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Conflict Processes between Youth Groups in a Norwegian City: Polarisation and Revenge

This study analyses the dynamics of conflict between two youth scenes in the Norwegian city of Kristiansand, commonly described as ‘the neo-Nazis’, and their counterparts, referred to as ‘the anti-racists’ or ‘the Valla Gang’. The ‘neo-Nazis’ regularly committed acts of violence against other youths belonging to the multi-ethnic youth scene. As such, many of these incidents could clearly be described as acts of racist violence or hate crime. However, through interviews with 50 participants from both sides it became clear that the acts of violence were part of a more complex set of conflict dynamics between youth groups. This involved processes of polarisation within and between the local youth scenes as well as cycles of generalised revenge based on widely shared notions of ‘one for all and all for one’. Youth groups and individual actors switched between political identities and gang identities depending on the situation, and conflicts that initially had nothing to do with racism or anti-racism could easily become politicised. Based on an understanding of the conflict processes, several points of intervention could be identified. Several of the interventions gave positive outcomes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study² will describe and analyse the dynamics of conflict between two youth scenes in the Norwegian city of Kristiansand (pop. 75,000). One side of the conflict was commonly described in the community as ‘the neo-Nazis’, whereas their counterparts were referred to as ‘the anti-racists’ or ‘the Valla Gang’, depending on the situation. There had been violent clashes between these youth scenes since the mid-1990s but the conflict escalated dramatically during autumn 2000, causing great concern among the local population and local authorities.

During the last decade, the Kristiansand municipality, the local police, schools and NGOs have collaborated closely to reduce problems of racism, youth violence and crime in the city. The municipality asked us – a research team which at the time was coming out a comparative study of youth gangs in four Norwegian cities³ (including Kristiansand) – to make a more detailed study of what the dynamics behind this particular conflict situation were and to advice the municipality and the local police on possible points of intervention. This article will present some of our findings and address the following questions:

- What are the conflicts between the youth groups really about? Which values or issues are they fighting over?
- What characterizes the groups and individual participants involved in the conflicts?

² This paper is based on a larger study in Norwegian *Om konflikter mellom ungdomsmiljøer i en norsk by* (Oslo 2001). All data were collected and analysed jointly, T. Bjørge, Y. Carlsson and T. Haaland, *Generalisert hat, polariserte fellesskap*, although the author of this article had main responsible for the part of the analysis presented here. The description is representative of the situation as it appeared in early 2001 and the preceding years.

³ The first of our studies covering Kristiansand was a self-report school survey with first year secondary school students (mostly 16 years old) in four Norwegian cities. In Kristiansand 995 youths participated, a response rate of 89 per cent of the age group population. The survey focussed on the youths’ experiences with violence (as victims and perpetrators), gangs and other forms of problematic behaviour. Findings are published in T. Haaland, *Vold – konflikt og gjengdannelse: en undersøkelse blant ungdom i fire byer* (Oslo 2000). The survey was repeated three years later, cf. T. Haaland, *Vold, rusmidler og holdninger til innvandrere: En sammenliknende studie blant ungdom i Drammen og Kristiansand* (Oslo 2003). Interventions and projects against youth crime in Kristiansand were evaluated in Y. Carlsson & T. Haaland, *Voldelige ungdomsgrupper – intervensjon på kommunenivå. Erfaringsrapport fra Kristiansand 2001-2004* (Oslo 2004). The main study on which the present article is based (see note 2), was carried out and published in 2001, after the first and before the two latter of these other reports. Unfortunately, since the escalation of violence unexpectedly took place some months *after* the first youth survey was carried out, this first survey could not serve as a baseline against which the second survey could be used to measure the effects of the interventions.

- Why have these conflicts lasted so long? Which processes and factors have contributed to the conflicts of the groups involved?
- Which of these factors and processes could be used through various forms of intervention or prevention, in order to reduce the level of violence?

It was hardly surprising that the conflicting parties themselves held widely different opinions on what the fighting was about. However, outsiders such as local newspapers, politicians, municipal agencies, the police and some local NGOs also held highly divergent interpretations about the violence and conflicts. Some considered this mainly as a struggle between neo-Nazi thugs and brave anti-racists who tried to oppose them and defend the community against racist violence. Others, including the police and local youth workers, considered this image of the ‘bad guys’ vs. the ‘good guys’ a misrepresentation, and claimed that there were provocations and aggressions, victims and victimisers on both sides.

However, few would dispute that racism and anti-racism was an important dimension in what was going on. The question is rather how this contributed to a more multi-faceted interaction between youths of different ethnic origins and different subcultures, and how conflicts over many kinds of issues may become racialised and politicised in an increasingly multi-ethnic society.

Among young people in Kristiansand, the local neo-Nazi group was notorious for their ‘nigger hunts’ and similar acts of violence against other youths belonging to the multi-ethnic or anti-racist youth scene. Many of these incidents would qualify as cases of racist violence or hate crime by any definitional criteria. This is evident from the following statement by one of the active participants (age 17) in the neo-Nazi scene:

They are the foreigners. Sometimes we attack them just because they are brown or black. Then we can beat up one or two, and they will mobilise. ... Sometimes we enter the bus to see if we can find someone, in particular weekends when we are reinforced with visitors from (the Nazi skinhead scene in) Oslo. Then we jump at them and kick their heads with our boots ... If we meet niggers on the bus, we do not always beat them up. But they will always get some spitballs in their face. (#16)

Thus, some of the violent perpetrators *do* hold racist and neo-Nazi beliefs, and select their targets on the basis of skin colour, or association with ‘foreigners’ or anti-racism. When immigrant youths and native-born youths attacked Nazis, this was considered by themselves and many observers as ‘fighting back’ – a form of anti-racist struggle against the neo-Nazis. Thus, these violent clashes could be seen as a political conflict, fought over issues of racism and ideology. So there is no question that there are some obvious political dimensions in what is going on. The question is rather whether this

political dimension tends to overshadow some other dimensions that may be equally important in order to understand the dynamics of the situation.

The notions of neo-Nazism, racism, anti-racism and hate crime carry heavy loads of values and moral judgements, providing an interpretive framework that tends to paint the picture in stark black and white. Once we attach these labels on the phenomenon in question or on specific incidents, there is a danger that our perception becomes closed and that we mistake labels for explanations. It may also prevent us from asking questions that might appear to 'blame the victim'. I do not believe that we should dismiss these labels of hate crime or racist violence, but we should use them with care. In particular, we should insistently ask ourselves and probe our data whether alternative interpretations or perspectives might make more sense.

In the research project on which this paper is based, we tried to achieve this by applying a conflict perspective, and interviewing systematically young people who were directly involved on both sides, representing different subgroups or perspectives, to gather their respective perspectives on the same events and conflicts.

2. ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The choice of applying a conflict perspective to the series of violent incidents between youth groups in Kristiansand is not incontestable. One might argue that violence between neo-Nazis and anti-racists/minority youths should rather be interpreted in terms of racist violence, victimisation and self-defence. The notion of 'conflict' presupposes a form of symmetry between the parties that may not be the actual state of affairs, and may also imply a form of moral equality.

The following discussion will demonstrate that in the Kristiansand case, a conflict perspective fits the series of violent incidents as a whole even if it does not fit all isolated incidents. However, in other locations we have studied, a conflict perspective would be completely misleading because the violent incidents generally had an asymmetric character of racist attacks against defenceless victims.⁴ The picture in Kristiansand is far more complex.

In situations characterised by conflict it is of great importance to be able to categorise persons and groups as friends and foes – Us and Them. Intensive conflict situations do not give participants much opportunity to be neutral. In these processes of categorisation, different forms of signs are used to show which side one belongs

⁴ We have applied the racist violence approach in many of our earlier works, such as T. Bjørgo, *Racist and Right-wing Violence in Scandinavia* (Oslo 1997); T. Bjørgo & R. Witte, *Racist Violence in Europe* (Basingstoke 1993); T. Bjørgo & Y. Carlsson, *Vold, rasisme og ungdomsgjenger: Forebygging og bekjempelse* (Oslo 1999).

to, as well as to ascribe group affiliation to others. Such categorisation on the basis of signs obviously involves a strong element of interpretation. In the present study it will be shown that the conflict parties tended to take dress style, appearance, skin colour, and acquaintances as signs of what group that person belongs to and what opinions and values he or she holds. In many cases, youths *do* put on particular dress items with the deliberate purpose of showing adherence to a particular group, subculture or opinion. However, it is by no means certain that someone e.g. wearing a specific dress item *intends* to signal the group adherence attributed to that person by others. Nevertheless, such a ‘mistaken’ interpretation of the meaning of e.g. a particular jacket may have as a consequence that the person in question is branded as an enemy, and is harassed and targeted for violence. It may also serve to push that young person into the group he or she is categorised as belonging to. Thus, semiosis, or the interpretation of signs, may have highly tangible consequences – both of a social, political, and even medical and legal kind.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of our study was to describe and analyse what was going on between youth groups in Kristiansand on the basis of how the involved youths themselves describe the conflict and interaction, and to try to identify some possible points of intervention.

In winter/spring 2001, fifty youths (37 boys and 13 girls) between the ages of 13 and 21 took part in a semi-structured interview, lasting 60-90 minutes. Sixteen of the youths had one or both parents of a non-Norwegian background, whereas both parents of each of the remaining 34 informants were all Norwegians. Concerning group affiliation, 16 informants were more or less active participants in neo-Nazi groups, and another four were former participants who had disengaged from the Nazi scene. Among the other informants, 10-12 belonged to (or were closely associated with) the multi-ethnic ‘The Valla Gang’ – a group that frequently flagged its anti-racism. The remaining 20 or so youths belonged to other groups or scenes, such as organised anti-racists, hip-hoppers, other ‘gangs’, or had no particular group affiliation. Since several of the groups overlap, and several individuals belonged to different groups, it is difficult to provide exact figures on group affiliation. One striking finding was that about ten of the informants had switched sides from either being a ‘neo-Nazi’ to join the multi-ethnic/anti-racist scene, or switched from the multi-ethnic milieu to join the neo-Nazis. Most of these individuals reflected on their experiences from both scenes during their interviews.

Although we were unable to get interviews with the main leaders among the neo-Nazis and the opponent ‘Valla gang’, we do feel that we had an excellent selection of informants, including several core members, and that we covered the main factions

and perspectives. We also interviewed 20 adults who provided insights from their positions as parents, police officers, youth workers, or politicians. Taken together, the interviews provided a rich data material that enabled us to explore the same incidents and conflict themes from highly divergent points of view.

In addition to the qualitative interviews (conducted during winter/spring 2001), we also made use of data from our school survey among first class secondary school pupils (mostly 16 year olds), collected in Kristiansand and three other cities during November 1999 (N=995). This was a self-report questionnaire focussing on the youths' experiences with violence (as victims and perpetrators), gangs and other forms of problematic behaviour.⁵ The youth survey was repeated in November 2002 (N=1105).

During the period 2001-2004, Yngve Carlsson followed closely interventions in Kristiansand, and performed what could be described as a 'dialogue-based evaluation' or 'empowerment evaluation'.⁶

We are not aware of any other studies that have applied a similar methodological approach to the study of violent conflicts between racist groups and their opponents.

4. THE CONFLICT PARTIES

The city of Kristiansand is located on the southern coast of Norway. The city itself has ca. 75,000 inhabitants but the larger urban area (including some neighbouring municipalities) count a population of about 100,000 – a typical middle-sized Scandinavian city. The appearance of the city is generally affluent, without overt poverty or any particularly 'bad' areas. The municipality has a well-developed system of social welfare agencies. The police, schools and social agencies have worked closely together in prevention and intervention with the violent conflicts, and to dismantle the racist scene in particular.

The youth informants pointed out that there were two main parties concerned in this conflict in Kristiansand. One side was unambiguously described as...

4.1. The Neo-Nazis

At the time of the interviews (early 2001) the neo-Nazi scene numbered up to 40 participants, including some from neighbouring towns. The activity level as well

⁵ Cf. T. Haaland (*op. cit.* 2000).

⁶ Y. Carlsson & T. Haaland, *Voldelige ungdomsgrupper – intervensjon på kommunenivå. Erfaringsrapport fra Kristiansand 2001-2004* (Oslo 2004). Thomas Haaland carried out some surveys that were included in the report.

as the number of participants has varied strongly during the years since the scene emerged in autumn 1994. The peak periods were in 1995/96 and fall 2000. Between 2001 and the present (2004), the scene has declined significantly, with very limited recruitment of new members.⁷

During the years, there have been several shifts between the two different directions within the scene, represented by two organisational wings that promoted different versions of neo-Nazi activism. One direction was the skinhead group *Boot Boys*, oriented towards street violence, beer drinking and skinhead style. *Boot Boys* had the character of being a gang rather than a formal organisation. The other direction was the more ideological organisation *Vigrid*, which distanced itself from intoxication and arbitrary street violence. *Vigrid* promoted a racial interpretation of an ancient Norse religion, and organised pagan ‘baptisms’, ‘confirmations’ and wedding ceremonies for their members. *Vigrid* is strongly influenced by anti-Semitic notions of the Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG), adopted from American racial ideologists, such as William Pierce (aka Andrew Macdonald: *Turner Diaries*). The organisation is against senseless violence, but promotes discipline and preparations for the great ‘racial war’. During the years the scene has existed, the ‘centre of gravity’ has shifted repeatedly between these two main directions. In some periods, participants of the neo-Nazi scene moved away from street violence and towards the more ideological activism of *Vigrid*; in other periods they were fed-up with the *Vigrid* leader wanting to ban their beer drinking, and moved back to the skinhead life style of *Boot Boys*.

The degree of ideological consciousness varied greatly among the 16 active participants of the neo-Nazi scene we interviewed. Only two or three of them held relatively coherent national socialist or similar ideological ideas. Most of the others had racist and hateful forms of expressions, with a thin veneer of racist ideology as a topping. Some emphasised that although they disliked immigrants, they disagreed with much of what Hitler and National Socialism represented. Being a ‘neo-Nazi’ was to them mainly a group identity, and not necessarily an ideological identification. Most of them were rather ambivalent about the notion of neo-Nazism. What mattered to them was the loyalty of the group more than its ideology or politics. However, expressing racist views was part of what was expected of them as group members. And gradually, they adopted the views as well.

With only a few exceptions, youths in the local Nazi scene came from an underclass background: single-parent families characterised by low education and income, alcohol

⁷ For recent development in Kristiansand and evaluation of measures to reduce violence and crime among these youth scenes, see Carlsson and Haaland, (*op. cit.* 2004).

(or drug) abuse, psychiatric problems or family violence.⁸ The youths had in many cases failed at school, sometimes related to problems of ADHD and dyslexia. Many of them had also been victims of bullying or other violence. Thus, they generally had a ‘stacking of risk factors’ that together increase the risk that the child will get involved in crime and other forms of problematic behaviour.⁹ More specifically, the majority of the youths in the Nazi scene had negative personal experiences with immigrants in the past – sometimes from close relationships (mother’s boyfriend or own boyfriend, etc.). They shared and generalised these negative experiences within the group. There were only two or three exceptions to this pattern in our sample of 20 individuals. They were among the ideologues of the local scene.

There was also a periphery around the neo-Nazis, consisting of relatively ‘normal’ Norwegian youths. They did not approve of the neo-Nazis’ forms of expressions, but found it useful to have contacts with them in case they needed help and protection against aggressive youths from the multi-ethnic scene – the Valla gang in particular.

4.2. The Multi-ethnic Scene

The neo-Nazis opponents were a far more diffuse and mixed scene, described by our informants with various labels such as the ‘Valla’, ‘the anti-racists’ or ‘the foreigners’. There were also many participants who were of an ethnically Norwegian origin. This side of the conflict consists of different groups and scenes that are partly overlapping and partly separate. Groups vary from serious and non-violent anti-racist organisations to loose subcultural scenes such as hip-hoppers and youths belonging to the drug scene, to more gang-like delinquent groups such as The Valla (and formerly the Chilean Gang). The latter groups were also involved in various forms of criminal activities, such as theft, robberies and drug dealing. Several of these youths have recently arrived from countries characterised by civil wars. There is reason to believe that many of them have been traumatised by these experiences, and they tend to take the easy recourse to violence. Several of them also come from families where fathers and brothers are heavily involved in organised crime, in particular drug trafficking. Local agencies have great difficulties in establishing contact and cooperation with these families, and consequently have limited knowledge about the background of these youths. By contrast, the youths of the neo-Nazi scene had been highly involved with the social welfare services since their infancy.

⁸ The underclass character of the neo-Nazi scene in Kristiansand was more pronounced than any other similar group we have studied. Elsewhere, members of racist youth groups have typically come from a working class background (e.g. Brumunddal) or even from middle class families (Nordstrand in Oslo).

⁹ R. Loeber, ‘Developmental Continuity, Change, and Pathways in Male Juvenile Problem Behaviors and Delinquency’, in Hawkins, ed., *Delinquency and Crime* (New York 1996).

Informants agreed that during the last few years,¹⁰ the ‘Valla’ had been the spearhead in the fight against the neo-Nazis. They were the ones who could mobilise others into physical confrontation with the Nazis – up to 200 persons if needed, mainly ‘foreigners’.

However, it is not obvious what the Valla really was. Some used the name as a label for the entire mobilisation network of a couple of hundred youths from the Kristiansand area. Others used the Valla label for a more specific group consisting of a core of around ten persons with another 10-20 regular participants in the outer circle. To begin with, it was a group of friends, of a predominantly Muslim background, who around 1997 started to appear as a gang in the city – partly because others called them ‘the Valla Gang’ since they frequently used the Albanian expression ‘valla’ (=I swear; it is true). They also made strong claims for ‘respect’ from other youths. Thus, they behaved in very aggressive ways; they were perceived as a gang by other youths; and they gradually adopted this gang identity themselves.

Their main enemy at the time was a similar group, the so-called Chilean Gang. However, as the Chilean Gang disintegrated, the neo-Nazis became the new enemy. In this new situation, the Valla group played down their gang identity, and tried to appear as anti-racists, since this would enable them to mobilise far broader than from their own gang. By 2000, they claimed that the ‘Valla is not a gang anymore’. However, they continued to be referred to as the ‘Valla’ by other youths, and they also used this label themselves when they found it convenient. A young Valla participant (#30) recounted:

It was the police who invented this thing with the Valla gang. The police gave them the image, and now the entire country knows about the Valla gang. And then some of the youths have started to see themselves as the Valla gang as well. Now they have got used to it, and consider themselves a gang. Sometimes they are a gang, and sometimes they are just friends. Sometimes, when we have a fight with some others, and the others do not know us, we ask: ‘Don’t you know who we are – we are the Valla Gang!’ Then they are really in for a shock! [laughing out loudly] They have heard so much shit about the Valla Gang that they do not want to get into trouble with them.¹¹

By 2004, three years after we had carried out our interviews, Valla no longer existed as a group or even a notion in the streets of Kristiansand. Many of the most active

¹⁰ Interviews were conducted during winter 2001.

¹¹ Interview with a young boy of immigrant origin, age 17, claimed by others to be a Valla member. Note that he shifts perspective between speaking about the Valla as ‘them’ and ‘we’.

Valla participants have now moved into the circles of more serious and organised forms of crime, dealing with drugs and robberies.¹²

It was a central characteristic of the neo-Nazis as well as their Valla opponents that they appeared as street gangs in some periods and situations, and as something completely different – e.g. as political activists – in other situations. Who they defined as their enemies or (potential) allies in the actual situation would to a large extent determine what form the group took or what identity it adopted.

5. WHAT WERE CONFLICTS ABOUT?

We asked our young informants who the main conflict parties were and what they were fighting over. The majority stated that the struggle was between the neo-Nazis and the anti-racists (or alternatively, the Valla or ‘the foreigners’), and that racism was a central issue. Conflicts between the groups were described as a struggle between two opposing value-based or ideological positions. However, when they were asked to be more specific, youths from both sides tended to paint a picture that was far more complex. Their stories show that they were also struggling over issues and values that had little to do with politics, ideology or racism as such.

It is the Nazis against the anti-racists. ... The conflicts are about excitement and revenge – to them [i.e. the neo-Nazis] at least! To us, it is all the time about revenge and fighting and... It has nothing to do with politics, not that I know of. (Participant in ‘Little Valla’, #29)¹³

Many of the violent fights were struggles over a set of entangled values that had to do with respect, power and domination. Both the Valla group and (some years earlier) the Chilean gang had tried to appear as ‘kings of the city’. This was also (for a period) the case with the multi-ethnic female gang ‘Mafia Girls’, who also, characteristically, called themselves ‘Queens of Markens’ (which was the name of the main mall through the city centre). Youths who were unwilling to show them the respect they demanded, could in such situations risk to being branded as ‘Nazis’. Many ordinary youths found the style and behaviour of these street gangs extremely provocative.

Whereas the multi-ethnic and gang-like groups dominated the city centre of Kristiansand, the neo-Nazi scene dominated some areas in two peripheral parts of

¹² Cf Y. Carlsson and T. Haaland, *Voldelige ungdomsgrupper – intervensjon på kommunenivå* (Oslo 2004).

¹³ ‘Little Valla’ was a name used on a group mainly consisting of younger brothers of leading Valla members. ‘Mafia Sisters’ was a female group or gang consisting of girls who were in most cases sisters or girl-friends of boys in the Valla.

the city. At the same time, they were refused entry to the attractive areas and facilities of the city centre, in particular the Markens Street. If individuals or small groups associated with the neo-Nazi scene were seen downtown, where the Valla and their allies dominated, they risked being beaten up and chased away. Rumours that there were ‘Nazis in town’ spread rapidly by word and mobile phones, leading to immediate mobilisation and a hunt. Only for a few limited periods had the neo-Nazi scene felt sufficiently strong enough to be able to challenge the dominance of the multi-ethnic scene in the city centre – and then only by staging brief ‘guerrilla raids’ into Markens Street, and then withdrawing after a fight.

During the late 1990s, most of the fights took place in the peripheral parts of the city, in particular in relation to struggles for dominance over certain youth clubs. Around 2000, however, the fights were increasingly about the control of the city centre. This had to do with the fact that many of the core members of the neo-Nazi scene were getting older (18-20 years) and wanted to have access to pubs and other attractive entertainment facilities that were mainly located in the city centre.

Some of the conflicts started out as fights over girlfriends/boyfriends or sexual reputations. Although such conflicts may have little to do with ideology or political divisions, many of these fights are nevertheless caught up in the conflict field between the neo-Nazis and their enemies. Ritualised insults were also expressed in a peculiar mixture of sexuality and politics or group association: ‘Nazi whore’ or ‘nigger whore’ were common forms of name-calling used to provoke a fight.

Many of the informants emphasised that the majority of the fights had to do with revenge, and that this was the main justification for using violence. To outsiders, however, it was usually not at all obvious who had started the conflict in question – although all the parties involved claimed that it was ‘the others’!

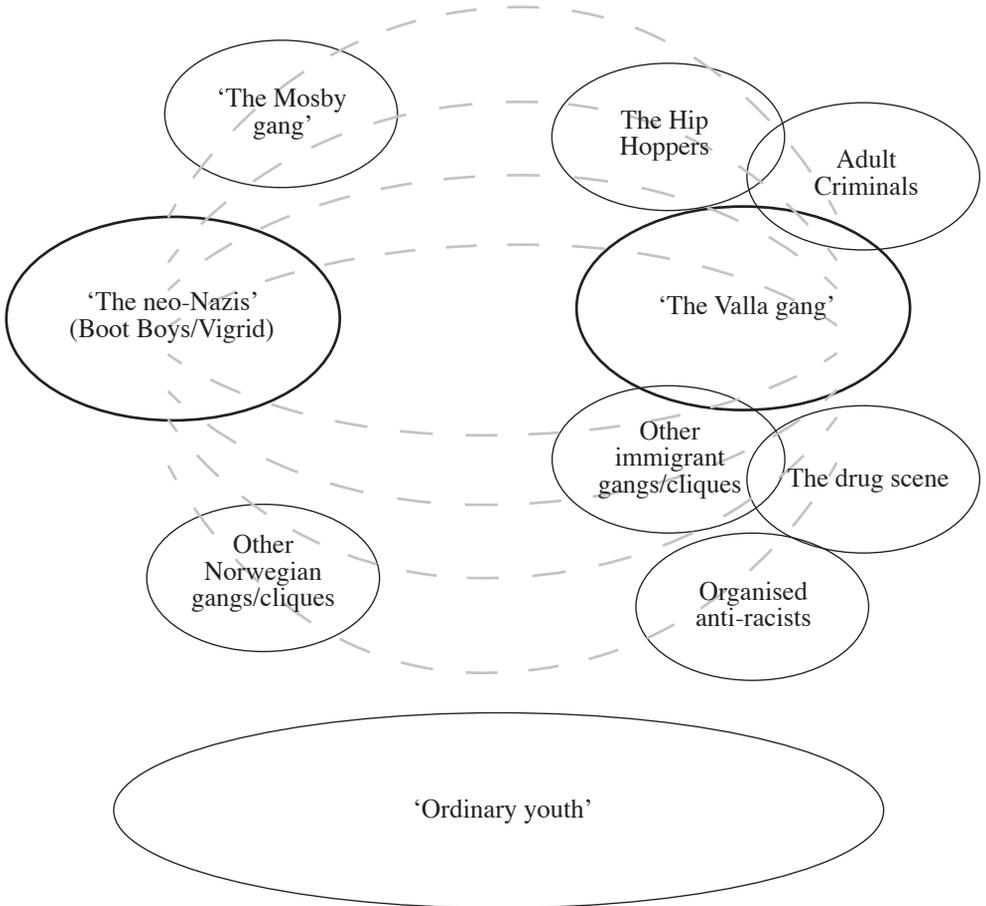
In our analysis of the conflicts between youth groups in Kristiansand, we focussed on two main conflict mechanisms that contributed to maintaining the conflict and the disputing groups – the processes of polarisation and the logics of revenge.

6. POLARISATION PROCESSES

Many youths belonging to different groups in the city feel forced to position themselves in relation to the two opposing poles, conceptualised as ‘the neo-Nazis’ on the one hand and ‘the anti-racists’ or alternatively, the ‘Valla’, on the other. This is the opposition that many conflicts are organised around – even if these conflicts have very little to do with racism, politics or ideology initially. The opposing concepts of Nazism and anti-racism have such powerful meanings that they tend to supersede

other conflicts and determine how these conflicts are interpreted, mobilised around, and fought over.¹⁴

The Magnetism Model: Polarisation and Conflict among Youth Groups



¹⁴ Cf. F. Eidheim, *Hva har skjedd i Brumunddal: Lokalsamfunnet i møte med de fremmede og seg selv* (Oslo 1993).

This process of polarisation can be described through a metaphor of magnetism, with two poles and a magnetic field of attraction and repulsion. Most 'ordinary' youths can stay far away from these magnetic fields, or do not get affected. They do *not* have the characteristics that make them 'magnetisable'. They are like filings of brass rather than filings of iron. However, youths who are easily associated with one or the other side because of appearance (skin colour or dress style), opinions, or social networks can easily be branded as enemies or friends, and are pushed or pulled in the direction of one pole or the other.

The youth scene of Kristiansand is characterised by a strong tendency to brand certain youths as being 'Nazis' or 'anti-racists' – often on the basis of such indicators as wearing particular clothes or having been observed 'walking with' persons representing one side or the other. We estimate that around 200–400 local youths in the age-range of 13 to 20 are involved in different degrees in the polarised conflict system we describe. However, these youths probably constitute less than five per cent of the total youth population of the city.

Being branded, harassed or physically attacked for being associated with one or the other side of the conflict has generally led to three different types of responses: Some youths turn to the side with which they have been associated for protection and support. Others fight actively against being pushed towards one side or the other to avoid being drawn into the conflict. And some fight against the stigma by joining the opposing group to which they were branded as belonging to.

How do these processes of polarisation and branding take place?

6.1. Processes Leading into the Nazi Scene

Among the 20 informants who were former or present members of the local Nazi scene, only a couple of informants cited agreement with the political positions of the groups as a main reason for joining in the first place. For most of the others, the political views were something they adopted *subsequently*, as they were becoming more and more tied to the group. Their reasons for joining were several and compounded. To many of them, it was a combination of push and pull factors. Some themes reappear frequently in their stories.

The positive pull characteristics of the groups are described as friendship and good company, kinship ties (e.g. older brothers being members), excitement, protection, and lively parties. 'I have never in my life found as many good friends (as among the Nazis) – no other group has treated me (as nicely) as they did', one girl (#45) stated. 'They took care of me, physically and mentally', another participant in the Nazi scene (#8) recounted.

Regarding the push factors, several striking patterns emerged from the interviews. The majority of the informants emphasised that having been victimised by bullying,

violence, threats and harassment was an immediate reason for joining the Nazi scene.

Bullying in particular seems to have been an important factor. One of the neo-Nazi activists (#47) stated, ‘Most of those in the Nazi scene are boys who have been bullied and who have been on their own. For my own part, I was rather among those who bullied’. Several informants emphasised that one of the two main Nazi leaders was actively seeking out young victims of bullying, taking them under his wings, offering them protection, and building them up to become persons others would fear. This leader had been a victim of bullying himself when he was a child, but had become big and intimidating as a teenager (having used anabolic steroids). However, he obviously knew something essential about the needs of those being bullied – and used this knowledge in his recruitment strategy. There should have been others who were there to take care of these young victims. But the only ‘Victims Support’ around were the Nazis. And they delivered. To children and youths who had experienced humiliation and bullying from others, it was a new and powerful feeling to experience how others came to fear them. An ex-Nazi (# 31) stated,

I was often with [name of local Nazi leader] in the three years I took part. He wanted me on his right-hand side when we went to town, and I felt very tall!

Several of these new recruits were merely 11-12 years old when they got in contact with the Nazi scene. Some were small, vulnerable, and easy targets for bullying. Others had particular psychosocial problems, such as hyper-activity (ADHD), which made them unpopular and marginalised among other children.

Having been beaten up or threatened by the Valla gang or other immigrant gangs was another common experience that pushed several youths into the Nazis group.

– Why did you join the Nazis?

I was really pissed off. I had been beaten up by some foreigners for something some others had done. They attacked me and kicked me – 10 or 12 of them against me alone. After this, I started to go with the Nazis, and party with them. But I still had some good immigrant friends as well. (Ex-Nazi, #28)

To others, being beaten up for being associated with the Nazis propelled them further into the group. A former Nazi (#9) who had switched sides, and become a hip-hopper and Valla associate, stated,

I was about 12 years old when I started to go with (the Nazis). To begin with, I went to their parties, and gradually I became one of them. The attitudes came quite early on, but I did not hold those views before I

joined them. I was beaten up several times by some immigrants who called themselves anti-racists, because I was with the Nazis. This created more hatred in me, and pushed me further into the milieu. If somebody disrespected me, I hit back. I shaved my hair, and donned a green bomber jacket and boots. As a consequence, I was even more branded as a Nazi.

Informants from different camps also stated that whenever someone gets involved in a conflict or fight with the 'Valla Gang', they are immediately branded as 'racists' or 'Nazis' – for any or no reason.

The tendency towards stigmatisation is more powerful in relation to the neo-Nazi than towards other youth groups, because the neo-Nazis are more excluded from normal social life than almost all other youth groups. The neo-Nazis also emphasise their otherness through provocative forms of expression, such as racist symbols, dress code, and aggressive behaviour. However, it takes little to be branded as belonging to (or sympathising with) the Nazis, and as a consequence, to be exposed to negative sanctions. Using particular clothes or being observed with alleged neo-Nazis may be sufficient reasons to become associated with them by others.

As soon as I showed myself publicly with some from the Nazi milieu, I was called a 'Nazi' and a 'Nazi whore'. It was like I was walking with the Devil himself. (Girl who is now part of the Nazi scene, #2)

To be seen with people who are identified with one side or the other easily leads to one being classified as belonging to that faction. Informants recount a number of violent episodes that had happened because the victim had been observed together with the wrong persons.

I was branded as a 'bloody Nazi' just because I had walked with a guy who had been in conflict with some immigrants – and he was not even a part of the Nazi scene. (#14)

To 'walk with' is a characteristic local idiom for expressing voluntary interaction with one or several others. However, 'walking with' someone involved in a conflict is also seen as taking a stand. The core issue in 'walking with' is companionship. By being with someone, others deduce that this person also has sympathy. The interviews are full of stories of how such classification takes place. One informant even explains his recruitment into the Nazi scene to this classification process. When he was 11, his mother by coincident bought him a green pilot jacket which was on sale, unaware that such jackets were used by the neo-Nazis as part of their uniform. However, when he turned up at school in his new pilot jacket, other pupils started to scorn him. The harassment brought him together with others wearing similar outfits, '... and after a while we were five kids hanging out with the older (neo-Nazis).' (#8) Another boy recounts a similar experience:

It is incredibly easy to get branded as a Nazi. If you wear an ordinary fashion jacket with a Norwegian flag on it, you are called a 'Nazi'. I do not like immigrants, but I do not consider myself a Nazi because of that. (Boy, age 15, who nevertheless now participates in the Nazi scene, #14)

Various forms of negative experiences with immigrants were also key events that led some youths to join the Nazi scene. Several of the boys in the Nazi scene had mothers who had had immigrant men as their partners, and this man had treated their mothers (or sometimes also the children) badly. Two of the boys had even been abandoned (or kicked out of the house) by their mothers – in favour of an immigrant boyfriend. One boy had a sister who had been raped by her 'foreign' boyfriend. Four of the girls in the Nazi scene had in the past been girlfriends of boys in the multi-ethnic gang scene, and had been beaten and mistreated by their boyfriends. Although such negative incidents were linked to specific individuals, these traumatic experiences caused feelings of hatred and aggression that were generalised towards immigrants in general – in particular when they talked it over with others in the Nazi milieu that had similar stories to tell.

6.2. Processes Leading into the Multi-ethnic Gang Scene

Racism represents one of the harshest forms of exclusion and stigmatisation of whole categories of people as 'enemies'. This process can take several forms, from subtle discrimination and exclusion of 'foreigners', to neo-Nazis targeting individuals for assault just because of their dark hair and skin colour. In Kristiansand, a number of youths with a minority background have been harassed and physically attacked by neo-Nazis at school, in the streets, or at the bus-stop. Sometimes, such attacks appeared to be carried out just to terrorise people with the 'wrong' colour of their skin, in other cases such assaults are intended to provoke a response.

Typically, youths are attacked because they belong to (or are associated with) a particular group or subculture that the neo-Nazis define as their enemies. This particularly includes those wearing 'sagging' trousers and other stylistic elements identifying them as hip-hoppers.¹⁵ It is significant that the hip-hop subculture has anti-racism as a core element of its identity package. The local hip-hop scene is highly multi-ethnic, and there are also a large number of 'native' white boys taking part. Breakdance, rapping, DJ-ing, and graffiti are the main activities. There are several local 'crews' (graffiti teams) that compete peacefully with each other. However, one

¹⁵ See J. Demant, C. Klinge-Christensen and A.-S. Sørensen, 'Den danske HipHop-kultur – et neo-tribalt fælledsskap', *Dansk Sociologi* 3/97; V. Vestel, A. Bakken, G.H. Moshuus & T. Øia, *Ungdomskulturer og narkotikabruk* (Oslo 1997).

of these crews (called ‘The Makers’ Crew’) is also part of Valla, and is known to respond rather brutally if other crews hamper with their tags and pieces. These links to anti-racism and Valla are sufficient to make any youth wearing hip-hop style outfits into ‘enemies’ and potential targets of attack for the neo-Nazis.

I was assaulted by the Nazis because I hung out with foreigners and a hip-hopper. ... At my school I cannot wear my sagging trousers without being beaten up. I have to wait until after school to put them on. (Boy with a Norwegian background, #40)

There are lots of threats from the Nazis. I receive (SMS) messages with swastikas on my mobile. They also phoned me on my mobile and said, ‘you wear a pig outfit!’ – just because I ‘sag’ and am hip-hopper. (Boy who has disengaged from the Nazi scene, #9)

Thus, sagging trousers (or pilot jackets) are attributed powerful symbolic meanings about group affiliation and political identity. Wearing sagging trousers communicates messages about having chosen to side with the anti-racists. Moreover, ‘walking with the enemy’ is also seen as an expression of having chosen sides in the conflict. This qualifies for a beating.

The Nazis attack foreigners as well as whites going with the foreigners. I have had the Nazis chasing me as well. (Norwegian boy participating in the hip-hop scene, #22)

Several youths belonging to the multi-ethnic hip-hop scene stated that the Valla people behave foolishly when they demand ‘respect’ all the time, but it was nevertheless useful to have friends in Valla if they were in need of protection:

The Valla people are involved in a lot (of crime). I know one boy who was stealing for them. He was not very good at school and had few friends. However, when he steals for payment, he also gets full protection from the Valla. The problem is just that he has to continue, because they have got something on him. (Norwegian boy who knows many people from different scenes, #36)

Several foreigners have told me that I just have to tell them (if I need help). However, I do not know if I want to, because I will just get involved in more trouble. Once, at the Billiard club, (a Valla member) took me aside and showed me his pistol. He told me that if I needed help, he would take care of it. (Boy of minority background who has been in conflict with neo-Nazis and others, #37)

Thus, both the neo-Nazis and the Valla gang offer protection to youths threatened by someone from the other side. But accepting such protection may come with a heavy price tag. They risk being dragged further into conflicts, and are expected to return the favours by backing up their ‘protectors’ when they mobilise for other fights.

There was a guy who joined us after an immigrant gang had beaten him up. But when we had smashed up that gang for him, he backed out and would not support us anymore. Then we beat him up as well. (Neo-Nazi, #16)

However, the process of ‘joining’ the multi-ethnic scene is different from recruitment to the Nazi scene. The multi-ethnic groups – including the ‘gangs’ – do not have sharp boundaries delimiting them from the mainstream youth scene. Whereas the Nazis are a stigmatised and excluded group, this is not the case with the Valla people, who do interact easily with ‘ordinary’ youths. To ‘walk with the Valla’ brings few social costs beyond an increased risk to get involved in fights with the Nazis.

6.3. Between the Poles – the Problem of Keeping Distance to Extreme Groups

In the field of tension between the two main ‘magnetic’ poles – the neo-Nazis and the Valla – there are a number of various groups and cliques struggling to avoid becoming too closely associated with one extreme pole or the other. One group of local boys, associated with a particular area of the city, is one example:

We have a lot of trouble in town because we are seen as the ‘Mosby Gang’. Many of us are violent, particularly when we get drunk. Then we easily end up in fights. ... But we are really just a bunch of friends who go out together. But when we are seen in the city, we are considered a gang. ... We have been involved in a lot of trouble with the Valla gang. ... We are probably the only ones who dare to stand up to them. ... We got involved in something it was hard to get out of. Once we were seven against 150, so we know it is not a very smart thing to do. ...

We have a friend who was a Nazi in the past but has quit. Because of him, the Valla people said that they consider us to be Nazis. Just because our friend has had some connection with them! We are against Nazism, but we are also against the gangs dominating the city centre – and these gangs are predominantly immigrants. We don’t fight with the Nazis; we just keep our distance. Some of us may speak them, but we consider the Nazis ridiculous. But it is OK if the Nazis and the Valla fight each other. That is probably why we are not anti-Nazis. ... It is OK that the Nazis take a bit of the punch with the Valla. Then the Valla knows they have some resistance and will not be as arrogant. So we think it is a good thing

that the Nazis give the Valla some beatings now and then. (Norwegian boy, age 20, # 34).

Because of their conflict with the Valla, the 'Mosby Gang' has been pushed towards the neo-Nazis and lumped together with them by the Valla. Even if they have no sympathy with the views of the Nazis, the common enemy makes it useful to have the Nazis there. Hence, our informants find no reason to dissociate from them.

Other youths who get in trouble with the Valla are also easily pushed towards the Nazis:

We hate the Valla. They think they are the bosses of the city. They beat up people just for fun. If you just look at them, you are in for a beating. If they find out where there is a party going on, they come and force themselves in, make trouble and destroy the house. ... The Nazis are on our side in this. They never did us any harm. We are friends with some of them. ... We do not walk with them but we talk all right with them.

– Did you ever ask the Nazis for help?

No, but they said that if we get into trouble with foreigners, they will offer to help us. They say that they will beat up the Valla if they fuck with people from our part of the city. (Local boy, #49)

Young organised anti-racists, wanting to carry out serious and non-violent political work against neo-Nazism, have great problems to avoid being associated with violent groups that call themselves anti-racists. A female left-wing anti-racist activist (age 17) stated:

Last fall, there were some big street fights between The Valla and some 'small Nazis'.¹⁶ The local newspaper wrote that it was a fight between neo-Nazis and anti-racists, or left-wing radicals. We got real angry because it ruined our reputation as serious anti-racists. We complained, but the paper responded that it was the police who had said so. And the police would not apologise. ... We try to get in contact with the Valla and discuss with them. ... They provoke us because they beat up people in town and at the same time call themselves 'anti-racists'. All that fighting of theirs is really far out! ... I do not think there are any political motivations driving the Valla. When they fight the 'small Nazis', they call themselves 'anti-racists'.

¹⁶ 'Small Nazis' refer to an emerging scene of 11-16 years old youths that constitute a second 'generation' of the local Nazi scene. They are frequently involved in fights with the 'Little Valla', representing a similar age-graded set of younger brothers of the original Valla members.

But I think it is just an excuse for fighting, and there is no political reason. As far as I can remember, they have always been the fighting gang. They can beat up anyone – just because people look at them a bit too long I think it is just to get more power. (#44)

The anti-racists also consider it a problem that leading police officers have publicly characterised neo-Nazis and anti-racists as ‘equally good’, and have sometimes warned parents that their children are involved with anti-racist groups. Thus, the police have not always distinguished between different forms of anti-racism.

You really cannot say that an anti-racist is as bad as a Nazi! That causes a lot of discord. Parents should not have to worry because their child is an anti-racist! It ruined a lot for the anti-racists here because they were compared with the Nazis. It was difficult even to walk down the street with anti-racist buttons. (Young organised anti-racist, female, age 15, #42)

Organised anti-racists in Kristiansand have also in the past felt a strong need to distance themselves from violent youth groups operating under the banner of anti-racism. This happened for instance when a large group in 1997 vandalised a house where neo-Nazis had a party, and some of them tried to put the house on fire.

– These incidents have nothing to do with anti-racism, said [the] leader of Socialist Youth. – This vandalism was committed by people lacking any political basis. Now we have to win back the credibility of the term anti-racists. (*Fedrelandsvennen*, 14 March 1997)

As a consequence of this incident, several youth organisations joined forces to establish the organisation ‘Anti-racist Forum’ to work seriously with the issue.

6.4. Breaking Out – or Crossing Over

Most youths who join racist groups, leave the group sooner or later. Depending on the circumstances, these ex-members do sometimes get severely threatened when they disengage.¹⁷ The Nazi group in Kristiansand has been known to punish its defectors particularly severely. Alleged ‘traitors’ have been attacked in their homes. Even family members and girlfriends have been threatened – in some cases even injured.

However, defectors are not only exposed to revenge from former friends. They also risk being attacked by former enemies who still have unresolved grievances to

¹⁷ The processes of joining and leaving racist groups, and the problems involved, is described in more detail in Bjørge, *Racist and Right-Wing Violence in Scandinavia* (Oslo 1997), ch. 6.

revenge. The fear of standing alone, without protection from the group, is the main reason why some potential defectors do not dare to break with the racist scene. There are also cases of ex-Nazis having been literally chased back to the Nazi group they had belonged to.

One of the most surprising findings that came out of the interviews in Kristiansand, was that so many youths had switched side from one extreme group to the opposite – and in some cases even back. Around ten of the fifty interviewed youths recounted their own varieties of such experiences, and they told about others as well. Although we know of similar crossover stories from other localities, it usually appears to be individual incidents. In Kristiansand, however, this appears as a striking pattern. Apparently, those who manage to fight their way out of the ‘magnetic field’ of one group are easily pulled into the ‘magnetic field’ of the opposite pole.¹⁸

Several boys who had been active in the Nazi scene for several years switched sides completely when they broke with the Nazis, joining the former enemies instead: The Valla, the hip-hoppers or the anti-racists. Three main reasons were mentioned: 1) The need for protection from a strong group against revenge from former friends in the Nazi scene; 2) the need to demonstrate that they had broken radically with Nazism; and 3) that there was a social network that would accept them if they lived up to the expectations of that environment (i.e. by fighting against former friends in the Nazi group).

A few girls who had been girlfriends of boys in the multi-ethnic gang scene represented a particular form of switching sides. They recounted that they were mistreated by their boyfriends, regarded as their property, and beaten when they did not obey. When they tried to break out of the relationship, they were threatened even more and beaten. In this situation, 4-5 girls switched over to the Nazi group – partly for protection in a strong group, partly to take out their hatred and revenge on their former boyfriends. In their new group setting, their hatred tended to become generalised towards immigrants in general. To the neo-Nazi group, it became an important issue to show that ‘immigrants’ were abusers of women, whereas they were protecting white girls and their dignity.

7. THE LOGICS OF PROVOCATION AND REVENGE

So far we have discussed how processes of polarisation – that push or pull individuals or groups with particular traits towards one or the other pole – tend to maintain the groups and the conflict system. We will now look at another closely related process

¹⁸ Obviously, jumping between a multi-ethnic scene and a neo-Nazi scene is mainly an option to ‘white’ youths, but there have been interesting exceptions in some other localities.

that also maintains and reinforces the conflicts: the behaviour and logic related to provocation, revenge and the preservation of ‘respect’.

There have been several cycles of revenge between the neo-Nazi and the multi-ethnic (or anti-racist) scenes in Kristiansand. One of the most dangerous feuds took place in spring 1997. Some neo-Nazis had captured one of their opponents from the ‘Chilean gang’, handcuffed him to a lamp post, and stoned and hit him – allegedly in revenge for something he or his friends had done to the Nazis. The following weekend, it became known to the multi-ethnic scene that the neo-Nazis were having a private party in a villa in the outskirts of the city. They mobilised around 100 young people, stormed the house and vandalised it. With about a dozen scared neo-Nazis and an intervening neighbour hiding on the first floor, some of the ‘anti-racists’ tried to put the house on fire. Luckily the fire died out, but a major disaster could easily have happened.

7.1. Provocations, Style and Categorisation

Youths involved in the conflicts generally justify their violent attacks against ‘the others’ by stating that it is a response to provocations, or a reprisal for something ‘the others’ have done to ‘us’. Who and what started it all is often unintelligible. What is seen as provoking might be specific acts but ‘they’ may also be provocative just by their mere presence.

When youths belonging to the same scene meet each other, they usually carry out rituals of salutation to reaffirm their bonds of friendship, loyalty and solidarity. These greeting rituals are particularly noticeable in the multi-ethnic scene. However, when youths belonging to antagonist groups meet in the city or at the bus-stop, they usually exchange expressions of hostility and disrespect. ‘Both the Valla and the Nazis are equally bad in this – they provoke each other systematically’, stated a native Norwegian girl (#7) who belonged to the multi-ethnic scene.

The most common forms of provocation was to ‘cast muck’ on someone from the other side. These insults often contained negative characteristics of the group, such as ‘Nazi bastard’ or ‘Nigger devil’. Frequently, this muck casting also contains a sexual element: ‘Nazi whore!’, ‘I’ve fucked your sister!’ or ‘mother-fucker!’ When such insults are made publicly, it will often lead to a violent response, ending in a fight. A former participant of the neo-Nazi scene recounted:

People are so mouthy all the time. When they throw muck, they will get something back. And when you are drunk, it gets even worse. At parties [in the neo-Nazi scene] they listen to [White Power] music before they go out in the streets. And then there is always someone who is mouthy, saying ‘fucking Nazis’ and such things. Both sides are involved in this quarrelling and fighting. But if the immigrants would just leave the Nazis

alone, nothing have happen. But they won't. ... The fights are mostly about revenge – that is clear. If just people could keep their mouths shut and not provoke... (ex-Nazi, #17)

One of the purposes of making an insult is to provoke a reaction – possibly a response that will end in full confrontation and fighting. It is a commonly held idea among many youths that a person who does *not* respond to a public insult virtually accepts the characteristic, meaning that the allegation of being a 'whore' or 'coward' acquires credibility. However, if you respond to the affront with aggression and violence, you may regain respect. And if beaten, you may also mobilise sufficient support and force to take revenge. 'Respect' is to these youths a limited value in a zero-sum game – it can only be won at the loss of others.

This line of thinking was underlined in an interview with a boy, age 14:

– When you react so strongly, what is provoking you?

It is particularly when someone says something bad about your parents. The worst you can say is 'I will fuck your mother!' If someone says that to some of us foreigners, we will bring a knife...

– But couldn't you just ignore it?

No, you can't! ... If someone says something like that, you just have to hit back! Especially if your friends hear it, then you have to get even unless you are willing to loose your pride.

– What about those who do not hit back?

I do not know any foreigners who do not strike back. I have never experienced that.

– But the Norwegians do not hit back...

No, it is just because they do not dare. If they try to get even with us, they will not dare to go to town later. If we have had a fight with someone, all the foreigners will know who that guy is. If someone sees him coming to town, many will go to get him. The first may have a reason to beat him; the others will beat him up just for fun (boy belonging to the 'Little The Valla' group, #48).

In the respect game, provocations and insults are often open and direct, not to be mistaken. However, participants in this game tend to be hyper-sensitive to any possible insult and may ascribe to others hostile intentions they do not necessarily have. Even to staring at someone for too long, or not lowering the gaze, may be interpreted as a provocation:

We were called ‘the Mafia Girls’. ... If someone stared at us with a bad look, we could just go over and beat them up. ... When I was 14 or 15, I always hit first. When they talk shit to you and you do not take action there and then, they will get a hold on you. You have to get respect, or they will get at you in the city. (Former member of a multi-ethnic female gang, age 20, #32)

People may also be seen as provocative just by their identity and presence. Standing out openly as a Nazi or as an anti-racist is considered a provocation by their opponents. This identity is commonly displayed by carrying particular symbols or clothes. Donning a bomber jacket or sagging trousers will immediately place that person in a category on this side or the other. Such an act is interpreted as self-identification with the ‘enemy’, and consequently as a sufficient reason to be beaten up.

Due to their declarative symbols and dress code – with bomber jackets, Doc Martens boots and skinned heads – most people in the city see the neo-Nazis as provocative and intimidating. And that is obviously intended. Their style communicates strong messages to others. It signals an attachment to a highly violent group. Their style and symbols are also associated with Nazism, racism and xenophobia.

A local school even banned certain combinations of clothes and style elements on the school premises because it led to fear and conflict. In interviews, several of the youths in the neo-Nazi scene expressed astonishment for not being allowed to dress as they wanted, and claimed to be unable to understand why their style should be seen as so provocative that they were banned or assaulted because of that. At the same time, however, they were obviously aware of the powerful and intimidating messages their style communicated to their surroundings, and frequently they took advantage of the effects.

The dress codes of the multi-ethnic and hip-hop scenes did not signal a similar aggressiveness, as was the case with the Nazi style – at least, most people do not construe any aggressive message from the style of the hip-hoppers or anti-racists. However, the neo-Nazis do interpret the use of e.g. sagging trousers as identification with the enemy group, and therefore close to a declaration of war. The difference is that almost everyone see the style of the neo-Nazis as provocative, whereas only the Nazis perceive anything provocative when someone through statements or style appear as an anti-racist.

The notion of anti-racism as provocation came out strongly when we asked our informants from the neo-Nazi scene to comment on a murder some weeks earlier, in January 2001. Members of a closely allied skinhead group in Oslo knifed to death a 15 year old boy who had earlier spoken out against racism on TV. This boy had a black African father and a Norwegian mother. One of the leading members of the neo-Nazi scene in Kristiansand commented:

When I heard about this murder I thought, ‘how can one be so stupid?’ But I also understand why they killed him. When people come from another place and have a different skin colour and assert themselves like he did, it is not so strange. He had stepped on their toes, and they wanted to set a warning example (#40).

A more marginal participant stated independently:

He did not deserve it. But he had provoked. It was provocative because he was involved in anti-racism. But he was only 15 years old and did not deserve that. However, there is nothing that can be done about that now (#18).

Participants in the multicultural scene also recount that they have attacked people because they dress up in Nazi style. To appear publicly as a Nazi is a provocation by itself:

Sometimes a small gang go through Markens street [the main mall] in full Nazi outfit, doing ‘siege heil’ salutes and provoking. Once they sent out two Nazis to run through Markens. When they provoked, and the anti-racists came after them, there were a whole lot of them hiding in a park to ambush the pursuers. Of course there will be quarrels when they are racists and show it. ... The foreigners get pissed off when the others wear sweaters with ‘White Power’ slogans (participant in the The Valla group, #11).

Some girls belonging to the multi-ethnic gang scene interpreted the dress style of other girls as signs of political affiliation, which sometimes led to violent action.

There are often fights with girls who hang out with the Nazis. They dress very provocatively, like bimbos. It is sufficient that they dress with a bare stomach and a small top. Then you know for sure that they are against foreigners and support the Nazis – they are the ones who dress up like that. Many of them have had a lot of beatings from other girls. ... The bimbo style is a little bit whorish. I have beaten up some girls myself. There are so many rumours, and the ‘whore’ label is buzzing all around. They cannot call you a whore, just like that. Then you have to deal with them. (Norwegian girl in the multi-ethnic scene, age 15, #35)

Understanding the processes whereby youths classify each other is crucial to understand the dynamics of the violent conflicts. Violence is mainly carried out between *representatives of categories*. A person classified as a representative of an enemy category is automatically exposed to the risk of being targeted for violence from the adversary. When we asked youths to tell us about their latest experience with violence,

many of the stories described how they were attacked as a representative rather than as an individual. In these cases, skin colour or dress code were main criteria for target selection. ‘I was assaulted just because...’ was a recurring theme – pointing to the group category to which the person in question was associated with.

Both sides retaliate. The revenge may be directed at the person who had committed something, or against anyone in the other group (boy, age 15, belonging to the Valla, #29)

Since violence and retaliation is directed against representatives of ‘the Other’, it is rather arbitrary which persons associated with the enemy are targeted. Both sides ascribe to each other a form of collective responsibility for what one or a few of the Others might have committed. Anyone associated with the other side is considered a legitimate target for revenge.

Last summer a friend and I beat up two guys from the Valla. ... Later this autumn two of them took my sister. She was only 15, and she has never been part of the [neo-Nazi scene]. But they knew she was my sister, and they beat her up so severely that she had to be hospitalised. Just because she was my sister! (participant in the neo-Nazi scene, age 20, #20)

The Valla youths would primarily behave provocatively towards their main enemies – the neo-Nazis – and persons they associated with them. However, their demand for ‘respect’ from others was also found offensive by ordinary youths. They felt they had to submit to The Valla’s dominance in order to be able to move freely around in the city. What they found most provocative – to native Norwegian youths in particular – was the way The Valla members on a number of occasions forced their way into private parties, threatened or beat up the hosts, and sometimes vandalised the house. In several cases, the neo-Nazis offered to take revenge on behalf of the victims.

Many of the conflicts started out as non-political quarrels and affronts, but soon escalated into a chain of revenge where mobilisation followed the political divisions of ‘neo-Nazis’ vs. ‘anti-racists’. Acts of violence and assault were frequently made with reference to earlier affronts carried out by someone on the other side against some of ours. Who started it and how it all began was soon lost track of. The previous affront from the enemy was always a sufficient reason for our side to take revenge.

8. HOW GENERAL ARE THESE CONFLICT PATTERNS?

I will argue that the conflict dynamics and patterns described in Kristiansand represent a more general and widespread phenomenon that can be found in other European cities as well. Negative circles of intimidation, provocation, fear, revenge and polarisation

between youths from minority and majority populations are forms of interaction that easily produce violent youth groups and gangs. In our own research on racist violence and violent youth gangs, we have observed such dynamics behind the formation of such groups as the nationalist/racist Viking group and (some years earlier) the Pakistani 'Young Guns' gang in Oslo, as well as the conflict between the multi-ethnic Warriors gang and the racist Green Jackets gang in Copenhagen.¹⁹

In some of these cases, youths of immigrant origin feel threatened by groups of racist skinheads or neo-Nazis. To be less vulnerable, they join together in groups or gangs to protect themselves and fight off the racists. If they feel sufficiently strong, they may also go on the offensive – actively seeking out and beating up members of the racist group. However, a powerful and intimidating group image may easily be turned into other uses than fighting off racists. Some of these groups demand 'respect' and submission from other youths, and may also use violence for more criminal purposes, such as street robberies.

In other cases, some youths feel threatened by the intimidating behaviour of these immigrant youth groups and gangs. They establish their own groups for protection. Such 'white' groups are often disposed to adopt xenophobic and racist discourses and modes of behaviour. This will reinforce their conflicts with minority youths and intimidate such youths to join groups and gangs.

Which side started this negative circle to begin with is sometimes hard to determine, but it is even more difficult to break the circle. The role of the groups may also change over time. A former member of a multi-ethnic gang in Copenhagen, the Warriors, recalls:

Before, young people used to support us because they were afraid of the [racist] Green Jackets. After the Green Jackets had been chased off the streets, people supported us because they were afraid of us.²⁰

In all these cases, racism/nationalism and anti-racism provided a powerful dimension to organise conflicts and groups around, constituting 'magnetic poles' for mobilisation and for sorting out friends and foes. This conflict pattern is certainly not the only dynamics behind the formation of racist youth groups and (multi-)ethnic youth gangs. Sometimes violent or racist youth groups arise without counterparts that constitute physical threats. However, a large body of American gang research has documented

¹⁹ Cf. Bjørgo (1997) pp. 121-133; Bjørgo and Carlsson (2001), pp. 39-50; and Bjørgo, Carlsson & Haaland (2002). See also I.-L. Lien & T. Haaland, *Vold og gjengatferd. En pilotstudie av et ungdomsmiljø* (Oslo 1998), pp. 31, 63-64; and P. Cohen (1972).

²⁰ Interview of former Warrior member by the author on 5 June, 2002.

that the presence of one intimidating group will often give rise to a rival group.²¹ This study has shown that in the context of typical European multi-ethnic cities such conflicts may easily be perceived and organised along dimensions of racism and anti-racism.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBLE POINTS OF INTERVENTION

This paper set out to address several questions concerning what characterise the groups in conflict, what they were fighting over, what kinds of processes and factors have contributed to creating and sustaining the groups and the conflicts, and which of these factors and processes are possible influences to reduce the level of violence. These concluding remarks will focus on the latter questions.

The ‘motor’ in this conflict was widespread victimisation and fear of violence among young people in the city. This victimisation and fear was often caused by intimidation from one or the other of the two main rival groups, the neo-Nazis or the multi-ethnic gang scene, but it could be ‘ordinary’ bullying as well. In any case, those who felt threatened were frequently offered protection by one or the other main group, and many accepted this protection. The prize was that they became part of the violent conflict and became even more in need of protection from their group. Withdrawing from the conflict through disengagement from their group became increasingly difficult because they then risked becoming targets for violence from both their former enemies and their (former) friends who now considered them traitors. Thus, a number of those who tried to disengage from one group, ended up by being drawn into the opponent group, seeking protection there. The prize was to demonstrate their new loyalty by fighting their former friends. These groups became breeding places for a generalised hatred against those they categorised as their enemies. An attack against ‘one of us’ had to be revenged against any one associated with ‘them’.

There is no single ‘cure for all’ of these factors and processes, but several possible points of intervention could be identified. One obvious intervention was to *reduce the level of threat* of serious bodily harm by removing knives and other dangerous weapons from the street. The local police increased their enforcement of a legal ban on carrying knives and other weapons by routinely searching known members of the violent groups and other trouble-makers, and putting a heavy fine on those who violated the ban. Our young informants reported that they previously used to carry weapons (allegedly for self-protection) but did not dare to do so anymore because of frequent

²¹ Cf. e.g. S. Decker and B. Van Winkle, *Life in the Gang* (Cambridge 1996); C.R. Huff (ed.), *Gangs in America* (Thousand Oaks 1996, 2001); M. Klein, *The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence, and Control* (New York/Oxford 1995).

police searches and the fines. Some expressed relief that there were fewer weapons around than in the past. Our two youth surveys in 1999 and 2002 documented that there had been a significant reduction in the reported use of weapons among those who had participated in a fight.²² Although fists, boots and improvised weapons could still be used to cause bodily harm, there is still reason to believe that this intervention from the police reduced the level of perceived threat.

A second possible point of intervention was to provide more extensive *support to young victims of violence*. If the only credible 'victims support' around were the neo-Nazis and the The Valla gang, no wonder that vulnerable young people joined these groups for protection! An advisory office for victims of violence has been in operation in Kristiansand since 1999 to provide practical assistance (mainly economic and legal), but with no special focus on youths. It is difficult to assess whether this advisory office has had any direct impact in reducing the tendency among young victims in Kristiansand to seek protection from violent groups. We believe that improved victim support for young people represents an important potential for reducing recruitment to racist groups and violent youth gangs. A Swedish project, the 'Support Centre for Young Victims of Crime',²³ represents a more targeted effort to counter these negative processes.

A third point of intervention was to provide credible options for disengagement from the violent groups. Without any realistic and attractive options to exit, members are likely to remain in the group and participate in the conflict even if they would prefer to get out of it. The longer a young person remains in such a group, the more likely that person is to get a criminal record and acquire extremist values, world-views and practices. Thus, the sooner he or she can be persuaded, assisted or compelled to disengage from the group and its activities, the better it will be for that individual. If disengagement from a violent group increases and recruitment is reduced or stopped, the 'demographic balance' becomes negative and the group will shrink in size.²⁴ In Kristiansand, the municipality and the police has cooperated closely with

²² In both surveys, 21 per cent of the respondents reported that they had taken actively part in fights. In 1999, those who had used some forms of weapons constituted 35.2 per cent of these. Three years later, this number was reduced to 25.0 per cent. The increased police enforcement of the weapons ban took place in the period between these two surveys.

²³ The 'Support Centre for Young Victims of Crime' in Stockholm was nominated for the European Crime Prevention Award 2001. See <<http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk/eurocpaward5.htm>> for a description of the centre.

²⁴ For a more thorough analysis of the problem of disengagement from racist groups, see T. Bjørge, *Racist and Right-wing Violence in Scandinavia*, chapter 6, 'Entry, Bridge Burning and Exit Options: What happens when young people join racist groups and want to leave?' (Oslo 1997); T. Bjørge, 'Rassistische Gruppen: Die Anwerbung reduzieren und den Ausstieg fördern', *Journal für Konflikt- und Gewaltforschung / Journal for Conflict and Violence Research*, Vol. 4, 1/2002 (pp. 5-31).

an NGO (Voksne for Barn, or 'Adults for Children') since 1996 to implement the Exit Programme, which has three main elements: 1) To provide practical assistance²⁵ to participants in racist and violent groups who want to disengage; 2) to use parents as a resource to get their children out of such groups; and 3) to train professionals with responsibilities for such youths (youth workers, teachers, police officers etc) to help youths to leave these groups.²⁶ In two evaluations, the Exit programme has been found to have had a positive and cost-effective impact in Kristiansand, in particular the use of parental network groups to help parents to get their children out of the racist scene.²⁷ The parents of 42 youths who had participated in the neo-Nazi scene were asked how they and their children had benefited from the parents participation in the network group. Only 27 per cent of the parents (10 of 42) responded, but the great majority of these parents were highly positive to the assistance and the outcome (on average 9.2 on a scale from 1 to 10). According to the parents, all ten children had broken completely with the neo-Nazi group and its activities, and the majority of them no longer held or expressed any racist or Nazi attitudes (only one still held some clear racist views, whereas three others still held some traces of racist attitudes).²⁸ The Exit programme was the most targeted intervention to reduce the neo-Nazi scene in Kristiansand.

In the extension of this, reducing the size – or dissolving – one or the other of the two main groups involved in the conflicts in Kristiansand, would also serve to reduce the level of violent conflicts. In our study, we concluded that a realistic target would be to dissolve the neo-Nazi scene and try to restrain the criminal and violent activities of the multi-ethnic scene.²⁹ This goal was achieved to some extent. The neo-Nazi scene was reduced in size from 40 in 2000-2001 to 10-12 in 2004. They were less

²⁵ Helping to find jobs, military service or opportunities for education far away from the former friends and enemies in Kristiansand were among the forms of practical assistance provided by municipal agencies or the police, to youths wanting to disengage from the neo-Nazi scene or other groups involved in the conflict.

²⁶ For a description of the Exit Programme, see T. Bjørgo, 'Exit Neo-Nazism: Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Racist Groups' (Oslo 2002), available at <<http://www.nupi.no/IPS/filestore/627.pdf>>.

²⁷ Cf. Hillgunn Olsen, *Å være foreldre til en nynazist* (Oslo 2001); Y. Carlsson & T. Haaland, *Voldelige ungdomsgrupper – Intervensjon på kommunenivå. Erfaringsrapport fra Kristiansand 2001-2004* (Oslo, 2004), pp. 56-71.

²⁸ Only one of the ten still clearly held racist and some Nazi views, whereas three others still held some traces of such views, according to the survey. Cf. Carlsson & Haaland (*ibid*, pp. 60-62). The Exit programme itself reported that it had worked directly or indirectly (through parents) with 60 youths in the neo-Nazi scene in Kristiansand between 1996 and 2001. By the end of that period, 49 of these youths were no longer part of the Nazi scene. Cf. Bjørgo (*ibid*) p. 22.

²⁹ Bjørgo, Carlsson & Haaland (*ibid*) pp. 219-220.

visible and far less intimidating in relation to opponents than they had been a few years earlier. However, a few of them were still frequently involved in violence, but not necessarily of a political kind. A core group of some 6-7 is still involved with a Nazi organisation. Recruitment is reduced to a handful. Several former participants of the Nazi scene have moved on to more profit-oriented criminal activities or are now part of the drug scene. However, according to key informants in the local police and among youth workers, the great majority of those who at some point had participated in the neo-Nazi scene since the mid-1990s no longer represent a problem in terms of extremism, violence or crime.

Although the reduction of the neo-Nazi scene was in all likelihood partly caused by various forms of interventions, external events have also played a role. A shocking murder of a black boy in Oslo in winter 2001 by a Nazi skinhead group in Oslo closely affiliated with the Kristiansand group, had the effect of reducing recruitment to the Nazi scenes in all of Norway, for at least a year, thereafter.

Concerning the multi-ethnic scene, the 'Valla' gang no longer exists as an identity or mobilisation network against Nazis in Kristiansand. However, several of the former core members of the Valla are now part of a more criminal and profit-oriented network, dealing with drugs and robberies. Social intervention programmes, such as MST (Multi Systemic Therapy) seem to have had less impact on core members of the Valla than these interventions had towards core participants of the neo-Nazi scene, where the success rate was moderate.³⁰

Although violence and crime among marginalised youths remains a challenge in Kristiansand, the described processes of polarisation and generalised revenge along ideological lines between youths identified with the neo-Nazi and the anti-racist/ Valla scene no longer represents a problem. Several of the interventions seem to have played a positive role in reducing the violent youth groups and the conflicts between them.

³⁰ MST is a family-based, intensive six-month programme which treats youths with behavioural problems in their own homes. According to Carlsson & Haaland (*ibid*, pp. 162-165), four out of the eight youths from the neo-Nazi scene were not registered with new criminal acts for more than two years after they had ended MST treatment. All five youths from the Valla scene who were treated by MST were still highly active criminals one or two years after finished treatment. After six months of intensive treatment in the context of family, the MST team had declared 80 per cent success with youths from both these scenes. However, once the control regime was lifted, all the Valla members turned back to crime, whereas only the half of those from the neo-Nazis scene did so.

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