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*The Role of Freedom and Identity in the Perceived Experiences  
of Former Right-Wing Extremists*

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**Abstract**

This study aims to identify the distinctive elements that contribute to the experience of being a member of a right-wing scene. Eight German former right-wing extremists were interviewed about the experiences of their entry and exit processes. The transcripts were qualitatively analyzed using two-step inductive coding, and five overarching themes were thereby found. The themes reflect both the chronological order of events as well as the thematically decisive factors that favored the entry and exit processes. They first explores how participants initially became receptive to the right-extremist ideology through personal circumstances, followed by a search for belonging and agency. Once in the scene, the group as well as the ideology offered a protective shell and a safe haven, although simultaneously also limiting the individual in their choices and exerting a level of control. Finally, the participants perceived contradictions and ambiguity, which led to them questioning their involvement in the scene and group affiliation. Throughout this process, identity and freedom are reoccurring core elements and will be discussed in more depth in the course of this study.

\*An Overview of the SAFIRE Project: A Scientific Approach to Finding Indicators and Responses to Radicalisation. Jean-Luc Marret, Allard R. Feddes, Liesbeth Mann, Bertjan Doosje, Heather Griffioen-Young. In: Journal EXIT-Deutschland. Issue: 2/2013 Online: <https://journal-exit.de/whats-your-experience-deradikalisierung-international/>

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## Introduction

With the recent uncovering of the Nationalist Underground in Zwickau, Germany and the attacks in Oslo and Utøya, Norway, the discussion about right-wing extremism (RWE) has shifted into the focus of Western media. Many questions around these events have begun to be discussed in more public forums; is there a general rise of RWE in Europe? How can youths be stopped from joining and current members be persuaded to drop out of the right-wing scene? What does the right-wing scene have to offer? What is it about the ideology or the structure of the groups that is so attractive? What motivates individuals to commit murder and similar atrocities in the name of an ideology?

There exist various theoretical perspectives aimed at finding answers to these questions. In general, explanations for individuals to become involved in the right-wing extremist scene tend to focus on an interaction of personal predisposition (e.g. lack of empathy, lack of self-esteem, personal uncertainty) and structure (e.g. broken homes, distance from peers, social isolation). Group membership is hereby mostly seen as a satisfier for the need to belong in the tumultuous lives of disoriented youths. While discussion of the environmental factors is theoretically sophisticated, the explanatory power of subjective experience is descriptive at best and largely under-theorized. The research question asked in this study therefore was, “Which factors in the experience of former right-wing extremists are perceived to have contributed to the entry and exit of the right-wing scene?”

Whereas this study partially confirms the environmental explanations, it additionally shows the significance of the individual level explanations for RWE and adds the personal experience of agency. It also suggest a link to current social theory, in particular to findings related to terrorism and collective action. Data collection and analysis were done in a first step and only then were the most striking findings embedded in a theoretical context. For the clarity of this thesis, however, literature will be discussed prior to presenting the findings of the study.

## Prior Research

Recent research on RWE (RWE) has already found a substantial amount of entry and exit factors that contribute to the radicalization and de-radicalization process respectively. Bjørgo (1997) identifies existing motives to include (1) sympathy for the underdog position, (2) protection against enemies and perceived threats, (3) curiosity, (4) search for excitement, (5) opposition to previous generations or to parents, (6) search for alternative to family or parents, (7) search for

friends or a community, (8) search for status or identity, and (9) tendency to be docile in friendships. Möller and Schuhmacher (2007) additionally find that right-extremist youngsters experience a great amount of conflict in their social lives, that they are not very involved in clubs or organizations, and that they have poorly developed social skills especially in relation to self-reflection, empathy, conflict management, and self-esteem.

In their study on determinants of radicalization of Islamic Youth in the Netherlands, Doosje, Van den Bos, and Loseman (2011) identify three factors as contributing to the process of radicalization: (1) personal uncertainty, (2) perceived injustice, and (3) perceived group threat. In a similar study on the radicalization process of right-wing attitudes in Dutch youth, Doosje, Van den Bos, Loseman, Feddes, and Mann (2011) add (4) relative deprivation and (5) in-group identification to the determinants of the radical belief system.

Personal uncertainty, as identified by Doosje et al., is also taken up by Hogg (2009) in his Uncertainty Management Model. He explains that uncertainty can be a motivator for the endorsement of ideological convictions (Hogg, 2009, p. 221) while Van den Bos (as cited in Hogg, 2009) links uncertainty to group identification.

What these theories have in common is that they view deprivation as the source of motivation for entering the right-wing scene. This implies that there are basic human needs of an individual that can either be met or not met by the environment. The scene along with its members and ideology are seen to serve as a satisfier for these needs. The view that self-actualization and demonstrating self-efficacy are the drive for entering the right-wing scene are not emphasized by this branch of research. However, research on suicide terrorism has looked into this direction. Suicide terrorism, which is usually studied in an Islamic-fundamentalist context and in war-torn regions such as Palestine, is not quite the same as right-extremism in the European environment. Nevertheless, similarities do exist between the two as both are settings that involve (1) the strong endorsement of an ideology, and (2) a group with strong coherence and solidarity among its members.

Kruglanski and Gelfand (2009) characterize terrorism “as a means to an end.” They also mention ideology as a crucial factor, but claim that underlying the motives and causes for being a terrorist is the quest for significance. Accordingly, it is in order to gain significance, to become part of something larger, that people join in terrorist groups when they feel they have no other means of changing society for the better and leaving their imprint on the world around them. Kruglanski and Gelfand’s view of how intergroup bias and in later stages terrorism are fostered goes in line with that of the Terror Management Theory (TMT). TMT, developed by Becker (1973), posits that awareness of death plays a role in the human need to be a part of something larger, so as to live on after the physical death. This comes close to what Maslow (1943) termed self-actualization in his research on the hierarchy of needs. According to him, humans have five basic types of needs that determine human motivation: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. He believed that those who strive for the higher level needs (i. e. esteem and self-actualization) are driven by “being-needs” instead of “deficiency-needs” (Goble, 1970, p. 62). The highest stage, self-actualization, is sought after by people who have the desire to become “everything that one is capable of becoming” (Maslow, 1954, p. 93).

Max-Neef, Elizalde, and Hopenhayn (1989) classify needs in different terms. Of the nine needs they identify, the two highest needs are identity and freedom. The definition of identity is “sense of belonging, consistency, differentiation, self-esteem, assertiveness, committing oneself, integrating oneself, getting to know oneself, recognizing oneself, actualizing oneself, and

growth.” The need for freedom is defined as “autonomy, self-esteem, determination, passion, assertiveness, open-mindedness, boldness, rebelliousness, tolerance, be dissent, be different from, run risks, develop awareness, commit oneself, and disobeying.”

The rivalry of higher-level needs is also described by Deutsch, Boehnke, Kühnen and Boehnke (2011). Basing themselves on results from the World Value Survey and work on happiness by Ronald Inglehart, Deutsch et al. believe that, “Personal freedom and control over one’s life are conducive to perceiving the self as a self-determined agent, which is conducive for a person’s sense of subjective well-being.” However, agency always stands in equilibrium with communion. In fact, Helgeson (1994) believes that both agency and communion are needed for subjective well-being.

To further combine these two aspects, Bandura (2000) describes personal agency as being linked to collective efficacy. Perceived efficacy can provide incentive to act, commitment to goals, and resilience to obstacles. Particularly acting on a group-level can supply this sense of efficacy as groups are usually more powerful than individuals in implementing change.

Psychological needs as a motivational basis for human behavior can help understand the rationale behind joining a right-extremist group and endorsing the ideology. In current research, if RWE is seen as a means to an end, it is usually seen as satisfying the needs love/belonging and esteem. The idea that becoming involved in a right-wing extremist group for the sake of satisfying the higher levels of human needs, the being-needs, whether they are called quest for significance, self-actualization, freedom, or agency, has not yet been discussed. It would imply that people searching for these elements may find them in different aspects of the right-wing scene. The analysis therefore aimed at identifying the factors former right-wing extremists perceived to have contributed to their experiences of entry and exit of the scene, and the role higher-level needs may have played.

## **Methods**

The relevance and importance of this perspective will become apparent during the course of the analysis, which uses grounded theory methodology. The field was hereby not entered with predefined theoretical concepts but inductively drew themes from the data while keeping in mind theories that related to these themes.

### **Participants**

Eight participants were contacted through EXIT Deutschland and were all former members of the right-extremist scene in Germany. Criteria were the experience of having entered and exited the right-wing scene in Germany. Initially ten participants were interviewed but two interviewees were reluctant to talk about their experiences. These interviews reflect a lack of validity in the short answers and were therefore excluded from analysis. Of the remaining eight, six participants were male and two were female. They were between 19 and 64 years old with a mean age of 34 years.

Important to note is also that they were rather deviant members of the right-extremist scene. As a member of EXIT explained, the cases this particular organization deals with are rather difficult. A member of the right-extremist scene who has risen in the hierarchy and has a certain reputation

in the scene has a much harder time dropping out and is therefore much more dependent on organizations to assist in the exit process. All eight participants were highly involved in the right-extremist scene and had in many cases founded or led their own groups (such as “Kameradschaft,” – literally: comradeship “Kampfgruppe,” – literally: combat formation). The average number of years the participants were active in the scene was 10 years, ranging from 3 to 20 years. The participants of this study must therefore not be equated with youths who only try the scene out for a few years. This may also have implications on the results.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were used as the method of data collection. The interview guide was developed together with the research team from the University of Amsterdam, comprising of Dr. Bertjan Doosje, Dr. Allard Feddes, and Liesbeth Mann. It was built up chronologically to allow participants to tell their stories the way they experienced them. There were five overarching topics: (1) joining a right-extremist group, (2) being in a right-extremist group, (3) leaving a right-extremist group, (4) self-esteem and identity, and (5) evaluation of existing programs. All five topics had sub-points, which were assessed through open questions and follow-up questions by the interviewers if needed. The sub-points were for the most part concept-driven according to prior research that had been done on factors influencing the radicalization and de-radicalization processes. Mainly the work of Van der Valk and Wagenaar (2010) was consulted to capture most aspects they had found to have played a role (i. e. family relationships, involvement in youth clubs, the role of music, etc.).

It is also important to mention that since the work in Amsterdam is done within the context of the European-wide SAFIRE Project (“Scientific Approach to Finding Indicators & Responses to Radicalisation”), the interview guide included questions that were not relevant to this study. Some parts of the interview were therefore left out of the analysis. The English version of the interview guide can be found in the Appendix, however during the course of the interviews, some formulations were changed, questions omitted or added as deemed necessary. For example, the interview guide always refers to a group, while participants spoke either of the scene or of several groups they were involved in. This was accounted for and adjusted during the course of the interviews.

All interviews were carried out in the offices of EXIT Deutschland and interviewees were assured that their data would be treated confidentially and without judgment. Although the topic was a sensitive one, the atmosphere was relaxed in all eight cases and participants were very willing to talk about their experiences and help the researchers understand how their entry and exit processes took place. Since all participants and researchers were German, the interviews were conducted in German.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Two-step inductive coding (see Gibbs, 2007, Chapter 4 and 6) was used on all eight interview transcriptions. In a first stage, interviews were coded openly to find codes independent of existing findings.

In a second stage, these open codes were condensed into bigger themes. Background information and explanations of personal stories were transcribed and taken into account but not included in

the second step of condensation. An English version of the complete coding scheme is attached in the Appendix.

## Results

Five core themes emerged from the analysis. In the following, each theme will be described as they emerged from the participants' descriptions. For the purpose of analysis, each theme was examined separately, although in the participants' experiences they were often closely connected to each other. All excerpts used were translated by the researcher, although the analysis was done in German.

### Theme 1: Receptiveness

The first theme to emerge was descriptions of the time before the entry into the right-wing scene occurred. Important to note is that participants felt in some way receptive to the ideology and the people involved in the right-wing scene through a variety of different factors.

Among participants there was great variety as to what may have induced this receptiveness, but there was often a component of searching for answers involved. Some participants spoke about puberty as a tumultuous time, others described difficult relationships with parents, bullying in school, or lack of self-esteem.

*And then the right-oriented students approached me and gave me a sense of self-worth, ideals, and built me up. (Excerpt from Interview 7)*

Some mentioned a personal crisis or traumatic events, others spoke about their childhood, romantic relationships, or questioning the existing political system and a general search for truth and meaning.

*Respondent: Uh of course it can be that they uh enter with a certain ideology and are also still searching for more, and therefore still develop within the scene [...]*

*Interviewer: But this initial interest in the ideology, does that come from a search for something, or...?*

*Respondent: The search for truth. (Excerpt from Interview 3)*

Participants did not directly describe specific events as causal factors of why they entered the right-extremist scene, but rather treated these aspects as stepping stones that brought them closer to the scene. Often they mentioned specific persons who influenced their worldview and introduced them to the scene (i. e. family members, peers).

*Well, first of all it was that all the theses I heard at home from my father and so on, I found those in conversations with classmates but also in discussions with various political groups. (Excerpt from Interview 9)*

So far, this goes very much in line with prior research on RWE. However, It is also important to mention that while participants were in a state of questions, they were nevertheless rational and composed at this time. Unlike some research on RWE claims, participants were mostly well-educated and very well informed about the content of the ideology.

*When I entered the scene, I was pretty solidified, also ideologically. Actually already before. And I was a bit of an enemy of the state and knew exactly why I entered it, in order to have a political effect. (Excerpt from Interview 3)*

## **Theme 2: Identity**

In the time shaped by uncertainty and questions, participants often described how their interest and ensuing entry into the right-wing scene gave them a sense of identity. Being in the scene helped them identify with something positive, rooted them in the German history, and helped them gain stability through values endorsed by the scene, such as strength and discipline. Oftentimes, they also describe a direct link between actual family members (parents, grandparents, spouses) and their own identity in the right-wing scene.

*I could identify relatively quickly with this music, glorifying the soldiers of the Wehrmacht and national-socialism. And I also recognized my grandpa. (Excerpt from Interview 2)*

When members of the scene were mentioned, many participants noted the strong solidarity and family-like relationships.

*Within the right-wing scene, they get along very well, there is this solidarity which you can barely find anywhere else. (Excerpt from Interview 4)*

Identifying with the other members of the group and feeling a sense of belonging in this scene are aspects that have been found in prior research. However, the importance of ideology has been underestimated in current research on RWE. Some participants regarded the members only as a means to an end. If ideology was spoken of, it was often described as a search for truth and meaning, instilling a purpose in life in participants. Their ideology was in some cases even compared to a religion.

*[I saw myself as one of those] who uh well uh who preserve the teachings. A bit like the Jesuits. (Excerpt from Interview 1)*

When ideology was so strongly endorsed, it was the overriding factor and participants only used the group for furthering the ideology.

*Most of them were [...] means to an end. People you need to uh help the ideology uh become more powerful. [...] I quickly adapted this cynical attitude, uh well you have to manage with the human material that you have, there is no better one at the moment. And uh likewise uh well especially uh since I felt around 80% in the scene originated from the Skinhead-scene. And for me I always thought that uh [Pause] they are not useful anyway, so you might as well use them as fuel. (Excerpt from Interview 1)*

Whether the group membership or the ideology was more dominant, in all cases, at least one of the two aspects, group or ideology, was mentioned as playing a central role.

*Back then that gave me strength, [...] it makes you feel very different with this ideology in the background. [...] The ideology was very important to me, I held on to that for a very long time. It also gave me a lot of strength, to endure these... these battles, or to even betake to this path of battle. (Excerpt from Interview 3)*

Something that was also frequently mentioned was the appearance of groups, the strength they conveyed and the values they stood for (see coding scheme in the Appendix for examples). Along with the descriptions of the ideology, participants also spoke of their enemies. Enemies could be



the system, Jews, immigrants, or Muslims. Some participants specifically mentioned that they were not xenophobic. However, they made it very clear what the beliefs of their group or their ideology were and how they identified with them. This can be seen as enforcing the identity of the in-group by defining who is seen as the out-group.

### Theme 3: Freedom

While in the scene, participants also described their feelings of freedom. When they spoke of these feelings, they were usually based on a personal level and not on the group level. Participants felt they could express themselves through their activities. The freedom theme particularly emerged when participants were describing their personal involvement and political activism in the scene.

*Interviewer: Did you generally feel free in the scene?*

*Respondent: Well, I gotta say, I've never felt as good and free as I did back then in XXXXXX.<sup>1</sup>  
(Excerpt from Interview 9)*

The activities themselves were often described as a fight, with personal ambition, autonomy, strength, and motivation playing a central role. The political existence of the individual was usually described in much detail and played a main role in many aspects of the participants' lives.

*I sacrificed my weekends for it. A big part of my leisure time. I was out at night, a lot.  
(Excerpt from Interview 7)*

The high involvement in the scene was not only depicted as positive (negative aspects mentioned were for example the toll this had on their health), but at the same time many recognized that their political career left them feeling worthwhile and useful to society.

*Our actions, well they were always in the media. So we must have had some kind of effect. If even the Tagesspiegel [German newspaper] and all those reported on it. Or the Innensenator [Senator of the Interior] of Berlin mentioned us, or the Verfassungsschutz [intelligence service]. That must have some kind of meaning. (Excerpt from Interview 7)*

### Theme 4: Security

This theme encompasses the consequences that resulted from the aspects freedom and identity participants described in Theme 2 and 3. Personal meaning combined with ideology or group-based entrenchment resulted in participants feeling secure.

*Of course we had our arguments, many arguments are of course only imaginary elements or also arguments of protection, where we isolated ourselves, where it was very difficult to discuss with us [...] we only wanted to adopt a threatening posture, by disposing of the Kameradschaften [type of right-extremist group], who could also be violent. (Excerpt from Interview 3)*

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<sup>1</sup> Participants were assured that all names were going to be treated confidentially. In this case, the participant is referring to a region in Germany.



Friendships and ideological structure served as a protective shield towards the outside world while the personal involvement was seen as justified by the rewards participants reaped from them. For example, participants described the image they now conveyed to the outside world, the respect they got from peers, the power they had over others, but also the prejudices they were faced with.

*I would only say, it gave me a sense of security towards other groups or persons. I felt sure that if I had been attacked by someone, that there would have been people who would have... well uhm committed themselves to the protection of my body. (Excerpt from Interview 9)*

They may have felt unfairly treated by the police or by members outside the scene, pointing to the component perceived illegitimacy of authorities of the radical belief system by Doosje et al., but this only enforced their commitment to the scene.

Security may also have stemmed from the financial situation through being involved in the scene.

*Advantages? Yes, the solidarity and in some ways also the protection, financial security, yes, safety, yes these types of things. And also, yes, not to stand alone, to be able to depend on others, in every regard. [...] By being in the scene, in this network, so much more is possible. You can be sure you are not alone. (Excerpt from Interview 4)*

### **Theme 5: Ambiguity**

The last theme focuses on the aspects that raised questions in participants' minds concerning the ideology and the right-extremist group. Participants spoke about this ambiguity becoming increasingly salient right before they decided to exit the scene.

*Well, once it changed, my thinking and the distance to the ideology, it became more difficult and I really had to think: what can I still express, what can I even still say here? Where do I appear, what do I leave be? [...] And this being under pressure, and: We don't want you as a speaker anymore, and: What are you saying? Where you had to be really careful, what is borderline [...] what is conform to the expectations [original verbal emphasis] of the scene. That was very difficult towards the end. (Excerpt from Interview 3)*

Participants often described contradictions they were perceiving in the scene, between what they personally believed in and what the ideology prescribed them to believe, or the expectations other members had. In some cases they talked about how their private life did not go in line with the public life they had through their position in the scene. For example, one participant mentioned being in a romantic relationship with a non-German, which he had to keep a secret from the other members of the group. Another participant mentioned a relationship with a woman, who did not know anything about his involvement in the right-extremist scene. Particularly in these cases, participants spoke about leading a double life.

*Just the fact that my girlfriend back then was Polish, and then there was immediately this contradiction, somehow that couldn't be. And then for myself, for that to somehow work, I said, well, Poland used to be Silesia, Silesia used to be German, so that somehow has to work [laughs]. So I manufactured some kind of justification. But I knew, that wasn't really right. (Excerpt from Interview 7)*

The timeframe of this perceived ambiguity was usually several months before exiting the scene, and was shaped by questions and inconsistencies. It was also a time of self-evaluation, as many participants spoke of the responsibilities they felt they had towards themselves and towards society, and the shame they felt upon deciding to exit the scene. While one could claim that perceptions could be biased by the sample consisting of former right-wing extremists who told their experiences in retrospect, it seems these feelings certainly played a role at some point during the exit process.

*I was also responsible for her son who was in jail in his early twenties and had screwed up his life. And she always told me that to my face over and over again and uhm that was where I felt incredibly ashamed in front of this mother, and for the first time I really saw the victim and the deed how they really were. (Excerpt from Interview 2)*

Participants often had to decide how conform they wanted to be and how much they wanted to emphasize their individuality.

*[My mother] raised me to be someone who loves freedom [...] and a bit of that caught on, how I noticed that I couldn't really evolve. There is this constant motivating yourself, everyday, your behavior, your doing, it always has to be in accordance to the ideology. You constantly have to compare... if I go here and there, if I think or write this and that, is that all correct, ideologically? Always having to function, and that is extremely exhausting. [...] You have these goals but you are constantly running against a wall. And these goals uhm there is no light, and you have to keep motivating yourself, and then you reach this choke point. I think that was the moment where it started [...] these contradictions, the ideology and also this freedom, this term freedom, they don't uhm go together the way you try to internalize it. And then there were these decisive moments, where I first had contact to people on the outside. (Excerpt from Interview 2)*

Ultimately, this led to participants taking on a new identity after they had left the scene. Two participants legally changed their names, although many others have also starkly distanced themselves from the way they were while still in the scene.

*"Well, now I have this change of identities, and thereby I have decided for myself, I am a new person. And I'm not going to go around and tell everyone what happened." (Excerpt from Interview 4)*

## Discussion

In this study about the factors former right-wing extremists perceived to have played a role in their experiences of entry and exit of the scene, five core themes were identified. Contributions to research are particularly the emphasis participants placed on the role of ideology, as well as on agency. In the theme named ambiguity, it became especially clear that an interplay between the aspects identity and freedom was taking place.

A starting point and precondition to being open to ideas of an extremist nature was a kind of receptiveness to right-wing ideology and groups. Some participants were particularly keen on conveying the point that they are not cliché Neo-Nazis. They mentioned that they are not from

“asocial backgrounds,” therefore putting emphasis on not being stereotyped and instead seen as a distinct individual.

As participants began to become more interested in what the right-wing scene had to offer, they mentioned how at least one of the two aspects (identity or freedom) played a determining role in the entry process. Most participants also clearly explained the struggle of finding a balance between these two concepts, especially towards the time when participants were playing with the thought of dropping out of the scene. Identity and freedom are therefore simultaneously contradicting and complementing each other.

According to the Social Identity Theory (SIT) of Tajfel and Turner (1979), one portion of an individual’s self-construct, the social identity, is derived from membership in a social group. The social identity is a person’s sense of who they are, based on their social groups, and an important factor in stilling the need for belonging. The personal identity, on the other hand, is the part of the self-construct independent of social groups, as far as human beings can ever be independent of social influences. Tajfel and Turner’s definition of social identity comes close to what falls under the theme of identity in this study; the belonging need is stilled by being able to identify with other people and groups. SIT also explains how in-groups and out-groups are perceived and that discrimination against out-group members enhances the self-image of individuals. Since the theme identity included the perception of enemies, social identity seemingly plays an important role in the self-construct of participants as they entered the right-wing scene.

This disregards the aspect of ideology, possibly because ideology usually refers to a belief system that individuals adhere to. However, Kruglanski (2002) defines ideology in the following way:

“An ideology refers to collectivist objectives rather than individualist ones. It sets the welfare of the group above the individual’s personal welfare.” (p. 3)

If we adapt the notion that an ideology is grounded in social welfare and group interests, the collectivist nature of the identity theme becomes clear. This would then lead to a clear division between the theme identity in terms of social identity and the theme freedom in terms of personal identity.

However, it is important to remember that not all participants had the same experiences. Some participants spoke of the group members and of the scene in instrumental terms, using them only for the purpose of expediting their goals and building up the Fourth Reich. In that case, they tended to view ideology as the driving force and described themselves as the carrier of truth. Ideology offered meaning to their life and took on an almost religious character. By personally identifying themselves with the ideology, the ideology took on the role of an extended part of the self. The term identity therefore encompasses more than just social identity and more than Deutsch et al.’s definition of communion. It comes close to Max-Neef’s idea of identity, with an additional emphasis on the rootedness that the endorsement of ideology renders. This extends the notion of social belonging and social identity of prevalent research on RWE to include the significance of the ideology. Since this particular sample was of high-ranking elite members of the right-wing scene, this may be a finding that could not possibly have been taken into account by prior research.

The second central aspect was that of freedom. Freedom was not defined in a political fashion, but rather as the perceived personal freedom that participants described through being

autonomous agents in the scene. Personal freedom was strived for through high involvement in the scene. As Bandura (2000) states:

“Among the mechanisms of human agency, none is more focal or pervading than the belief of personal efficacy. This core belief is the foundation of human agency. Unless people believe that they can produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act.” (p. 75)

Bandura (2000) goes on to explain that perceived efficacy influences what course of action people choose, the goals they set for themselves, the commitment to those goals, how long they persevere in the face of obstacles, their resilience to adversity, and the accomplishment they realize. All of these aspects were at least in part mentioned by the participants in the freedom theme. The perception of efficacy was a key element of this theme; only while participants felt they were leaving imprints on the world around them, did the efforts they poured into the scene seem rewarding. Once participants felt their actions were not paying off, their views were challenged and their convictions began to crumble. Bandura (2000) also states that efficiency can best be perceived through collective action, which is where the role of the group/scene becomes salient. As one participant explained:

*And of course if you want to do propaganda, well, or collecting votes or whatever, you cannot do that alone, you need the group for that. And in that sense I was a representative of those who misuse the group or use the group to implement the goals. (Excerpt from Interview 3)*

While this study has tried to separately analyze the two themes identity and freedom, in reality they are very much entangled.

This finding implies that it may not be deprivation of certain basic needs that motivates individuals to join extremist groups. It may in fact be the want for self-actualization that serves as the motivating factor. Seeking agency and demonstrating self-efficacy implies that the individual wants to be able to actively shape his or her environment. This perspective provides a novel way of viewing individuals engaged in the right-wing scene. It shifts the view from a passive, troubled teenager, to active, ambitious individuals who find the ideology and scene appealing in order to become agents of their destiny by shaping the environment and society they live in.

This brings us to the last theme, which is where the rivalry and disaccords of identity and freedom became clear to the participants. While the theme security still focuses on the positive consequences derived from being involved in the scene, ambiguity refers to the inner struggle participants underwent.

Here it became clear that the expectations of the group members and/or of the ideology in many cases constricted the personal freedom of participants. Opinions conflicting with the prescribed ideology could not be expressed and some parts of their lives were thereby suppressed as long as they were active in the scene. In some cases, participants reported feeling extremely controlled and restricted by other members of the scene, sometimes even resulting in violence. For two participants, this meant that upon leaving the scene, they had to legally change their name and move to a secret location. But even while still being involved in the scene, participants often described living a “double life.” It seems that in some ways the individual identity evolved onwards and could no longer remain conform to the expectations of the scene while the social identity demanded of participants to bow to the rules of the scene. All participants described

“contradictions” as having been a crucial factor for questioning the scene and eventually leaving it.

In a way, the aspect of freedom was simultaneously an entry factor and an exit factor. Agency was something many participants seem to have been striving for and the scene offered them this opportunity. Upon being specifically asked, one participant admitted that he may as well have become involved in a left-wing extremist group. Others, however, spoke specifically of the interest they had in the right-wing ideology since they felt it was a link to the values they had been brought up with or could identify with, out of their own accord.

### **Limitations**

It is important to keep in mind the limitations of this study. First, the eight participants who have dropped out of the right-wing scene can in no way speak for those who are still in the scene. A self-selecting bias is therefore very evident. Second, since all participants were acquired through EXIT Deutschland, they were not the average dropouts of the scene since EXIT usually deals with more difficult cases. Most of our participants were high-ranking members of the scene, often having founded their own groups and played central roles. It may therefore very well be that due to this unique sample, the findings of this study deviate from findings of other studies on right-wing extremists. While this is certainly a constraint, it is at the same time a strength of this study since little has been researched into this direction before.

It is also clear that this is an exploratory study, which can only try to shed light on specific issues that have not been sufficiently studied in the area of right-extremist research, but cannot be generalized to the wider population of former right-wing extremists.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that every interview included very individual stories, influenced by personal experiences. Not all five themes emerged in the same clarity throughout every interview. Personal stories were excluded from this analysis for the sake of focusing on understudied aspects.

As two participants themselves remarked, interviews can only capture so much, and it is very hard to describe the emotions experienced in a specific phase, at a specific time. Qualitative research helps alleviate some of these problems, but the depth of the experiences will never be fully reflected and research will always constrain real-life events.

### **Conclusion**

Implications of this study are far-reaching. In order to combat right-wing terrorism, many European governments are trying to better understand the factors that influence entry into extremist groups. Many thereby focus on understanding the role of the socioeconomic status of individuals or the personality traits that may endanger individuals to radicalize. While these are certainly important aspects, it may be beneficial to also examine the individual as a self interested agent without defining interest in a strictly economic sense (e.g. Crozier & Friedberg, 1995). What are his or her motivations for becoming involved in an extremist group?

For practice, the implications of this study mean that organizations like EXIT Deutschland are necessary in helping specifically high-ranking members of the right-extremist scene exit. Since the

factors and motivators for entry and exit processes alike are complicated and deeply intertwined, well trained personnel is imperative for successful intervention and prevention methods. Additionally, if the goal is to reduce the high-ranking leaders of the right-wing scene, one must be aware that these individuals are possibly in the process of satisfying higher-level needs, going beyond the basic human needs such as safety and moving towards being-needs. External factors may play a greater role when it comes to lower-level members of the right-wing scene, and these individuals need to be assessed and treated differently. It could also be possible that through different motivators, the radicalization process plays out differently. For those who see the scene as a possibility to positively expand and grow, rising in the hierarchy of right-wing groups may continue providing positive incentives. Individuals looking to satisfy deprived needs may lose interest once those deficiencies have been satisfied and may in fact drop out of the scene much faster and without far-reaching consequences for the personal well-being or self-construct.

Implications for theory are to consider the newfound aspects that became clear through this study. Most current theories incorporate a structure-based or deprivation-based view. This study has found that the dual search for belonging and search for agency, termed identity and freedom, were found to be at the basis of becoming involved in the right-extremist scene. If the higher-levels human needs were to be satisfied through other means, the right-extremist scene might not enjoy such a large clientele. As it stands, it seems that these gaps are filled by entering the scene through a combination of the ideology, the group members, and perceived agency. RWE as attracting only asocial individuals incapable of higher human activity (such as strive for agency and self-actualization) have previously been denied. Hence, media, but also general theory portray right-wing extremists as engaging in deviant and pathological behavior.

Much more research is needed to gain a clearer picture of all possible factors and motivators. Quite concretely, the role of the right-wing ideology versus other ideologies could be explored to understand why people specifically chose this sort of extremism over other types, for example left-wing extremism or religious fundamentalism. Research on the exit process and the difficulties it comes with has also not yet been extensive. Understanding the effects this has can ultimately build better intervention campaigns and reduce the rise of RWE in many European countries. Overall, this study already provides an important contribution to better understanding the attraction of the right-wing scene.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

### 1. Introduction

Presentation of interviewer and research project

Consent form

Confidentiality

Recording the interview

Formalities (Duzen/Siezen)

### 2. Joining a right-wing extremist group

Can you tell me a little bit about your life before you became involved in the right-wing scene?

Assess if following parts were included:

- a. Relationship to family
- b. Private relationships (friends, peers, romantic relationships)
- c. Involvement in sports clubs/other activities

When and how did you hear about the RWE scene?

Assess if following parts were included:

- a. Was contacted by others/looked for contact him/herself
- b. Media (Internet, demonstrations, music)

In retrospect, can you tell me why you became involved?

Assess if following parts were included:

- a. Problems in life
- b. Problems in society
- c. Special event
- d. Emotions: anger, frustration, rage
- e. Search for adventure, feeling strong

Did you feel that people with similar ideals were not taken seriously? If so, from whom?

Assess if following parts were included:

- a. Feelings of humiliation
- b. Bullying
- c. Isolation
- d. Threat

### 3. Being a member of the group

Can you describe how you experienced being a members of the group?

At what point did you see yourself as a true member of the group?

How important was this group to you?

Can you tell me something about your group in relation to other groups? For example, democratic RWE groups such as the NPD, non-democratic RWE groups, non-RWE groups such as Muslim organizations, etc.

What did you perceive as advantages of being a member of this group?

What did you not like about being a member of this group?

Did your ideals go in line with the ideals of the group?

### 4. Leaving the group

Can you tell me a bit about why you decided to leave the group?

Assess if following parts were included:

- a. Doubts about efficiency
- b. Behavior of group members
- c. Polarization of opinions
- d. Ideology
- e. Goals of the group

Can you tell me how you came to leave the group?

Assess if following parts were included:

- a. Help from outside the group
- b. Contact to others
- c. Connection to society at large

- d. Help afterwards

As a member of the group, did you ever use violence?

Assess if following parts were included:

- a. Violent thoughts and intentions
- b. Emotions: Satisfaction, shame

#### 5. Identity and self-worth

We have now talked about the phases before, during, and after the exiting of the group. Thinking back, how would you describe yourself when you were a member in the group?

Assess if following parts were included:

- a. Purpose in life
- b. Identity: importance of group for the individual
- c. Self-esteem and self-worth
- d. Possibility to change something through the group
- e. Free will and opinions in the group

#### 6. Evaluation of existing programs

This last part of the interview aims at preventing youths from isolating themselves from society and entering the right-wing scene. Who do you think is best equipped to help?

Assess if following parts were included:

- a. Parents, friends
- b. Authorities (teachers)
- c. First line workers

How can youths be prevented from endorsing RWE ideals?

- a. Role models
- b. Establishing trust and respect
- c. Training competencies

#### 7. Finishing statement

In conclusion, what would you say to youths who are in danger of entering the right-wing scene?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Participants were thanked for their time.

-END-

## Appendix B: Coding scheme

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
<b>Receptiveness</b>	Relationship with family	Relationship with family overall or with specific family members is mentioned by participants.	“Several things went wrong and she was as a mother [Pause] never there, the way it should be, I think. [...] she was very young when I was born and I was [...] not a planned child. [...] She always wanted to leave, she wanted to travel, and then I was a bit the nuisance factor.” (Excerpt from Interview 2)
	Influence of family	Influence that family overall or specific family members had in sparking interest of the participant to become involved in the RW scene.	“Well, first of all it was that all the theses I heard at home from my father and so on, I found those in conversations with classmates but also in discussions with various political groups.” (Excerpt from Interview 9)
	Relationship with peers	Relationship participant describes to have had with peers, positive as well as negative.	“But I got a certain level of respect, uh uh seeing as I was the only one in this class... [...] And there was this strange relationship between me and my peers, we were the oldest ones at this school, and we partied a lot, and I was always invited and all that, but there was this strange interaction.” (Excerpt from Interview 2)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
	Influence of peers	Influence peers had in sparking interest of the participant to become involved in RW scene.	"Yeah and then there were these right-wing people, well, they weren't really in the scene but right-wing oriented, and they approached me." (Excerpt from Interview 7)
	Life goals	Participant mentions plans he/she had for the future, perspective he/she had or lacked, and how he/she imagined his/her life to play out.	"The goals, that you have in your life [...] having a proper job, starting a family, building a house, all those suburban things" (Excerpt from Interview 2)
	Political direction	Political interest and direction before entry into the RW scene.	"My life or so on always stood well uh as long as I uh can remember, in this right-wing, sort of conservative context." (Excerpt from Interview 1)
	Puberty	Aspects related to puberty are mentioned by participant.	"Of course with 12, 15, puberty. That was also this martial appearance, showing masculinity, strength, the first experiments with alcohol" (Excerpt from Interview 2)
	Self-esteem	Participant mentions his/her self-esteem before entry into RW scene.	"Very shy little boy before [...] And they gave me back my self-esteem, ideals. They built me up." (Excerpt from Interview 7)



<i>Theme</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
	Difficult events	Participant mentions difficult or traumatic life events that affected him/her.	"I already had a girlfriend [laughs] before I got involved into the scene [...] and she was addicted to chemical drugs, which I only found out later. [...] I was very disappointed when she first stopped and then started again. And such kinds of disappointments I had frequently." (Excerpt from Interview 9)
<b>Freedom</b>	Fight	Being involved in the scene is described as a fight. Warlike aspects of the scene are mentioned, in direct relation to the participant.	"to endure these... these battles, or to even betake to this path of battle." (Excerpt from Interview 3)
	Ambition	Ambition and drive participant felt while being involved in RW scene.	"The purpose in life was the ideology, it was the fight, the actionism, and uhm also this constant motivation." (Excerpt from Interview 2)
	Career	Participant speaks of involvement in the scene as of a career.	"I really experienced it as a type of career ladder, which you can climb." (Excerpt from Interview 3)
	Political existence	Participant describes his life in terms of political activism.	"I sacrificed my weekends for it. A big part of my leisure time. I was out at night, a lot." (Excerpt from Interview 7)
	Strength	Strength as an important aspect of the scene is mentioned.	"It's in this clique, you can shows strength there." (Excerpt from Interview 2)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
	Efficiency	Participant mentions how scene is/is not efficient.	"You have these goals but you are constantly running against a wall" (Excerpt from Interview 2)
	Ideology	How was ideology construed by participants.	"[I saw myself as one of those] who uh well uh who preserve the teachings. A bit like the Jesuits." (Excerpt from Interview 1)
	Feeling free	Feelings of freedom are described by participant.	"I've never felt as good and free as I did back then in XXXXXX." (Excerpt from Interview 9)
	Group as instrument	Group/scene/members are described to have been instrumentalized by participant.	"Most of them were [...] means to an end. People you need to uh help the ideology uh become more powerful. [...] And for me I always thought that uh (Pause) they are not useful anyway, so you might as well use them as fuel." (Excerpt from Interview 1)
<b>Identity</b>	Interest in history	Participant describes his/her interest in history.	"Then I had always been very interested in histor... uh in history." (Excerpt from Interview 9)
	Distancing of clichés	Participant distances him/herself from clichés about Neo-Nazis.	"We said that we want to free ourselves from these Skinheads and these clichés, that's not us at all, and uh we created a new subculture." (Excerpt from Interview 2)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
	Enemies	Enemies of the group/scene are described.	"I never saw them as the true enemy. I said, well, there must be something about them if they have been persecuted for over 2000 years, but the problem in Germany today is not of the Jews but of Muslims." (Excerpt from Interview 7)
	Group as family	RW scene is described in family-like terms.	"I saw it as a second family, the uh community, the solidarity, uh that was very important to me." (Excerpt from Interview 2)
	Values	Values of the group/scene/ideology are mentioned by participant.	"Keeping the values from back then active; faithfulness, loyalty, honor, and so on." (Excerpt from Interview 7)
	Identification	Participant identifies with aspects of group or ideology.	"And I could really identify with some of those texts" (Excerpt from Interview 9)
<b>Stability</b>	Protection	Group offers protection against physical, emotional or other threats.	"it gave me a sense of security towards other groups or persons. I felt sure that if I had been attacked by someone, that there would have been people who would have... well uhm committed themselves to the protection of my body." (Excerpt from Interview 9)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
	Friendships and solidarity	Friendships and solidarity in the scene are described as giving stability.	“And also, yes, not to stand alone, to be able to depend on others, in every regard. [...] By being in the scene, in this network, so much more is possible. You can be sure you are not alone.” (Excerpt from Interview 4)
	Discipline and structure	Discipline and structure of the scene as providing stability is described.	“That is to say that order, orders and obedience, discipline was very important. There were uniform shirts, with which you went to events, also internal events. Of course also alcohol prohibition and so on [...] and the hierarchical structure [...] honestly, I liked that a lot better there.” (Excerpt from Interview 2)
<b>Ambiguity</b>	Contradictions	Contradictions between specific aspects of being involved in RW scene are mentioned.	“And these goals uhm there is no light, and you have to keep motivating yourself, and then you reach this choke point. I think that was the moment where it started [...] these contradictions, the ideology and also this freedom” (Excerpt from Interview 2)
	Questioning	Participant describes how he/she began questioning himself or aspects of the group.	“When people asked me, ‘well, what do you represent?’ And that was the question, where things started moving again, exactly this dissatisfaction, yes, what are you representing?” (Excerpt from Interview 2)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
	Submission	Submission of participants to the ideology/expectations of group members is described.	"What are you saying? Where you had to be really careful, what is borderline [...] what is conform to the expectations" (Excerpt from Interview 3)
	Control	How group members controlled/surveilled participants is described.	"Where sometimes you are controlled and surveilled, yes I also experienced all of that." (Excerpt from Interview 4)
	Shame	Feelings of shame and guilt are described by participant.	"I was also responsible for her son who was in jail in his early twenties and had screwed up his life. And she always told me that to my face over and over again and uhm that was where I felt incredibly ashamed in front of this mother, and for the first time I really saw the victim and the deed how they really were." (Excerpt from Interview 2)
	Double life	Participant describes how he/she had dual identities in or after exiting the scene.	"Hmm I was playing a double game. I also partially lied to myself in that respect." (Excerpt from Interview 7)
	Hiding	Participant describes how he/she hid certain aspects of his/her private life from the scene or from members outside the scene.	"She knew that I had certain nationalistic attitudes, but she did not know how far it went." Excerpt from Interview 7)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
	Identify after exit	Participant describes how he has taken on a different identity after exiting the scene.	“Well, now I have this change of identities, and thereby I have decided for myself, I am a new person. And I’m not going to go around and tell everyone what happened.” (Excerpt from Interview 4)