“We Are the White Aryan Warriors”: Violence, Homosociality, and the Construction of Masculinity in the National Socialist Movement in Sweden

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Abstract
Violence is a significant element in the constitution, emotional structure, and reproduction of right-wing extremism and neo-Nazism. This article examines the life histories of former neo-Nazis and explores the roles of violence in the Swedish skinhead culture and neo-Nazi organizations. We conducted individual and group interviews with seven former neo-Nazis who held high positions in the movement. Our study focused on violence and violent acts, as well as feelings of redemption and regret. The findings show that violence had always been a part of our subjects’ lives. Violence was a means to solve disagreements and position themselves within the organizational hierarchy. Among our informants, masculinity was displayed and constructed through the performance of being “real men” within the circles of skinheads and neo-Nazis. The portrayal of real men as Aryan warriors attracted violent men to these circles to a greater extent and for longer than in other Nordic countries.

Keywords
dominating masculinity, violence, homosociality, neo-Nazis

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Introduction

Violence is a significant element in the constitution, emotional structure, and reproduction of right-wing extremism and neo-Nazism. In this article, through the life stories of seven former skinheads and neo-Nazis, we explore what roles violence plays in the Swedish skinhead culture and in neo-Nazi organizations. Since the 1980s, violence has been an integral and visual part of the Swedish racist skinhead culture. However, it is not always so within neo-Nazi organizations. At the same time, violence is constantly present in racist subcultures, and with time and an individual’s increasing involvement in the movement, spontaneous and unregulated violence is replaced by more elaborate plans for exploiting and organizing violence and intimidation. In addition, in many cases there is a close relationship between the skinhead culture and various political movements. Skinheads and the more subcultural parts of neo-Nazism often function as recruiters, demonstrating that sometimes violent capital is useful (Blazak 2001; Pollard 2016).

In a study of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn (GD) in a rural Greek community, Petrou and Kandylis (2016) found that “violent performances have to be considered not only as a symptom, but as a constitutive element of extreme-right mobilization. Once the microscale of activism is taken into consideration, violent performances appear as a potential (though not unambiguous) factor that explains extreme-right success” (593). Using hate rhetoric, and an antisystemic discourse, these activists succeed in legitimizing a certain amount of violence. Violence and violent reactions are legitimized by the imaginary threat and fear of the ethnic Other, and by the betrayal of politicians and the mass media. GD sympathizers celebrate a macho identity and a male-dominated values system. According to Petrou and Kandylis (2016), violence becomes an effective political means of generating sympathy for a neofascist movement.

After nearly two decades of mass use of violence, such violence peaked in the Nordic extreme-right movement and skinhead subculture at the end of the 1990s. By the turn of the millennium, the skinhead subculture began to wane in the Nordic countries and transformed into radical right democratic movements. In Sweden, these movements were more resistant to change and also more violent; violence seemingly was not simply a means to an end but a reason for the very existence of the Swedish neo-Nazi movement (Ravndal 2018).

Violence and violent behavior can be interpreted as a logical consequence of extreme-right activism and an instrumental means of creating an impact and intimidating people into obedience. However, violence can be a pleasurable, social, and identity-generating aspect for extreme-right activism. This article aims to explore the role of violence in the recruitment process of neo-Nazi movements and examines how former skinheads and neo-Nazis discuss their own violent histories. Previous research suggests that violence within these milieus is retrospectively easier to discuss as something collectively committed, rather than as acts with individual agency, and that people express personal moral consequences of guilt and remorse.
Therefore, the second aim is to shed light on feelings of guilt and regret, or their absence, and how this affects processes of disengagement and deradicalization from neo-Nazi movements.

First, we orient our study with an overview of relevant and closely linked research and subsequently present the theoretical framework for the study, along with the research design and background information on our informants. Lastly, we present our analysis of the empirical data and the key themes. Broadly speaking, we find that violence is a key factor in attracting new members no matter how superficial the ideological foundation of its use. We also learned that the former skinheads still talk about their violent deeds but downplay their own role and continue to have difficulties addressing their sociopsychological needs and emotional wounds. A clear difference exists between those who have been able to show regret and those who have not, especially in terms of how successful the deradicalization process has been.

**Literature Review**

Skinhead culture developed in the United Kingdom in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Initially, the “skins” were influenced by different styles of music and were not linked to racist subculture. Additionally, there were no clear dividing lines between their groups (for example, the Jamaican Rude Boys—which was a West Indian subculture—and the British skinheads) (Brake 1974). Toward the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the scene changed, and the nationalist currents of 1980s Britain became linked with skinhead culture. Some bands, such as Skrewdriver, came out as racists, and racist and neo-Nazi lyrics became more common. Nationalist movements, such as The National Front and The British Movement, started gaining more followers in the 1980s, and a strong link between this type of right-wing extremist movement and skinhead culture was gradually established (Ware and Back 2002). In the 1980s and 1990s, skinhead culture was exported to several European countries, including Sweden (Lööw 2000). In many, though not all, cases, skinheads developed racist attitudes and became intimately involved with extreme-right movements (Johansson 2019).

Since the late 1980s, there has been a growing body of research on racist skinheads. In a study of 14 male skinheads in Canada, 12 of the 14 youths reported experiencing regular physical discipline at home (Baron 1997). All the interviewees reported being involved in many violent incidents. In addition, they withdrew from the formal labor market and survived through theft and selling drugs. Although there are some connections between these “street crime skinheads” and extreme-right movements, Baron (1997) distinguishes between these less organized skinheads and skinheads engaged in political activism. However, Baron (1997) also argues that street skinheads’ fighting skills and violent capital are attractive to recruit new members that are already violent. The extreme right-wing scene has been characterized by a fluidity and a notoriously unpredictable activism. In a study of German...
skinheads and xenophobic youth in Germany, Watts (2001) concludes that what she calls xenophobic culture—that is, racist and violent sentiments in society—includes both a highly spontaneous youth culture and subcultural expressions, and more organized forms of political activism. She also suggests that aggressive subcultures do not always act on the basis of ideological motivations but may instead be driven by thrill-seeking behaviors.

Other researchers point out that there is a clear connection and strong bonds between the racist skinhead culture and organized forms of activism and even terrorism. In a United States study, Blazak (2001) found that some older Nazi skinheads manipulate teens and recruit them into a world of terrorism and possible attacks. The presence of a violent and racist skinhead culture varies considerably cross-nationally. In Russia, for instance, skinhead attacks have become more frequent since 2000 (Arnold 2010). Pollard (2016) also argues that skinheads have shifted from being a working-class phenomenon to becoming a significant element in a transnational far-right movement. The skinhead phenomenon has transitioned from a distinct subculture to an imaginary world and a symbol for extreme far-right activism. Miller-Idriss (2009) highlights that not everyone engaged in far-right movements, including the neo-Nazi movement, exercises violence. She underlines the particularly intense inclination toward violence within skinhead groups; however, she also indicates widespread support for discarding violent approaches among far-right movements.

Research on the development of extreme right-wing and neo-Nazi movements in the Nordic countries from the 1980s onward identifies factors that likely influenced eruptions of violence. These are high levels of immigration, the presence of loosely organized skinhead gangs, anti-immigration rhetoric, and media coverage of right-wing extremist and neo-Nazi movements. Establishing causality in this case is challenging, given that local groups with superficially ideological motives most commonly performed the violence, and that violence was also commonly exercised among peers (Bjørgo 1997; Lööw 2000; Ravndal 2018). However, this body of research suggests violence within these milieus may be a contributing factor that generates more violence.

Violence, Homosociality, and the Construction of Masculinity

In racist skinhead culture, violence is endemic. It is staged and implemented as an emotional structure, channeling frustrations, hatred, and disappointments. Subjective violence enacted in specific situations and in confrontations between different groups must also be understood as part of a wider symbolic and sometimes also systemic violence guided by ideological doctrines and ideas of White supremacy (Zizek 2008). Through a mainstreaming of many of the hateful ingredients in the far-right political movement, racism and hate speech are no longer merely a part of subcultural settings or neo-Nazi organizations, but also increasingly present in
society at large (Johansson et al., 2017; Kimmel and Wade 2018). Consequently, the
subcultural, expressive, and aggressive styles of the skinhead—particularly tattoos
with skulls, Nazi symbols, and aggressive messages—have been replaced by sophis-
ticated elements, such as White shirts and green ties (as in the Nordic Resistance
Movement), concealing violence and putting forward new, attractive images of
masculinity and nationalism (Miller-Idriss 2017).

Homosocial bonds are critical to violence and masculinity in skinhead culture. Homosociality describes the construction of social bonds between persons of the
same sex. It is a social dynamic mechanism that explains the maintenance of hege-
monic masculinity (Connell 1995). The concept is frequently applied to explain how
men, through their friendships and intimate social relationships with other men,
maintain and defend the gender order and patriarchy by building closed teams and
defending their privileges and positions (Haywood et al., 2017). Although the con-
cept of homosociality maintains homogeneous gender categorizations, focusing on
single-sex groups and often referring to hierarchical gender relations in which men
strengthen hegemonic gender ideals, it is possible to open up the concept and
observe more closely at the dual aspects of the term. On one hand, homosocial
bonds uphold vertical power dynamics between men and between men and women
(Sedgewick 1985). On the other hand, it indicates men’s need for intimate, close, and
more horizontal relationships with other men. In research on fratriarchal spaces,
such as the military, men simultaneously maintain close but hierarchical and antag-
onistic relationships with their peers (Higate 2012; Michalski 2017).

Violence is generated in specific and often emotionally charged subcultural
sites—where friendship, support, and the feeling of belonging are nurtured—and
more generally integrated into specific constructions of neo-Nazi and hardcore
masculinity. In particular, we are interested in how rawer and subculturally charged
masculinity is transformed and made usable in a disciplined and institutionalized
organization. These processes illustrate what Messerschmidt (2016) would call local
forms of hegemonic masculinity. According to Messerschmidt, local hegemonic
form of masculinity refers to the most celebrated, common, or current form of
masculinity in a particular social setting. Consequently, we will look more closely
at the role of violence in the subcultural organization and in the friendship group,
and how our informants relate to and handle their violent pasts.

Research Design

This article is a part of a larger and ongoing research project investigating the life
trajectories of individuals who joined the neo-Nazi movement from the early 1990s
to about 2010. In the larger project, we examine both individuals who exit the
movement and those who remain, as well as those who deradicalize from neo-
Nazi ideology and those who still believe in the ideals, even after leaving the
movement. For the present study, we have selected seven informants who left the
movement at least five years before the interviews started. There are two reasons for
choosing individuals who are no longer active in the movement: first, it is difficult to conduct interviews with active individuals due to ethical issues relating to their continued potential for violence. Second, we seek to analyze sentiments of regret and remorse, which may be more difficult with individuals who still follow the ideology that motivated the use of violence. We divided the participants into two focus groups rather than conducting individual interviews to allow them to assist each other in the process of remembering, as well as to minimize the risk of participants concealing information, which may be easier to do toward researchers than their former peers. While the sample size is small, it is a challenge to access and interview former neo-Nazis in groups, about their history of violence, including potential crimes that have not been subject to court trial. Nevertheless, the data provided by this small number of individuals are both unique and rich. No other studies have brought together former neo-Nazis who were interviewed about their violent past. Having them compare their memories made them recall and reinterpret events that otherwise may not have been a part of our research. The focus group setting was initially intimidating but developed into a safe space to reveal their painful memories, not only to a researcher but also to other with shared experiences.

This research project was approved by the Swedish ethical review authority, and the research process followed the principle of sound ethical research (Vetenskapsrådet 2017). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to conducting interviews. All information about informants that may reveal their identity has been omitted or masked. Participants have been given alias, names of places and institutions have been changed or omitted, and some details about dates and events has been altered to maintain informant anonymity.

To begin with, we interviewed all seven individuals separately on at least two occasions; interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. Thereafter, they were divided into two focus groups and interviewed together on one occasion. The focus group sessions functioned as opportunities to analyze how these seven individuals—who knew or knew about each other—talked together about their violent pasts.

During the first set of individual interviews, violence was not or only seldom mentioned spontaneously among the informants, unless they were victims or bystanders. In the first round, mentions of offensive use of violence were quite absent, calling for a new round of interviews focusing on violence in terms of being victims, bystanders, and perpetrators. In the second round of interviews, it became clear that they all shared experiences of severe violence, mostly as victims, during their upbringing. However, it also became obvious that they were exercising extremely violent behavior within the movement. These sections of the interviews resembled to some extent police interviews, not least in the sense of being very detailed narratives of the actual physical violence. During the analysis of these transcripts, it was obvious that there was a need to dig deeper into how violence was practiced within the movement and how it brought meaning to the members, that is, beyond their own accounts. This was done by introducing our informants to each other in the two focus
groups. While all participants in each group were involved in the same organizations or milieus when they were active, none of them had been in the same close circles during their period in the movement. This decision maximized their comfort with their co-participants while preventing them from re-enacting former hierarchies. The focus group interviews lasted about 3 hours and were audio and video recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Findings

The findings of our research particularly focus on how masculinity and masculine values are etched into this activist lifestyle. To this end, we present our findings chronologically. We examine how violence and masculinity play out in our subjects’ childhood, the period of recruitment into gangs, and later into the neo-Nazi movement. Furthermore, we investigate masculinity and violence as they were a part of the movement, the period of disengagement, as well as the exit process.

Violent Childhoods and the search for Identity

The seven individuals interviewed for this study display different life trajectories and tell different stories about their engagement in the neo-Nazi movement. However, there are also some common experiences and patterns. They describe dysfunctional families: they all felt abandoned by their parents, left alone and without any support from adults. In some cases, their families were also plagued by violence, drug abuse, and chaos. Most of the individuals were bullied in school and experienced a general lack of supervision.

John’s story is typical. In his case, his mother frequently hit him and his siblings before eventually abandoning them:

Absent father, and a mentally ill mother, more or less. So, she became a pensioner quite early. And... What should I say? When they got divorced, she just packed a bag and went away, and left all the kids with my dad. But this was a good solution. After all, she was the one who terrorized and hit me when I was a kid, screaming and carrying on. Dad is the world’s most gentle person. And he is a very good father. He never showed any emotions, however, and he was away a lot and worked. So, I had to raise myself more or less, of course. That was the upbringing I got. (John)

All informants but one were victims of domestic violence during their upbringing. They are both targeted and collaterally affected when violence was directed toward their mothers or siblings. Roger grew up in a family characterized by severe daily violence and abuse. However, he does not blame his upbringing for his eventual entry into neo-Nazism or try to explain his life in light of a violent and abusive family environment:
My upbringing was characterized by a lot of violence, abuse, crime, and general chaos, in many ways. And what should I say... It has well... I do not know if I... I am a little careful to say that it has left its mark on me, because I am very sensitive about this, I must take a personal responsibility for the choices I have made. I don’t want to... I’m not the kind of person who feels sorry for myself and puts the blame on others. Of course, I reflect upon many different things, about how my upbringing has affected me, and I’ve certainly been through a tough upbringing, with abuse and violence, and crime, as I told you. (Roger)

Roger continued to talk about his precarious situation as a child. He felt stigmatized and treated differently from others in school. Other informants shared this feeling—of being stigmatized and labelled as an outsider by the other students and especially by the teachers in school—and as a result started to use violence to defend themselves at school. An integral part of their neo-Nazism, this violence, when it began in their childhood, had no connection to racism:

Well, in primary and middle school, I was fighting most of the time. Nothing about racism or neo-Nazism or anything like that. I was just a rowdy person. /.../ In middle school I committed my first assault for the first time, I beat up another guy. I was ten and so was he. I hit him with a swing, jumped at his back. I think this was when this violence started [to be part of my identity]. (Erik)

After such childhood experiences, the informants became attracted to skinhead gangs and culture, as they provided them with a feeling of power, being able to hit back, and being able to scare other students and teachers:

I wanted revenge. Don’t you think I wanted to show these disgusting teachers at the school, that now they should fear me? And people who kicked the shit out of me in school. Do you know what a thrill it was to see them cower like dogs when I arrived, when I started to figure in the media, when everyone knew who I was? Because that’s exactly what I mean, you remember when someone has done you an injustice. And when you see that they are like this, they are like little puppies that expose their throats to you later in life, do you know what a great feeling that is? (Roger)

Being abandoned by parents, and treated as deviants by teachers and other adults, among the skinheads our informants found a new and safe group to which they could belong. In this subcultural environment they felt secure and powerful. They received recognition and a new identity. They are not bullied anymore, instead they themselves bullied and frightened both students and teachers. Their hatred spilled over, and to strengthen the group and their homosocial bonds, they found potential threats and victims everywhere. The ability to pick a fight was both an asset for the skinhead gangs and a precondition and a practical reason for recruitment. Jesper was living in despair, with significant difficulties in coping with constant depression and loss of social connection. He, therefore, turned his gaze toward hooliganism.
I got interested in football [soccer], but not to run around and chase a ball. I was looking for the high-risk games, where supporter clubs, the hooligans, would meet up and fight. Then, I made sure to be there on one side or the other, just to get the kick from fighting. The chaos inside of me finally gave in... back then this was the best way for me to get rid of all of my frustrations, disappointments, as well as my anger, and fear. I fought everyone and everything. The supporters of the other team, volunteers working at the arena, police officers, yeah anyone. It could be fathers with their sons watching the game; I could beat them up for wearing the wrong sweater. You know, in these hooligan gangs, there were always those who were looking for lost souls to recruit, so they could be made use of. That is precisely what happened to me; this is how I got recruited into the right-wing extremist movement.

For Jesper moving from the hooligans to the skinheads was a step toward being part of a close homosocial relationship. Instead of waiting for the next high-risk game, every fortnight, he now had skinhead friends around the clock. Homosociality works in two ways here, creating sharp distinctions and a vertical hierarchy between us and them, as well as tightening and strengthening the horizontal and intimate bonds between the peers in the in-group.

Fighting soon became a part of everyday life, something one did for fun and to create a strong bond with the group. Niklas tells us about everyday life as a skinhead:

When you came out of this apartment, there was a courtyard. So, then everyone was charged and ready for a fight, there were people we had seen through the kitchen window, and we knew that around the corner there were lots of people. So, when everyone was charged with energy, everyone was prepared to fight. Then we walked out into the street. Then when you came outside the housing complex, it was trouble right away. So, you moved in this group to somehow symbolize outwardly that you wanted trouble, this group is available for this. We signaled that we wanted to fight. After such a battle, so... The mood was always high after that, whether you had been hit, or if you had won the fight, the mood was always high. It was usually something you joked about—“Yes, but we will get revenge for that next time.” So, next time we would focus on the individual who kicked you or hit you, because then everyone knew who that was. (Niklas)

Violence soon became an integral and enjoyable part of life and that of a thrill-seeking behavior (cf. Watts 2001). The close affiliation between the skinhead culture and various factions of the neo-Nazi movement also successively led to more organized forms of resistance. Recruitment to different organizations often meant certain restrictions on spontaneously enacted violence. However, the violence now had another disguise: it made them Aryan warriors with a cause.

**Hatred of the Other, Masculinity, and Ideology**

All of our informants held prominent positions in the neo-Nazi movement in Sweden: four locally, two nationally, and one internationally. Becoming a member of an
organization differed to some extent from being an unorganized skinhead. Besides the discipline, the meetings, and the rallies, members are also schooled in and learned how to think about contemporary political issues. When the frustrations and hatred turned into ideology, the imaginary violence was extended and developed into a vision for a future society.

Yes, during my period in Nazism, what I was looking forward to... It was like an awakening. I was a soldier. I was an Aryan soldier now, fighting for the future of Sweden, and my future. I wanted a country that was cleaned from immigrants—people with dark skin—and this included also the Jews, the disabled, the homosexuals, and so on. They just had to leave and go away from here. They would have a chance to leave by themselves, or we would kill them. This was my vision for the future. (Roger)

After being accepted into the movement they had all undergone a substantial makeover. Not only had their dress, hairstyle, and other aesthetics changed, but so had their names. They used nicknames that showed their status in the movement and signified past actions or specific characteristics. This sequence is from the first focus group interview:

Interviewer: If you would like to reflect a bit, I would like to learn [about how you were named before and after joining the movement]. You were called Bulgaria [pointing at John], you were called ADHD-kid [pointing at Niklas] /.../ Did you get a new name and a new guise so that the name Lion would erase your previous labelling [bastard of a drunken whore]?

John: Chainsaw—Mike, Fly . . . . [laughing]
Roger: Pie, Rind . . .
Jesper: Oat . . .
Roger: What else was it . . . ? Butter yeah . . . Flower, Block . . .
Roger: The nicknames were often very important.
John: Yes, they removed your identity in a way.
Jesper: Yes, and reinforced it . . .

To give and be given new names brought the peers closer to each other and erased their former stigmatized and weak identities. Roger, who was brought up by his abusive and alcoholic mother, could now take on the role of the Lion. He could separate completely from his mother by refraining from using the very name she gave him, as well as the label “bastard of a drunken whore,” and instead becoming the hypermasculine character of the Lion. This new identity was shaped around strength and violence. At this point, the informants saw themselves as warriors with status and recognition. As their parents, teachers, and peers subjected them to violence in their childhoods, they are not resistant to exercising violence. On the contrary, they knew about their capacity for violence even before they joined the movement. They also felt that their ability to fight was appreciated by the leaders in the movement (cf. Baron 1997).
Niklas: Well, I got satisfaction...well I used a lot of violence, it was my masculinity, to go out and to fight.

John: Yes, one was like a warrior, a foot soldier. And all these parties, you headbutted, poured beer on each other... It was like...

Jesper: Neanderthals...

John: Yes, a bit like that, like...

Jesper: Cavemen.../

John: You laughed and showed your wounds [after being in a street fight]. That was a way to show your manhood.

Interviewer: The wounds, how can you make that into something masculine?

John: Yes, like this: “Yeah fuck, he smashed my eyebrow. Ha-ha, look, I head-butted him like this.” You know, you were sometimes all black and blue. And that was masculine, right?

Jesper: It really gave you status to be able to show all your wounds and scars.

John: /

Jesper: Oh, my Lord, chunks of hair...

Violence provided a means by which to structure the hierarchy within the movement, but also to give meaning and direction to being a part of the movement, thus guiding them at an individual level and providing them with a purpose and reason for being. At the same time, the frequent use of violence—not only exercising it but re-enacting it by showing wounds, talking about the fights, planning for upcoming fights, scoring points, and so on—provided their social circle with a habitus of violent masculinity. It should also be noted that violence was not only exercised in relation to ideological convictions or other rationales, instead it played a central role. Niklas recalls:

Then you know, it was also something you did for fun, you know beating up people. It could be a thing, like going to the library. Outside, there were rather tall bushes where people, went to take a leak, when the toilets were occupied in the bar. We would just stand there and wait, just for the opportunity to beat someone. It was mostly like that you did not have the opportunity to beat someone that evening, so you went there. It was so extremely unprovoked, I mean all violence is unprovoked. People just went for a leak and there we were, always in great numbers. Never outnumbered...

Violence is a means to structure hierarchy, an outcome of the ideological convictions, and a rationale for exercising ideological convictions. It obviously had its own meaning too—violence was always a companion from early childhood. On a psychological level, exercising violence is clearly a coping strategy, though not a well-functioning one, to avoid socioemotional suffering.
During a focus group interview, we talked about emotions and weaknesses. All four participants agreed that emotions are not considered as appropriate in the movement. Advocating a hardcore masculinity was the goal, and weaknesses are associated with people who should be eliminated and killed.

Interviewer: Was it possible to show emotions?
Roger: No!
Jesper: That was a weakness.
Roger: No, a weakness.
John: [laughing] No, we never talked about or expressed emotions.
Interviewer: It wasn’t possible?
Several voices: No.
Roger: You couldn’t just sit down with a friend and say: “Hi, I’ve written a really good poem. It’s great, it’s about a woman that I had sex with last weekend, it goes like this . . .” This wasn’t possible, no, no, no.
John: To talk about emotions . . .
Roger: Then you would be called a faggot, a bloody faggot, and you’re a fucking queer, and so on. This is what would have happened.
John: This is a real macho culture; it’s all about masculinity.

Emotions are feminized and seen as unmasculine, and thus associated with homosexual men (cf. Connell 1995). Hate and rage are not understood as emotions, but rather as masculine attributes.

The lack of emotional confirmation and the unsatisfied need to reflect on social or psychological issues within a hardened, masculine world also led to severe emotional pain and constant suffering.

Interviewer: Within the movement, you gained a role and an armor, so to speak, but behind that armor there must have been moments of emotional suffering?
Roger: No.
Interviewer: There weren’t?
Roger: No, you are indifferent. Detached, you are numb.
Interviewer: So, what did you do then, were you so completely detached that you were never in pain?
Roger: We cried, it’s like this, we have all cried out in our loneliness. I’m the only one [of us in the room] who dares to admit it. Sometimes I even had . . . I would sit with a loaded gun against my head.
Jesper: Exactly.
John: I was standing at the top of [naming a well-known bridge/building/cliff the name omitted for ethical reasons] before they fixed the fence that prevented people from jumping.
Roger: There you go. Are you listening now [asking the interviewer]?
Jesper: I think that all of us somehow came . . .
Roger: When that numbness kicks in, it doesn’t matter if you live or die.
Jesper: ... I remember some fights that I went to with the attitude “I hope that they kill me.” The last two fights I was in I would have been so happy if I’d just died.

Still, even after many years outside the movement, it was a burden for the informants to admit to their weaknesses during the time they were a part of the movement. Moreover, they still viewed their emotional needs as weaknesses. They used violence as a coping strategy during the neo-Nazi movement to numb their emotional needs. In the rare moments when they were on their own, this violent coping strategy was out of reach, which put them in acute risk of committing suicide. Clearly, the informants, to varying degrees, were able to find functional strategies to help them cope with their emotional needs today. It was truly painful for them to talk to each other about their long-gone plans to commit suicide. After this conversation, the interview had to be paused.

Remorse, Guilt, and Redemption

The process of disengagement from a neo-Nazi movement often involves a drastic rewriting of one’s life story. Reconstructing the biographical narrative and reorienting oneself into a new life also means facing the consequences of some of the acts committed during the period when the individual was active in the movement. Consequently, acts of violence are re-evaluated and sometimes regretted.

John recollected an incident that happened during his active years in the movement when he was fighting a man who attacked a friend. Owing to his being high on steroids, John repeatedly banged this man’s head against a concrete floor. He told us that he was beating this man so hard, he got fractures in his hand. When he was telling us about the incident, John was laughing. He also tried to justify his actions. We asked him if he currently feels guilty about damaging this man’s face.

Interviewer: Do you feel guilty about this now?
John: Yes, sometimes old memories come back to haunt you, it’s like waking up from a nightmare or something. There are certain memories, like I can still see that eye, hanging out, in that totally demolished face. I certainly think, “What happened to him?” I guess he went through a lot of reconstructive surgery, and plastic surgery. But I mean, what is his life like today, how has this violent episode affected his life? Probably, it has affected him much more than me because I seldom think about it. However, sometimes it just comes back and kind of hits me. I regret certain things, things I have done to other people, you know.

John talks about a violent incident that happened many years ago. He is ambivalent. On one hand, he talks about remorse and guilt. On the other hand, he laughs and tries to justify his actions—the other man attacked one of his friends. Somehow in his mind, the violence was justified by the situation. In other words, at that time
when he was part of the neo-Nazi movement and a specific brotherhood, violence was a necessity.

Our interviewees deal with and talk about violence and seriously hurting other people in different ways. In some cases, such as Jesper, remorse, guilt, and regret seem to dominate. Jesper talks about how he dealt with his psychological distress and anxiety through violence and violent acts, but he also talks about the consequences of his former lifestyle, wanting badly to do penance, not least through helping other people to disengage from violent movements:

Fighting was a means of getting rid of all my negative feelings. But you also have to face the consequences, and ask yourself: “Is this really the right way of doing this?” The guilt feelings and the shame are there. I nearly killed or mutilated a person. To deal with this I used alcohol, but I became even more detached from myself. It was such a dangerous combination, the violence and the drugs.

Carl, like the rest of the participants, has difficulties in singling out one fight from another when he tries to reflect on his feelings of guilt:

But then, there were so many times when we beat up people, some of them worse than others. However, I don’t walk around feeling remorse. That may sound upsetting to you, but I really don’t. I don’t think too much about it. / . . . / I do think that I have made a lot of stupid choices and acted like a bloody asshole, but now I have chosen not to do that any longer, and instead I try to do good things. I’ve been supporting the antiracist movement for a number of years now, helping children and young people and a lot of such things. And when I think about it, it’s like: “Yeah, I’ve done this to heal my own wounds, really. Am I doing all this because I have guilt feelings about what I’ve done?” I’ve been thinking a lot about that.

Interviewer: Are you talking about redemption?
Carl: No, not now, now I do things because I want to. Now I’ve found . . . but it used to be like that, and I only recently figured it out. Fucking hell all these things [the good deeds] I did them because I needed to redeem myself. That’s why I did them, because I owed this to society for all the stupid stuff I’d done.

Today Carl feels confident that he has paid back what he owed, and he does not feel guilty any longer, unless he talks about specific incidents. The guilty feelings are more or less gone, with the transition made by making up for his bad deeds. Carl felt uncomfortable about doing “good” deeds that he was not inspired to do but felt compelled to do. Eventually, he determined that the ongoing process of redemption was keeping him tied to his former identity as a neo-Nazi. He decided to stop seeking redemption and only do things he really believed in:
You know what I really regret? If I had a time machine, it’s stupid I know, but sometimes I think like this. ... then I would have asked Mum to find me a better school. To find us a better place to live. I would do good things for myself then, get myself an education, have a nice life, and do the things I wished I had done. If that had been the case, I would never have had to waste my life like I did.

Thinking about the choices he should have made, Carl found the strength to go back to school, pass his exams, and enroll at the university. During this transition, he realized that he could not be a former neo-Nazi any longer, as it was tying him to what he was and thus limiting what he could become:

I don’t want to get a job because I’m a former neo-Nazi any longer. ... I don’t feel like a former neo-Nazi any longer. I do feel that I don’t want to be a former neo-Nazi anymore.

Disengaging from a violent and extreme movement takes time. Our informants used different strategies and made different life choices. As a part of the disengagement process, confronting their violent background seemed to play a key role in shaping a new life. Confessing to and making up for their violent acts in the past also seemed to be an important part of the disengagement process for some of the informants, a means of forming a new and more “true” identity (Foucault 1979). However, this was just one step toward leaving behind the identity of being a former neo-Nazi. Disengaging does not necessarily mean confronting one’s violent past; in some of the narratives, we also noticed a high degree of ambivalence, and even perhaps a longing for past times and being part of a closely knit and embracing homosocial culture. In this imaginary homosocial heaven, everyone is equal, has the same worth, and belongs to a tightly interwoven, horizontal homosocial culture.

Conclusions

Violence was a part of our informants’ lives from their early childhood to the time they exited the neo-Nazi movement. It is difficult to argue that their choices to use violence were well-considered. Violence was part of their habitus and their behavioral repertoire, a means used to solve disagreements and to position themselves within a hierarchy. They had all experienced how status and power in their families were orientated around the ability to exercise violence, and they also had all been severely intimidated by threats and by the overhanging presence of the threat of violent acts. It is also clear that they were admitted into the skinhead gangs because of their capacity to use violence (cf. Baron 1997). In the movement, violence was constantly present and part of everyday life, just like in their families, and disagreements were solved and status was gained in relation to the capacity for violence. On the surface, it might appear that this is different from domestic violence, since as skinheads they also used violence toward outgroups. However, they had all used
violence to solve various social issues at school and with other children before becoming skinheads.

After joining the neo-Nazi movement, their violence was given an ideological focus and direction. As we interpret this, we remain unconvinced that the ideology made any major difference in how, when, where, and toward whom they exercised violence. Although they preferred victims who could be taken to be immigrants, they also reported that if they did not find someone who fit this ideological template, they would attack random victims. This thrill-seeking behavior has also been recorded in other studies (cf. Watts 2001). Moreover, these individuals regularly beat each other up (cf. Bjørgo 1997; Lööw 2000; Ravndal 2018). It should also be noted that none of them committed or tried to commit any terrorist attacks, despite the fact that they embraced the neo-Nazi ideology, were willing and able to do harm, and did not fear being sent to prison or even losing their lives.

Looking more closely at the narratives of our informants, we find a complex and somewhat contradictory grand narrative of violence. Their violence did in fact turn into rage, but not in an unpredictable way—quite the opposite. They had routines about when, how, and where to fight, and the identity of their enemies was of less importance. They all possessed a high level of agency and were not lured into a violent milieu where they learned, ideologically and physically, to use violence. Rather, we see violence as a part of the homosociality developed in these closely knit groups, and in how relationships and structures were developed among them and their peers. There are many similarities among fratriarchal spaces, where the dual aspects of homosociality become visible. This social mechanism serves to create hierarchies, to point out the enemy, and the object of the violence exercised, and to create an often tight, secure, and emotionally important horizontal bond between the men. Other studies also confirm this specific homosocial pattern, where men maintain close and hierarchical relationships with their peers (cf. Higate 2012; Michalski 2017). In contrast to other studies, this study also focuses on how violence is reproduced and how a violent upbringing and an early environment marinated in violence tend to travel into emerging adulthood and create the “right” conditions for a violent neo-Nazi lifestyle. This study shows that violence, rather than ideology, is consistent among our informants’ life trajectories and in some cases do not cease after disengaging from the neo-Nazi movement.

For our informants, masculinity was displayed and constructed through the performance of being “real men” within the circles of skinheads and neo-Nazis. This violent and hateful form of masculinity, celebrating the idea of the Aryan warrior, was also the most celebrated local hegemonic masculinity (cf. Messerschmidt 2016). The Swedish neo-Nazi movement upheld a hardcore national socialist ideal after the turn of the millennium, longer than its counterparts in other Nordic countries. The central role that violence played within the skinhead, and the closely linked neo-Nazi movement, helps us to understand how it was structured and how new members were recruited. The identity as Aryan warriors attracted violent men to these circles to a higher degree, and for a longer time than in other Nordic countries, and this must be understood as a reason for the persistence of the Swedish neo-Nazi movement. Consequently,
violence enacted by our informants should also be understood as part of a wider symbolic violence guided by neo-Nazi doctrines and ideas of White supremacy. Today, many of these hateful ingredients in the far-right political movement—although somewhat modified and adapted to a normalized political context—are increasingly present in the Swedish society (Johansson et al. 2017 and Haywood et al. 2017).

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