, and professionals, play a key role – both as motivating factors and support – in the disengagement process (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020). Often, it is also possible to identify some key turning points or fateful moments. The participants are often quite aware of when these moments occurred, and they can vividly describe how they suddenly realized that they had to change their lives. Reaching these kinds of turning points and making radical decisions constitute only the initial stage of the disengagement process, however. The greater part of the disengagement process involves a long and arduous struggle to become destigmatized. As mentioned earlier, many of our participants have a long history

of lecturing and talking about their experiences of being a part of a neo-Nazi movement. In this section, we will zoom in on some key examples of this kind of confessional activity.

Jesper was hospitalized after being brutally beaten. His violent and extreme lifestyle had reached an end. He describes how two persons – who supported him but also questioned his lifestyle – came to play key roles in his disengagement process. This moment is also how he met his girlfriend and decided to leave the movement. However, it was only the beginning of a long process of redemption and societal engagement. He describes his feelings of chaos, fear, guilt, and shame and his need for support.

> Over one year's time, I got support from [name of organization omitted for ethical reasons]. I went to a psychologist and to different meetings. I also met with a priest and told him about my losses and having missed many things. Gradually, I started to feel better. I regained my self-confidence. I also realized that I had to stop others from doing all the bad things I had done and exposed others to. Through [name of organization omitted for ethical reasons], I started to work with clients and became involved in lecturing at schools about the consequences of becoming attracted to right-wing movements. This was my way of giving back to society, my penitence for all the shit I had done, working actively with preventing other kids from ending up where I had been.

Coming out as an ex-Nazi is one way of dealing with stigmatization. Those who use this strategy do not need to hide and seek self-protection. They have confessed, and through their persistent engagement in social and preventive work, they have started their journey towards regaining the trust and confidence of others. Reintegrating into society is a time-consuming and self-healing process. Jesper also describes how he processed and dealt with different emotions, his psychological distress and his feelings of guilt.

Sofie has a somewhat different story. She disengaged in 2013, when her boyfriend left her, but after two years of anxiety about being recognized and defined as a Nazi, she decided

to do something drastic. Since people still talked about her as a Nazi and spread rumours about her, she decided to contact a local journalist.

> Then, two years went by. I just kept quiet. I just carried this load. In 2015, after two years, I went public. Suddenly I was in a situation where I was pressed to do something, because people knew that he had left me. They did not know my position, "is she still active or not". Finally, I was forced to do something, as one of my friends showed me a message where someone wrote, "My children are not going to play with those Nazi kids". Suddenly it became clear to me that many people thought that I was still active in the movement, and my children were being affected negatively. I contacted a journalist, someone I had debated with endless hours /…/ When I got that text message I called this journalist and told her, "Let's do the interview". I did the interview for the local newspaper. The interview is very detailed and straightforward; I considered it well written. When it was published, everything just exploded, and I was the only woman talking about this. All the newspapers wanted to do interviews.

All of a sudden, Sofie became famous. She wrote a book and began lecturing about her former life and her path back to society. Handling stigmatization through creating an identity as an EX is a common strategy.

Becoming an ex-Nazi is often a long and complex process. In her iconic book *Becoming an Ex – The Process of Role Exit* (1988), Helen Rose Ebaugh describes the *hangover identity*, that is, the part of an "old" identity that an ex-Nazi, for example, must confront and then reconcile with a new self-concept. This process is complex and challenging. Having a career as a lecturer and mentor for potential recruits to neo-Nazi movements means that one must continuously process and reflect upon one's past.

Niklas has been engaged in preventive work for several years. He has also lectured frequently about his life in the neo-Nazi movement.

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People talk about an Exit, but what is that? Is it related to when one leaves an organization behind, or is it something else? You leave a whole lifestyle, and somehow you start to build a new life. So, when is the exit final and done with? I would like to suggest that… I often try to compare this with the abuse of alcohol, for example. Somehow, I will always have to live with this. Always carry around these experiences. Therefore, I am not totally done with the Exit before leaving all this behind. In terms of opinions, it has taken a long time to leave the ideas behind me. Still, I am often out there talking about my life and myself, and this is probably a part of the Exit process, I would say.

What Niklas describes is clearly a hangover identity. In his work and commitment to helping young people disengage from violent and extremist organizations, he constantly has to face his past and confront what he has done. Niklas also confesses that he has had problems reformulating his opinions and expunging his past commitment to neo-Nazi ideas.

Carl has also worked for several years with preventive initiatives. He has lectured on several hundred occasions about his life in the neo-Nazi movement. However, recently, he has refused to continue his life as an ex-Nazi.

I feel that I do not any longer want to be an ex-Nazi. I want to stop thinking about the past. When I talk about this or give life talks, I sometimes get flashbacks, and it is tiring to think about things I have done in the past. I would never use violence today. Even if someone would attack me, hit me, I would not use violence, probably. I do not know if I would defend myself. After leaving the movement, I had no problems using violence. If someone jumps me, I would defend myself. However, I do not want this anymore; it is unthinkable. I wish this had been the case from the beginning, instead of now that I'm 30 years old.

Violence has become unthinkable for Carl. He has also come to a decision to leave his ex-Nazi identity behind. He no longer wants to be defined as an ex-Nazi. It is time to move on and to finally end the disengagement process.

Gabriella is working for the American exit organization Life after Hate. When presenting herself, she emphasizes self-actualization and the importance of becoming a better person. For many years, she was active in a violent white supremacy organization. She talks at length about the everyday and constant presence of violence and how she beat up and physically harmed other people. She has now worked for several years in preventive social work, trying to help people leave violent and extremist organizations.

> Well ... Ah, shh... I am ... Gabriella. I am working for a very unique organization. Living a life I never thought I would live, a very different person than I was when I was younger. I'd like to think I'm a much better person than I used to be. But also very aware that growth never stops. So, every day I try to be – better. Even if it is just a tiny bit better than the person I was the day before. And unless we're going to sit here for a day, that's probably as good as it's gonna get.

In this section, we have focused on our participants' attempts to become destigmatized. Nine of our participants described similar disengagement processes. They were redefining themselves through acts of confession and storytelling and through mediating their experiences and engaging in preventive initiatives. The turning point or fateful moment that led to their disengagement was merely a starting point for a long and often painful recreation of the self. Gabriella stresses the importance of a moral journey, becoming a better person. Niklas notes that it takes time to leave all the ideas and the lifestyle behind and move on. These kinds of hangover identities are not uncommon (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020). Lecturing about one's life and retelling the same story again and again requires commitment and the courage to confront and process acts of violence and sometimes even crimes

committed when one was part of the movement. The confessional process involves both redemption and a struggle to construct an ethical subject.

Concealing stigmatization

Six of our participants took a different path to disengagement than the participants in the previous section. They all share the experience of concealing their past engagement, and their history in the movement is unknown to their current friends, colleagues and, in some cases, even to their families. However, they do not have the same reasons for concealing their past.

Lucia entered the movement after she had turned 30 and thus was well established in the community as a hardworking and respected fellow citizen. She was initially ideologically convinced and radicalized in online communities. As she entered the movement, a neo-Nazi party, she served mainly as an online editor and writer for a web forum of this party. She was very careful to avoid revealing her identity and often used aliases. There was, however, an expectation that she would take part in rallies and other public events, a circumstance that contributed to her loss of faith in the movement, as she noticed how her engagement negatively impacted her social life. She was threatened with expulsion from a Viking re-enactment society because of her engagement, and she was in constant fear that her workmates would learn that she was a Nazi. The first crucial event that led to her disengagement was when Lucia agreed to give a public speech that was recorded and distributed on the Internet. She already had some doubts regarding her ideological convictions but felt compelled to give the speech. Afterward, she watched the speech as it was uploaded on the Web.

> I saw the speech and just thought: "What the fuck am I doing?". I didn't want to do this in the first place. I just wrote a speech [that she did not believe in]. /…/ I knew what they wanted to hear and then I realized that this is not me, who I am. It is hard to explain but somehow there and then… you know it was my life, so it

was goodbye. Or rather, I didn't leave just like that; it was more step by step. I sneaked out the back door, more or less.

Lucia was unable to cope with the neo-Nazi image of herself when she saw the film clip. She was hearing words that she did not believe in, but worse than that was that she saw what she feared other people would see: a neo-Nazi leader. Such an association threatened to turn her private life upside down. She decided to sneak out, with her only strategy being to hope and pray that no one would out her.

…really, after I decided to disengage, I have just been waiting for the bomb to be dropped. You know… people will find out who I used to be. Maybe some of them did know but said nothing./…/ to discuss these matters [being a neo-Nazi] at work, you know… It would… well it is obvious that people do not accept these ideas and I wanted to keep my job. For a while, I became a university student; then I got myself a different job. /…/ It was only then [after getting a new job about a year after leaving the movement] that it became even more important that nobody should know about my past. At work, it was ok because it was far away from home, but in my home neighbourhood, I was afraid to be recognized since I had been visible there [as a neo-Nazi]… but yes, no one has ever said anything. However, I am still just waiting for someone to out me. That's why I have a different name today.

Lucia's only confrontation between her Nazi past and the broader community came when the chairperson of the Viking re-enactment organization threatened expulsion because she was a neo-Nazi. She claimed that she was no longer in the movement and was excused. As she prepared to leave the movement, as the web editor, she erased all the material on the website that contained her name or pictures of herself. However, it is still easy to find links on the Internet that reveal her past engagement, but to do so one must know her old and her new

name. Lucia left the neo-Nazi movement and has hidden herself in broad daylight, hoping that her past will not catch up with her.

John disengaged from the movement in his early 20s after being active for approximately five years. He still maintains the ideological convictions of the movement but lives a totally different life today. He is nearing middle age and is a father and husband with a steady job. He left the movement because he found his peers to be unreliable and without ideological orientation.

> I just did not find my peers to be solid friends. I can tell you that most of these people [within the movement] had no ideology at all. No conviction. Only hell raisers. I did not know what I wanted back then [as he disengaged]. Or, yes, quite extreme things./…/ There are those who want us gone. People who think like I do. When you feel threatened, I guess you will think about a solution. I thought a lot, had many ideas, but nothing that I will share. /…/ My ideas have not changed at all, really. There is something [referring to the conspiracy towards white people] that is up against me, you know. However, my priorities have changed. You know, I do not have the desire to enact my convictions any longer. I have other things in my life that are so much more important to me now. Therefore, I believe that it is just people without solid priorities in life… extremists should just get their act together and move on with their lives.

> *Interviewer*: And if you did not have other important things in your life, would you still be in the movement?

> *John*: I think that I would. If you feel miserable and have a sense that you have nothing to lose, then I think you would join.

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John married and had a family after he left the movement. Therefore, his family is not the reason why he disengaged, nor does his family prevent him from maintaining his ideological convictions, a matter he was not keen to talk about. It is, however, the reason why he will not engage in the movement today and why he does not share his past engagement or his convictions with other people. He has no desire to risk his family becoming stigmatized.

Richard used to be an extremely violent neo-Nazi and is open about his attraction to the violence and the fellowship of the movement. When he contemplates his past, he describes himself as a depressed young man without the capacity to empathize but with a great need for belonging to counteract his depression. Being violent and an outlaw sustained his sense of closeness to his peers. Suddenly, however, he found his skinhead gang had dissolved.

> I did not develop any empathy until I had my own children. Before that, I saw people as bags made out of meat walking around. /…/ I fucking believe that I enjoyed being depressed, in one way or another I really enjoyed being depressed and feeling gloomy. Strange isn't? /…/ For me, it could have been any sort of religion or anything else for that matter [instead of the skinhead gang]. So when the gang had sort of dissolved, I just carried on and joined [an outlaw motorcycle club (OMC); name removed for ethical reasons]. So from being a neo-Nazi I went on to start dealing drugs with the wogs and dagos and hung out with them instead. /…/ It was all about being together.

He met the girl who was to become his wife, and his life changed instantly. He was already burned out from his criminal lifestyle. Fearing for his life, evading the police and committing violence around the clock had finally taken its toll on him. However, he had nowhere to go and lacked relationships outside the gang. He describes his life as drifting from one way of belonging to another.

I got this chick knocked up, you know. She lived in the south of Sweden so I, you could say, took the opportunity to move there and changed my name. /…/ I just changed [once more] and it is still about belonging. So, I mean, yes, it is still the fucking same today. I hunt with the lads and hang out at the shooting range with the lads.

Richard does not want to share his past with his current friends for the obvious reason that it would be stigmatizing. Being a former neo-Nazi among immigrants in an OMC was unthinkable. Being a former neo-Nazi and a former OMC criminal in a hunting club would also be unthinkable. He has very few regrets about his past. As he sees it, he did what he did because he was who he was and then moved on. For him, each transformation has demanded that the past be hidden but not regretted.

I am who I am because of all that. You know, it is not a coincidence that I work as a supervisor today. I gained so much experience from back in the day. Therefore, I have no regrets. You should know that there were times that were so much fucking fun as well. However, yeah, there are some things that I regret… maybe I shouldn't have beaten up this or that guy as much as I did.

Richard mainly sees his past as an experience that fits well into how he lives today and is not overly concerned about his former brutality. Today, he sees himself as a loving and caring father and husband who benefited from his past but does not want it to resurface. Moreover, he fears that the past may catch up with him.

Then, things like this [his past] may come back and bite you in the ass. All of a sudden, I may bump into them when I'm out with my kids. You know just walking around with my child in my arms and then it may come back and bite me in the ass. I'm so fucking glad that I threw my phone in the river, changed

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my name and moved far away. /…/ Things might still come back. If I visit [the name of a well-known amusement park in his hometown, deleted for ethical reasons] with my kids, I could literally be stabbed in the back for some shit I did in my past.

Tommy was active in a neo-Nazi organization for approximately 5 years until he was a few years past 20. He grew up in a family with a negative reputation in a small municipality. He was used to being looked down on from an early age. As the youngest of four brothers, he always felt that his path was set for him by his siblings. The way that neighbours, teachers and others viewed his brothers was soon the way they viewed him. As an active neo-Nazi, he was often seen in his hometown and region handing out flyers and taking part in demonstrations. He was also on television as a Nazi several times. This was already somewhat embarrassing to him by then, not because of his beliefs but simply because he was shy. All of his siblings were active in the movement, and most of his friends were too. Getting out of the movement was not anything he reflected on—it happened unintentionally.

Well, what can I say? It just sort of ebbed away. I started bodybuilding, doing that more and more. It became my major interest, so I just skipped the rallies and so on. They called me and asked why, and I just said that, you know, I'm not interested. Then I met my girlfriend and then I just let go of it. I became a different Tommy sort of. I got myself a new identity. So, I didn't care any longer. /…/ I got a great outcome from my training and then when you start to do it [taking steroids] you cannot be in a movement that does not accept it. /…/ I became the Tommy that I was before the movement. /…/ [by growing large muscles] you get new people looking at you, you are seen differently. Then you are identified in that way instead.

It is clear that Tommy followed his older brothers, first into the movement and then, when they became bodybuilders, into the gym. All of his life he has accepted the identity conferred on him by others, and he is comfortable with that. From his experience, life is not something you make plans for; it just happens, and you become who you become.

Mathilda had a relatively short but intense engagement in the movement as a teenager. She came from a deprived family that was considerably psychosocially disadvantaged. She was a rowdy student and was soon expelled from all non-stigmatized environments, relegated to a special teaching unit with similar peers and not welcomed in any other social circles. All her peers in the special teaching unit were active neo-Nazis, and she soon joined in and became an outspoken and violent neo-Nazi. She was selected to take part in a social educational intervention intended to encourage disengagement from skinhead gangs. During this intervention, she had the first opportunity during her teenage years to be with peers who were not stigmatized, and the intervention as such was designed to be non-stigmatizing. This did not change her beliefs but sparked a will to be part of a different social setting than the skinhead gang.

> [during and after the intervention] it is not like I stopped being a Nazi. It is a very long process to change your thinking. However, it made me part of a different environment, and I dared to be a different person. You know when people see you as something, I mean if you have a role and then change, people will still see the person they saw before and you will remain who you were even if you'd rather not. It is really hard for one single individual to just change. [during the intervention] I tried out a new role and was helped back into a regular class. /…/ [after a while] I changed my social circles completely; I moved [to a different town], started to go to a different school, where I did not know anyone. Therefore, it came naturally that I could choose to be someone else, to take on another role.

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Mathilda also contacted the social welfare department in her municipality and explained her situation, at home and with the gang, and she was given the opportunity to move to a foster family until she became independent. Having learned through experience that she could be someone else, she managed to conceal her old neo-Nazi identity and presented herself as a different person. The new Mathilda took on the identity of a teenager who cared about her studies and did not like to be rowdy. She explains that it took her a long time to convince herself that she was different. It was only after almost ten years, when she entered university for the first time, that she believed that she was no longer playing a role and that she did not feel hatred any longer. Today, she can talk about her past with people who she completely trusts, but not with anyone else.

Four individuals in this group have deradicalized on a behavioural level but have not completely deradicalized on a cognitive level. John still adheres to ideas and values from his period in the movement and would readily join again if his current family situation were to dissolve. Richard is no longer ideologically convinced per se but is still living with the imminent threat from his former violent lifestyle and, moreover, does not seem to have much remorse over what he has done. He still enjoys his memories of violence from his former life as a neo-Nazi and a criminal. In this sense, he is not behaviourally deradicalized. Tommy is a different case. He appears to have little control over his direction in life and is highly dependent on others to make decisions for him. He is clearly vulnerable to becoming re-radicalized. Lucia and Mathilda have both managed to disengage and deradicalize. Lucia had already lost faith in the ideas when she was in the movement and thus experienced parallel disengagement and deradicalization processes. Mathilda needed a long period to develop a different understanding of herself and, more importantly, to trust in her new identity. She describes how she kept thinking as a Nazi for a long period, obviously conflating ideological thinking with her hatred of and disappointment with her own life. As she managed to make her way into a functional life and grew in self-confidence, she stopped feeling hatred and was finally deradicalized, also at a cognitive level.

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Conclusions

By becoming neo-Nazis, our participants turned a stigma into something powerful and into a desired identity. When deciding to disengage from the neo-Nazi movement, they once again had to challenge themselves and deal with stigmatization. In this study, we focused on the different strategies used by the participants to cope with stigmatization. Through an analysis of the outcomes of revealed or concealed stigmatization, we have looked more closely at how disengagement was or was not followed by deradicalization. Although disengagement processes often start with disillusionment and a gradual withdrawal from the movement, there is also a need to find a strategy to successfully turn a stigmatized identity into a new and acceptable presentation of the self. As we have seen, this process can take different forms and lead to different outcomes.

Using two categories – the confessional self and the concealed self – we have zoomed in on the participants' strategies for coping with stigmatization. Let us start with the confessional self. Through confession and long-term involvement in preventive initiatives, the participants processed their past and developed a self-reflexive and self-therapeutic strategy. Obviously, this strategy follows a clear script whereby the participants gradually turn a stigmatized identity into a lifestyle and an occupation as an ex-Nazi. Telling and selling their autobiographical stories becomes a way of life and a way to give back to society. It is also the road to becoming a moral and ethical subject. Clearly, telling their stories and coming out as ex-Nazis in front of an audience can also develop into a self-confessional and therapeutic ethos. Confronting and eradicating the past and a stigmatized identity promote the deradicalization process. However, we noticed the risk of being trapped in the role of former neo-Nazi, which in itself creates a new trauma. This observation requires some reflection on the use and misusing of former extremists in countering violent extremism (CVE) programs (cf. Koehler, 2020)

The concealed self-adopts a very different strategy. Instead of coming out as an ex-Nazi, some of our participants avoid talking about their engagement in the neo-Nazi

movement. They move to another city, delete information, rename themselves and restart their lives. They are no longer committed to the movement, but in some cases, they are still devoted to neo-Nazi ideas. Among those who conceal their past, there are some individuals who are still not deradicalized. However, they want to live "ordinary" lives and to have a family without being afraid that neighbours or people at work will stigmatize and dissociate themselves from them. The individuals in this group have all avoided making confessions about their pasts and thus have not benefitted from the therapeutic outcomes that seem to emanate from being open about one's past. It is also clear that to a greater extents these participants were less satisfied with life in general.

Discussion

Those of our participants who decided to reveal about their ex-identity did not see this as something that they actively and/or voluntarily chose. They all describe having had no choice but to confess and that it was initially extremely uncomfortable. The deradicalization process was something that occurred in the interaction between our participants and those to whom they confessed. After overcoming the initial shame and embarrassment, they were able to feel guilt. Guilt was not the driving force for coming out as a former neo-Nazi; it was their social circumstances. As they witnessed the reactions from their environments during their repeated confessions, their shame turned into guilt. When faced with guilt, they were all willing to atone by doing various forms of community service, thus earning their way back into society. In our research process, we have also been able to follow how some individuals within this group have started a process of un-becoming a former neo-Nazis as their need to share their stories has waned. The group with a concealed self is in a worse situation with regard to overcoming their ex-identities. We acknowledge that 15 participants only amount to a case study, and that we ought to be careful not to draw too broad conclusions from it. Bearing that in mind, we would like to pose the following conclusions:

In our study, the mechanism that encourages disengagement to turn into deradicalization should not be understood as the public disengagement itself. The public disengagement demanded that the participant showed remorse and attempted to redeem themself. Remorse and redemption are powerful tools in transforming a life course, but should not be forced upon anyone. As we learned from two of our participants, ultimately they felt that they were trapped in their roles as former neo-Nazis, bestowing on them a new layer of stigmatization. We would argue that their public disengagement to some extent substituted for much-needed psychotherapy help, but lacked any kind of accountable or guided path for our participants to heal. Thus, we do not want our results to be understood as public disengagement being a solution in itself. We would like to point out that, in our case study, the publicity lead to redemption and that this redemption was what made deradicalization possible. Confessing requires that the individual subjugate themself to certain cultural scripts and available narratives. Becoming a former neo-Nazi is possible, but it can also turn into a kind of "prison". Listening to our participants, it has become clear to us that the struggle to recreate a desirable self-identity is hard work indeed. Public disengagement may very well benefit this process of hard work, but it cannot be a substitute for professional help.

It is always expected that researchers will call for more research within their field. In the course of our research project, we keep coming across individuals who have disengaged but not deradicalized, in other words they are still believing neo-Nazis. These individuals, when asked, usually report that in different circumstances they would consider engaging in the movement again. For the long-term safety of the individuals, their potential victims, and the society as whole, the aim must be to promote deradicalization. We believe that this paper contributes a small piece to this puzzle, in understanding the mechanism that sparks deradicalization after disengagement has already happened.

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