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# Right-wing Extremism in Switzerland

National and International Perspectives

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## 15. Right-Wing Extremist Youth: Motivations for Exiting the Right-Wing Extremist Scene and Clique Structure

*Saskia Bollin, Corinne Sieber, Nina Studer, Ueli Mäder, Wassilis Kassis*

*In recent decades, research on right-wing extremism has mainly addressed the pre-conditions and mechanisms that lead to right-wing extremism among the young. But which factors support the motivation to disengage and dissuade young people from taking an active part in the right-wing extremist scene? In our three-year longitudinal study (2003 – 2006) we attempted to discover the various influencing factors and to weight them. In the present report, we focus in particular on the question of how the different structures of right-wing extremist groups influence the development of a motivation to exit the scene. We also look at what determines the subsequent process of distancing oneself from that scene.*

### *Right-wing extremist orientation patterns*

What is this right-wing extremist scene from which youths should distance themselves? Right-wing extremist groups cultivate specific values and express them in the form of political demands and/or activism that ranges from provocative to violent. The attitudes espoused are National Socialist, anti-Semitic, racist, sexist, and authoritarian (Studer 2005).

In our study, we wanted to work to bring the disintegration and dominance hypotheses together. Our own work (see Kassis 2005) indicates it makes no sense to prolong the dispute between »dominance orientation,« as an expression of structurally transmitted right-wing extremism (see Rommelspacher 1998; 1993) and »disintegration theory,« which explains right-wing extremism as a product of the social disintegration of the individuals studied (compare Heitmeyer 1995a; 1995b; 1992a; 1987). Rommelspacher and Heitmeyer, the main proponents of these two hypotheses, have both stated repeatedly that this polarization is senseless and that what is required is an integrated approach (see Heitmeyer 1990; 1994).

Instead, we proceed from the assumption that the locations where social deficits can be found in right-wing extremist youth are not necessarily the same locations where the problems arise. We quite often see problems that stem from society and social structures in the families of right-wing extremist youth, for example. At the same time, however, each family – with its specific socialization constellation – develops specific ways to deal with its problems.

Following Heitmeyer (1992b), a right-wing extremist orientation contains two basic elements that are decisive. One is an **ideology of inequality**, or dominance orientations (see Rommelspacher 1998), that can be expressed in regarding certain persons

as inferior, and in demanding exclusion of foreigners through unequal treatment, whether socially, economically, culturally, legally, or politically. The other is an **acceptance of violence**, which can range from the conviction that violence inevitably exists (approval of unequal treatment), through the approval of violent acts by others, to a person's own willingness to use violence and actually committing violent acts. A young person is thus defined as completely detached from the right-wing extremist scene only when he or she casts aside ideas of inequality, such as racist prejudice, as well as the acceptance of violence associated with those ideas, and also breaks off contact with »comrades« in the scene (Studer 2005, 6).

#### *Data of 67 interviews and 100 standardized questionnaires*

The basis of our empirical research consisted of 67 interviews, in which participants were asked about their biography, attitudes, experiences in a right-wing extremist group or scene, and exiting from the scene, in the context of family and groups. In total, 40 persons, ranging in age from 14 to 35, participated (35 men and 5 women). They had either been part of the right-wing extremist scene, in varying contexts, or were still integrated in the scene when data was first collected. Participants were generally aged between 18 and 23. Two-thirds of the participants were between 15 and 20. At the time of the first interview, 16 persons had already left the right-wing extremist scene and 9 were still »clique members« with regular contact to the right-wing extremist scene. It was unclear for 15 of the participants whether they should be categorized as clique members or as drop-outs from the scene, due to their attitudes and their irregular (or sparse) contacts. Precisely these participants were of central interest in the analysis, as their ambivalent status helped reveal factors that either promoted or impeded disengagement from the scene in particularly clear fashion.

Of the 40 youth who participated in the first interview, 27 (24 men and 3 women) took part in the second interview (68 percent). Two youths were members of right-wing extremist cliques and six persons had still some sort of irregular contacts to the scene. 19 of them had left the right-wing extremist scene. Out of the 19 youths who did not belong to the scene anymore, five boys exited the scene while the empirical research was taking place. Two of them were clearly integrated in the scene at the first interview; the other three belonged to the ambivalent cases.

During the analysis of our extensive data, we also conducted conversations with two sets of parents of youths who did not participate in the study. Their insights supported our findings.

Each interview lasted from one and a half to two hours. In addition, the participants had to fill out three questionnaires at intervals of six months each.

What are we able to read out of this data set? In the main, it provides an interpretation of what the interviewees experienced (Rosenthal, 1995). Thus, when participants explained their membership in a right-wing group, the reason(s) for their leaving, and their current values and attitudes, then this involved subjective ascription of meaning and coherence.

However, two factors allowed us to find latent structures in the data as well. First, we added questions which seemed relevant from a social science point of view. In addition to demographic details, we also collected information about their peer relations in and outside the scene, their other interests and hobbies, their families, and their own clique. We included specific statements in the questionnaire as codes in order to discover their attitudes toward inequality and their acceptance of violence. We then focused on contextual and intervening factors that might support the motivation to exit. Second, we compared the arguments of group members, ambivalent youths, and youths who had quit the scene. Our analysis is based on the entire dataset, treated as one case. In other words, a category that was created to define a particular aspect must fit logically into all the other 39 interviews. For example, we labelled one key category of exit motivation »burnout«. We found typical burnout symptoms in cases with an early fixation on right-wing attitudes, a clear (ideological) identification, the willingness to take over a main function in the scene, and a personal need to effect something. We could not find the same symptoms in other cases where interviewees had *not* taken over such a prominent role in the scene and did *not* show a strong belief in racist theories. This example indicates that the reasons for exit are not – as is often assumed – simply a question of age.

With this approach and theoretical sampling using a longitudinal design we were able to meet the criteria of the »grounded theory« in the sense used by Strauss and Corbin (1996).

#### *A tight-knit, exclusive society*

As Studer (2005) describes it, right-wing extremist cliques are a relatively new aspect of youth culture. Right-wing cliques have achieved a significant public presence since the early 1990s. They now define their own arenas of action through having their own place, spaces and time, and pursue »politics in the street« (Hafenecker and Jansen 2001). They cultivate a clearly defined subculture that is expressed through clothing, symbolic emblems, and joint actions that put racist-nationalist and anti-Semitic ideas on show. This is a tight-knit, exclusive society that seeks to defend itself against »external enemies« and that is defined by its political ideology (Studer 2005, 6). As a result, anti-Semitic thinking comes in even in the absence of any direct contact with Jews.

Highly exaggerated values of **comradeship**, **solidarity**, **honour**, and **loyalty** make disengagement from the scene difficult (Studer 2005, 6). At the same time, the youth is integrated in a social network that hardly allows for emotional or confidential relationships.

Group cohesion is safeguarded continuously using three central modes or mechanisms:

- 1) through discourses of group and nation, and corresponding mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that trigger the construction of images of the enemy and processes of depersonalization, which under certain conditions can favour physical violence;

- through ritualized collective action that allows a collective identity to grow and that devalues personal identity, or reduces the ability for autonomous, individual action;
- through distinctive clothing and music that set the scene apart.

The degree of organization varies strongly among right-wing extremist youth more firmly bound into the scene. Case studies and quantitative investigations (see Eckert, Reis and Wetzstein 2000; Hafenegger and Jansen 2001; Hafenegger 1993) suggest that the cliquish character of these groups, measured by the degree of radicalization of ideas about inequality and the group members' readiness to use violence, can be »soft,« »medium,« or »hard.« Hafenegger's findings indicate that »soft« or »softer« cliques tend to contain younger juveniles (aged 14 to 17), while members of »medium« to »harder« cliques are typically 18 to 23 (Hafenegger and Jansen 2001, 39).

Our most important findings concern the quite variable degree of societal integration found in these types of cliques (also confirmed by Eckert et al. 2000, 19). Young people in »softer« cliques are socially integrated in other groups that are encouraged or tolerated by society at large, including as local clubs and associations (fire department, sports clubs, and others). They also have contacts to other young people outside the right-wing extremist scene. At the same time, while their relations with family and school are somewhat strained, they can be still be seen as functioning (see Hafenegger and Jansen 2001, 212).

Members of »medium« and especially »hard« cliques, in contrast, have either cut off relations to outside persons or reduced them to the level of services or favours. Relationships to school, family, and the adult world in general are severely disturbed. With »medium« cliques, however, their members still have some »threads« tying those to young people outside the right-wing extremist scene.

In general, the groupings are under little adult control, and a strong repressive pressure rules with respect to assertion of the self by the individual. All those in the group must obey the group authority, and distance themselves from other groups through their appearance, actions, and provocative behaviour if they are to survive in the group. The strong internal pressure leads to dangerous group-dynamic processes and to an escalation of violence.

Right-wing extremist groups are mainly made up of young men. But some young **women**, not content to only remain in the role of girlfriend of a member, are themselves members of right-wing extremist groups. In addition to **girlfriend of a member** (dependent status), we found two further types of female member: the **co-initiator**, a recognized member of the group who exercises core functions but must assert herself in the male-dominated scene using the same means, and the **sympathizer**, an accepted independent member of the group who tends to continue to take a classical girl's role (supportive person in the background).

#### *Four types of cliques*

The right-wing extremist scene has a heterogeneous structure, and four types of cliques can be distinguished.

- The **loose alliances** are large groups. They have defensive ideas about inequality. In addition, the organization has a formally open structure with a shallow, two-level hierarchy (core members and sympathizers) and a low level of politicization. These loose alliances have a young age structure (aged 12 to 18). These are mixed-gender groups that favour meeting at public gathering places like railway stations.

- The **patriotic-nationalistic groupings** are large groups. They also have defensive ideas about inequality, but they are better organized than the loose alliances. They have a three-level hierarchy (leader, core member, sympathizer) and a high level of politicization and organization. The age structure is mixed. Young males with good middle-class backgrounds predominate. Political aims are important, including verbal disassociation from right-wing parties and extreme right-wing skinheads.

- The **informal youth cliques** are small groups. They have ambivalent ideas about inequality and act, at times, offensively to support their views. In addition, the organization has a semi-formal structure with a three-level hierarchy (leader, core member, sympathizer) and a low-to- medium level of politicization. Compared to loose alliances, these groups are more organized, but in contrast to the patriotic-nationalistic groups, they are less political and more closed. The age structure is mixed. Girls make up about one-quarter of the members. Public and private gathering places are popular with these informal youth cliques. As to background, intact, middle-class families predominate. The within-group relationships are more intense and more constant, due among other things to the small group structure.

- The **comradeships** are small groups. They hold hardened, offensive ideas about inequality. In addition, the organization has a formally closed structure, of a »secret society« type, with a two-level, strict hierarchy (leaders and core members) and a low level of politicization. Political participation is not an aim. The »system as enemy« is the predominant attitude. The strict organization of the group does not allow for sympathizer status. This type of clique tends to be made up of young men who are somewhat older than in the other groups (20 to 30) with extreme attitudes and/or psychological problems. Women are not desired and are therefore very much in the minority. The »comradeships« see themselves as elites within the right-wing extremist scene.

#### *Entering the right-wing extremist scene*

With the exception of comradeship, right-wing extremist groups have a relatively accessible opportunity structure, and no special abilities are required for membership. To be recognized within the group, it is sufficient to show an acceptance of the group opinions.

If one looks at the course of a »career« in this context – starting with the motivation to enter this scene, through the characteristics of members, and to the motivation to exit again and adapt »anew« to society – we found **two specifiable lines of development**

in our qualitative data set: one is oriented toward compensation, the other toward ambition.

[Lines of development are empirically based on the methodological requirement of a systematic and transparent »construction of types« (see Kluge and Kelle 1999). The lines differ with respect to their external heterogeneity (at the level of the type) but are also characterized by the internal heterogeneity of their attributes and their (meaningful) interrelationships (at the level of the type). When referring to youths belonging to a particular line of development, we use the term »type«: compensatory type and ambitious type.]

The concept of a line of development helps in understanding the role ideology plays in the course of group membership, and also indicates the most probable motivations for exit. To be able to offer support for youths in the exit process, it is important to understand their entire careers in the right-wing extremist scene. The links between a line of development and the processes and motivations for exit are detailed below.

– In the foreground of the **compensatory line of development** is satisfaction of social, emotional, and/or needs specific to the life phase, such as needs arising during puberty and transitions (e.g., leaving school, choosing a vocation, becoming self-supporting). Such youths are less at risk of embarking on longer right-wing extremist careers, and have little political or ideological motivation for entering the scene. The compensatory type prevails in groups that meet in public and are discernibly right-wing extremist. In such groups, most participants have completed secondary school. The compensatory type also includes those who have fled into the seeming stability of the right-wing extremist groups due to instability in their own social environments. They may internalize right-wing extremist attitudes that were initially unimportant to them.

– The **ambitioned line of development** is found in the more ideologized forms of right-wing extremism, since the motivations for joining the scene is ideological and political. Early on, say from age 10 to 15, its members are **fixated on questions of values and the search for meaning**. In the foreground is the motivation to change society, and to do so by strengthening the ambitions found in the right-wing scene. Determinants of membership here are found in family structures and attitudes, personality characteristics (like stubbornness or a tendency towards extremism in attitude and behaviour), and early, unresolved **experiences as victims**. These youths tend to stay in the scene longer, and are from relatively mixed social backgrounds. The age structure is heterogeneous and includes adults.

#### *Disengagement from the right-wing extremist scene*

Our research team discovered six factors that were decisive for developing the motivation to exit the right-wing extremist scene.

a) The **right-wing extremist group as a dysfunctional system**. For one, the network of social »comradeship« is not supportable over the longer term. For another, the group interferes with or hinders relationships and exchange with other systems

(including other importance reference groups such as family, peers not part of the scene, neighbourhood acquaintances, or sportsmates).

The uniting, and binding, element in the group is not individual affection but an **ideal of »comradeship.«** Personal problems are ignored, and fear, sorrow, and grief are considered weaknesses. Friendly relations take place more at the outskirts of group activities, and they help promote reasons for exiting the group and disengaging from its collective identity ideals. If there are internal conflicts, these social deficits in the relationship pattern within the group quickly leads to **splitting away from the group**. Perceived contradictions between the maxims communicated by the group and its actions in practice also promote disengagement. Those of the »compensatory type« gain a sense of the group as dysfunctional more quickly than do those of the »ambitioned type«. In addition, those in »comradeships« and »informal youth cliques« often perceive such dysfunctionality much later – the former because the »comradeship« does not permit any other relationship experiences at all, and the latter because there are stronger mutual personal (protective) feelings of commitment in the smaller groups.

b) **Positive contacts with »outsiders/foreigners.«** Positive experiences with enemy groups lead to a breaking down of ideas of inequality, if the experiences occur under certain conditions, in particular, repeated positive contacts. This happens in situations in which there is a need to cooperate, for example, if people live together in an institution or if they share leisure-time interests. Indirect contacts via colleagues who have good relationships with foreign youths also have an encouraging effect. Young persons of the »compensatory type« involved in »loose associations« or »patriotic/nationalistic groups« tend to have more opportunities of this kind in their free time.

c) **A lack of effectiveness regarding political/ideological ambitions.** In order to be taken as serious social actors, right-wing extremists need social legitimation. And yet they also engage in conscious provocation. In both types noted above, young persons who are motivated to exit the right-wing extremist scene say their membership is »useless.« The violence itself seems more and more pointless, and even those who are ideologically-inclined, and who belong to a »comradeship«, come to feel similarly. They experience a lack of socio-political effectiveness that accompanies their marginal standing, and they do not feel that they are being taken seriously as persons.

d) **Satiation of lived-out needs.** Group life proves monotonous, especially for the »compensatory type«. The constant hostilities, arguing during public conflicts, confrontations with the police, and court proceedings become a burden and a strain. There is little time to recover, as group members cannot withdraw for reasons of group solidarity, and their private opportunities for rest and relaxation are very limited. Members also become oversaturated as a result of a fixation on particular thought patterns, though without them ever being discussed. Both »comradeships« and »patriotic/nationalistic groups« conduct debates on fundamental principles, with the group therefore undergoing a certain cognitive development, the »loose associations« and the »informal youth cliques« do not get any further than hackneyed phrases picked up in the scene.

e) **Burnout.** Burnout symptoms are found mainly in the ›ambitioned type‹ that associates in »comradeships.« The symptoms reflect overly high personal expectations of one's own effectiveness and a sometimes strong need for recognition. The effort expended and the results achieved are disproportionate, particularly for those in leadership positions. The social contacts revolve almost exclusively around personal engagement. Reconciliation between the demands of the scene and responsibilities in other areas of life is perceived as difficult, which ultimately leads to disengagement.

f) **Criminal proceedings are perceived as a strain.** Researchers have conflicting opinions whether criminal proceedings motivate young people to exit the scene. Criminal proceedings do promote disengagement, if they go into effect soon after the criminal offence, and if the young person is required by the court to perform a personal, tangible service such as community service. However, the stronger the identification with the group, the more that likely that the criminal proceedings enhance and validate that person's status and value within the group. This negative effect is found mainly in the »comradeship« and »informal youth clique« Types.

#### *Further influences on the motivation(s) to exit*

Contextual conditions can variously reinforce or weaken the effect of the six exit factors described above. We established two main categories of indirect influences on disengagement:

The first consists of all personal influences. This includes developmental tasks achieved, identity-creating capital (hobbies, talents, success experiences, and the like), personality characteristics, and biographical aspects. To young persons with interesting hobbies and other interests, the right-wing extremist group usually does not contribute any further in content/substance. In the case of the ›patriotic/nationalistic‹ group and the ›comradeship‹ group, it develops further only to a small extent.

The motivation to exit the scene is also affected by social influences. They include the type of clique, the person's position in the clique, peer network, family, the public, and the social pressure to adapt. The more deeply one enters into the scene, the more likely previous contacts will be broken off. This is the case particularly with the »comradeship« type, as it makes heavy demands on its members' time. A leadership position in a clique – that is, detaching from the clique context and taking over responsibility for the whole clique – can also trigger a phase of reflection. The right-wing extremist clique is then seen from a different perspective, and it is one that members must be able to identify with.

The more radical a group is, and the more a young person feels integrated in it, the less opportunity there is to perceive and even concede the possibility of conflicts and objections.

#### *Consequences of leaving the scene*

The course of exiting the scene is both various and problematic, depending on the type of clique and the function of the person leaving the group. Exiting »comradeships« is difficult due to the possibility of betrayal. A young person who has left the group can be seen by the remaining members as a personal disappointment and a breach of trust, but also as a threat. Acts of revenge taken out on the person who has left can strengthen and stabilize the group once again.

In the »loose alliances,« arbitrary developments in the inner life of the clique are possible. Dangerous group dynamics and bullying are characteristic. Exiting the scene can therefore take a difficult course. Because of the size and the personal relations in the »informal youth cliques«, the clique structure is not in itself decisive for the likelihood that exiting will be difficult. In »patriotic-nationalistic groups,« involvement and exit depend on political conviction, and therefore take an unproblematic course.

#### *Leaving the Scene while Remaining Engaged?*

How can one define »leaving« in this context? When has a young person truly exited the scene? We observed three possibilities:

**Disengagement.** We call young persons disengaged if they no longer have contact with the group and the scene, and if their ideas of inequality have become much more moderate. No longer associating with their old clique or the scene, they also otherwise prefer personal relationships that are independent of any dominant group identity. They apparently no longer hold with right-wing extremist thinking, and we find no indications of unconscious right-wing extremist attitudes in their interview responses otherwise.

**Exiting without disengagement.** If young persons maintain ideas about inequality – consciously or not – after leaving the group, we speak of »exiting without disengagement.« Here young persons of both types proved equally affected. So we still wish to discover the significance of giving up inequality and dominance and the process of leaving violence behind (see Bauriedl 2001) by examining it in relation to our investigation of young people's social identities.

For the ›compensatory types‹, who entered the scene with little to no political or ideological motivation, low identification does not lead to conscious reflection on ideas of inequality. Looking back, after leaving, they call their group membership »just a phase,« and do not engage in differentiated reflection as to the politics involved. As a result, they also persist in their ideas of inequality, without being consciously aware they are doing so. For this reason, it is not exactly correct to speak of »just a phase.« For the ›ambitioned types‹, as a consequence of strong identification and staying in the group longer, right-wing extremist attitudes can become more fixed. Ideological thinking leaves its mark and can not be broken down from one day to the next. Critical examination of ideological fragments is made possible mainly through discussion with others.

**Joining a right-wing political party.** This alternative is mainly chosen by the ›ambitioned type‹. The danger here is that ideas of inequality are not abandoned but instead rationalized. In the right-wing party realm, those who have exited from an extremist group finds a socially recognized confirmation of their fundamental convictions, in a more compact form. However, he has to hide this due to the official status of the party. As a result, the young person does not look back and reflect upon his or her right-wing extremist »phase.«

All three of these paths are accompanied by distancing oneself from the personal use of violence. When the clique context ends, committing acts of violence oneself becomes quite out of the question.

*What do these results mean in practice?*

When investigating disengagement processes in right-wing extremist juveniles or young adults, it is important to understand that we are not dealing with processes of primary or secondary prevention. Instead, we are dealing with young people who have already »sunk into the brown swamp.« This is about extricating young people who have already fallen in. While we may hope to see the young people pull themselves out on their own accord, that hope is an overly optimistic and passive approach to right-wing extremism. It is also a myth that falling in, as well as »pulling out« will leave no traces on the personality or on the social environment of these young people.

With the help of the six factors that we have identified as decisive in the decision to exit the scene, it is possible to support a person's motivation to leave the scene. The factors have to be encouraged using the right instruments. For example, conversations in which the right-wing extremist group is scrutinized again and again can strengthen the dysfunction factor.

According to our results, prior to every intervention it is important to clarify the type of development and the type of clique.

In case of compensation, the risk of being ideologically affected during of the time of membership remains. To re-enforce exit, it might be good practice to boost the knowledge of how dysfunctional the internal system of right-wing extremist groups is, as soon as we become aware that a juvenile is affiliated with one (factor a). For example, we can do this by confronting the leaders of the group with political counter-arguments that highlight the contradictions. This is not done with the objective of convincing the leaders, which is hardly possible, but to weaken their effect on the members whose line of development is compensatory. **Group members that have not yet internalized the extremist ideology** must be aware of other opinions which contradict the right-wing extremist positions. That requires knowledge and eloquence; otherwise we run the danger of evoking the opposite effect.

In case of an ›ambitioned‹ line of development, with its internalization of right-wing extremist values, we might encourage »burnout« effects (factor e) by pointing to the dysfunctional elements in the group itself (factor a). For example, if a personal conversation outside the group context is possible, we could try to force reflection on the

erstwhile comrades at a personal level that mocks their »careers as losers« and their inconsistent and embarrassing behaviour (see factor c and also Bar, 2003; Hasselbach, 1993).

With respect to the type of clique, it is relevant to know beforehand if the youngster is member of a loose alliance, a patriotic-nationalistic group, an informal youth clique, or a comradeship. If we know the type of clique, we also can appreciate the strength of influence the youth is exposed to and the possible risks involved in exiting the scene. We also can decide what sort of action is appropriate, and whether it should involve the whole group or only the individuals. We assume it is hardly possible to work with a comradeship, but loose alliances are more easily influenced because of their open structure. Youth workers may be more successful if they support alternate local youth cultures, particularly ones which provide experiences of one's own abilities (factor d). In case of patriotic-nationalistic groups, we think a content-related conversation (discussions about politics but also about individualism, dominant cultures, racism, nationalism) would be appropriate (factor c). However, in informal youth cliques, where relations are more intense and more constant, it would be better to weaken the power of the leader, and to help individuals find new interests and hobbies together within others participating in these relatively small groups.

Indeed, it is a question for those who work with youth, how the factors discussed above can be encouraged in the different contexts. We think such a comprehensive and differentiated analysis of the target group makes effective intervention possible, and it can help to break down the image of the unreachable right-wing extremist.

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