Skinhead Involvement is a Result of Alienation

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Introduction

In today’s world there are many different routes of displaying intolerance. Some people have intolerance that is held inside and others display it outwardly. Some have only a little amount of hate whereas others have a lot of hate stored up inside of them. Everyone has a different level of vulnerability toward displaying violent racism. Society plays a huge role in deciding how susceptible one person will be to join groups that outwardly display their hate or rage. A person’s social network which includes their friends, family, church, school, work and mentors each have a significant influence on them. Skinheads may be a significant example of a group of people who violently display their intolerance outwardly in society, but underneath this obvious fact we can see people who are having complications in their communication abilities; they have a heart that is unable to properly express its need for love and acceptance.

As we have learned from professor Hodge, if we are going to communicate across cultures, we have to engage into a part of peoples lives that are from a different culture than our own. In this paper I would like to take the time to enter into the culture of a Skinhead, and begin to understand what their life is like. As Hodge has guided me to do, I want to take into account that I will have my own “stereotypes, discriminations, prejudice, and racism” which may influence this paper (Hodge, Lecture 1, 2005). This paper will take the opportunity to discuss many different issues that pertain to the Skinheads in today’s Society. First I will discuss what a Skinhead is and how a person can identify them within their culture. Then I will discuss the idea of racism because this is one of the main leading forces which define what a Skinhead stands for. Following this I will discuss possibilities for what leads a person to become a Skinhead.
After that I will focus on the key causing forces in society which push people in the direction of joining gangs such as the neo-Nazi Skinheads. Then I will summarize a personal interview I had with someone who used to be involved in the Skinhead scene. Finally I will present my concluding thoughts about Skinheads.

What is a Skinhead?

Skinheads are said to be an “authoritarian youth movement which sanctifies violence as means to achieve political domination.” Their main objectives are to defend the white race and to build white pride around the world. Most groups openly display “anti-black, anti-gay, anti-Jewish, anti-Hispanic, anti-Asian, and anti-immigrant attitudes” (Prejudice Institute, 2000). Skinheads have been referred to as the “most violent group of white supremacists this country has seen in a quarter century. They espouse bigotry, hatred, and violence toward minorities, and have been responsible for some of the worst racial assaults that have ever occurred” (Clark, 1992).

One difference that sets the Skinheads apart from most other racial groups like the KKK is that most groups are found to be very independent. There is not a lot of communication from groups to groups across the nation or the world. They mostly communicate through media, music concerts (White Power rock), and word of mouth by Skinheads passing through town. Most Skinheads do not stay in one place, they move to different cities quite often. “There is no single national organization, Skinheads frequently move in and out of gangs, and gangs themselves split and merge” (Hamm, 1994, p 7).

Even though the Skinheads are independent and move around a lot, they seem to stay true to their commitment as a Skinhead. Skinheads call themselves “warriors” and say, “We
never run away, back down, or sell out. We despise the traitors, the cowards, the apathetic and the limp-wristed queers. We will fight forever to defend our people and our land. Our heads are shaved for battle” (More p 84). This brings an obvious fear for a Skinhead to leave their gang that they have committed to. Their decision is a binding oath that they make to their group. Even though it is not easy to leave the Skinhead scene for the most part it seems to be joined voluntarily. “Nowhere were skinheads a major peer pressure group among the young able to force or achieve membership through the magnetic attraction of their size or social glamour” (p 76).

A person would notice a Skinhead walking down the street by their attire alone. Skinheads mostly cut their hair with a zero-zero cut but can go up to as high as a number three. Today they may even grow out their hair to conceal their identity. The girls may shave their heads as well, but most choose not to do so (Moore, 1993). The males are typically extremely physically fit and dress in “blue jeans, white power T-shirts, red suspenders, and Doc Martens (heavy steel-toed boot of British make)” (Hamm, 1994, pp 4-5). Skinhead girls are supposed to wear the same thing as the boys except they are found to wear mini skirts or more specifically kilt skirts made out of wool. Girls often also wear fishnet stockings with their Doc Marten boots or shoes (Moore).

Surprisingly the gangs aren’t composed of older men like the KKK but rather they are composed mainly of teenagers. The typical ages of Skinheads can range from as young as 13 and 14 years of age to 25 to 27. “American Skinheads are [said to be very] dangerous; most members are aged 16 to 19, and bolster their courage with alcohol, methamphetamine, and cocaine” (Clark, 1992). Estimates that have been given in 1998 about the United States have said that there are approximately 3,500 Skinheads spread
across and active in 40 states. Not only are Skinheads active in the United States, but they are also active in 32 other countries. These Skinheads have formed over 160 Skinhead gangs within just the United States (The Prejudice Institute, 2000).

The Skinheads are marked by the swastika emblem which most people typically believe resembles only the Nazi party. The Skinheads can also be referred to as the Neo-Nazi Skinheads. Common sayings or slogans that Skinheads use to depict their racism are: “White Unity,” “No Jews,” and “Niggers Suck” (Hamm, 1994, p 50). Unlike most gangs who use guns as their main weapon, Skinheads typically use knives, baseball bats, and of course their convenient steel-toed boots (Clark, 1992).

What is Racism?

There are many different obstacles that come in the way of a person obtaining intercultural competence. Racism plays a main role in deferring someone from this because it makes it hard for people who are of different races or ethnic groups to communicate properly. For some, the word racism itself can produce very strong emotions in people who have experienced oppression and exploitation as a result of racial discrimination done to them in their past. Racism has been referred to as “the tendency to categorize people who are culturally different in terms of their physical traits, such as skin color, hair color and texture, facial structure, and eye shape” (Lustig and Koester, p 157). Racism also refers to “attitudes, practices and other factors that disadvantage people because of their race, color or ethnicity” (Say No to Racism, 2003).

According to Lustig and Koester, there are three different levels of racism: individual, institutional, and cultural. Individual racism exemplifies how a certain ethnic group is portrayed as somehow inferior to another ethnic group. Institutional racism
excludes people from “equal participation in the society’s institutions solely because of their race” (158). This has restricted minority ethnic groups from participating in particular professions. “The cultural level of racism produces a denial of the existence of a particular group. This type of racism leads to the rejection of the beliefs and values of one ethnic group by another” (158).

There are many different aspects of racism that produce racial divisions throughout the United States. A person does not have to be a part of a gang to display racism. Therefore, in order to avoid ignorance toward racism a person must recognize that racial practices “(1) are increasingly covert, (2) are embedded in normal operations of institutions, (3) avoid direct racial terminology and (4) are invisible to most Whites” (Emmerson & Smith, 2000 p 9).

Skinheads place the white race as supreme over all other races and as a result they display extreme forms of racism. Most may think that only individual racism is displayed by Skinheads, but in order to maintain white pride, all of these levels must be maintained. As Emmerson and Smith say, “racism is not mere individual, overt prejudice or the free-floating irrational driver of race problems, but the collective misuse of power that results in diminished life opportunities for some racial groups” (2000, p 9). Many Skinheads have claimed that racism is their primary reason for all of their violent behavior that they demonstrate. Their membership to a Skinhead group is an explicit way for them to demonstrate their harsh racism that is stored inside of them (Hamm, 1994).

**Who Are Apt to Becoming a Skinhead?**

The little research that has been done has found that most Skinheads come from broken families. They have been known as the youth who have been severely alienated
and rejected from mainstream society. As children these kids have grown up feeling insecure, which over time accumulates and develops into rage. When they are in their late teens, they then feel the urge to relieve this rage, and they do so by attacking others (Hamm, 1994).

One of the main influences on a person who is considering becoming a Skinhead is the American society itself. Some researchers have said that violent gangs, like the Skinheads, are a “natural outgrowth of urban, underclass cultures where schools are lousy, parents don’t control their children, and there is no community or ethnic organization to join when life becomes just too much for young men to endure” (Hamm, 1994, p 64). It has a huge impact on adolescents’ developmental stages, peer and family relationships, adjustment and coping abilities, and behavior that is displayed. The expectations that are held by society help to mold these adolescents’ personalities, influence their roles in life, and guide the way their future is going to be (Rice, 1978). As a result of this important influence that society has on an adolescent, “alienation presents a serious threat to the successful resolution of the adolescent identity crisis. To be alienated is to lack a sense of belonging; to feel cut off from family, friends, school, or work.” If an adolescent is feeling alienated and unwanted by their social network they are most likely going to experience some type of compromise in their psychosocial development. The formation of an adolescent’s identity and the feeling that they belong are major points that an adolescent needs to achieve, almost everyone has the innate desire to feel like they are accepted (Clark, 1992).

After reading “Getting High and Getting By” I made comparisons between drug sellers and Skinheads. This article stated that “In the case of New York City, drug
suppliers often used juveniles to retail their wares and avoid the risk of harsh sentences adults faced under the Rockefeller drug laws” ("Mexican Gangs" p.85). By reading this information I wondered how much Skinheads youth is used to achieve “White Supremacy” without getting into much trouble for it. There needs to be enough fear placed into a juveniles heart in order to keep them from committing violent crimes.

If an adolescent is feeling alienated, they are going to seek out comfort from those who are welcoming and who want to make them feel like they belong. Interestingly enough, this need for approval, companionship, excitement, belonging, and self-worth is commonly found by their affiliation with gangs and cults. Most would think or at least hope that religious institutions would provide this for these adolescents since they are supposed to be the ones who have loving and accepting attitudes. In reality these adolescents have been rejected by the church as well and as a result they have had to turn to deviant subcultures (Clark, 1992; Moore, 1993). Hamm goes on to say that experts have found that “the fraternity of Skinheads offers [the] youth an identity and a support network” (1994, p 7). Clark also went on to talk about how “youths who feel alienated may succumb to depression, cynicism, delinquency, and substance abuse, and may choose to align with deviant subcultures” (1992).

Adolescents who are becoming vulnerable to joining a gang or who have just entered into a gang have been found to have various common symptoms and attitudes. "Declining economic conditions in many minority urban communities increased juvenile involvement in illegal drug markets" ("Mexican Gangs" p.85). Surprisingly this isn’t the same for Skinheads, rather than them coming from lower class neighborhoods, “Some reports indicate that Skinhead activity in urban areas is now more common in middle
class neighborhoods than it is in working class or lower income areas” (The Prejudice Institute, 2000). One thing is that most adolescents who are just becoming involved in a gang tend to withdraw themselves from their previous lives (family and social activities) and become more secretive about their lives. Another common symptom is that most gang members begin to develop a new vocabulary that is synonymous with their specific gang. Those who are considering joining or are in a gang usually do not know how to properly release their anger and therefore can tend to be very violent throughout their life circumstances. Others demonstrate various dysfunctional behaviors, such as drug and alcohol abuse, truancy, runaway behavior, and serious family conflicts.

As a result of possible depression that these adolescents may have, researchers have found that they tend to commonly have a gloomy and dismal outlook on life. They seem to lack humor and spontaneity in their personality which makes it hard for them to be in relation with others. This makes it hard for these kids seem to be able to have the proper skills for obtaining and maintaining friendships with their peers and relationships with their family members. They have no positive feelings about their future and overwhelmed with hopelessness. Along with the depression that these kids have, they are extremely “susceptible to suicidal ideation and/or gestures (e.g., cutting oneself and self-mutilation)” (Clark, 1992).

What is the Cause?

In Moore’s book, he talked about how certain Skinheads he interviewed believe that if they provoke someone verbally and this person responds in an argumentative or verbally aggressive tone, it is not their fault if they attack these individuals in response to their disrespect displayed to the Skinheads. Moore seems to believe that Skinheads
believe that they aren’t looking for trouble all of the time, instead trouble comes to them. Moore’s interpretation of this belief is that “Skinheads complain that violence seeks them out, but actually by their appearance and manner they draw violence onto themselves, when they do not create it directly by initiating violent acts” (Moore, 1993, p 74).

Part of me wants to agree with Moore’s comment, but then another part of me wants to disagree with this comment. Yes, I agree that Skinheads should not be saying comments that make people angry if they supposedly do not want to get into a fight but I also think there is a large amount of responsibility for the person who reacts to their provoking acts. The Skinhead’s lack of maturity does not give their enemies the right to respond with immaturity as well. This leads me to believe that Moore might be falling into the trap of blaming the victims instead of the perpetrators themselves. People like Moore should caution themselves from following the fundamental attribution error.

Wikipedia.com defines the fundamental attribution error as “the tendency for people to over-emphasize dispositional, or personality-based, explanations for behaviors observed in others while under-emphasizing the role and power of situational influences on the same behavior” (2005). It is almost natural instinct to blame the person for who they are rather than on the environment which surrounds that person. “Everybody loves to hate the Skinheads, but nobody wants to spend the time, energy, or money to figure out why these youths have turned out to be so magnificently deviant to begin with” (Hamm, 1994, p 7).

This situation leads me toward reflecting on what I have learned from attending the Museum of Tolerance. Tolerance is the key to this situation; both the Skinheads and their enemies need to be displaying tolerance toward each other. Everyone has their own
definition of tolerance, but what I am referring to is that as a world, we need to overcome
the hate that is in our hearts and instead love each other. Love is at the root of tolerance;
it is what produces it.

God’s call for us to love one another is greatly reflected by Galatians 5:13-15. In
this passage it can be noticed that God knew in advance that people would need to love
one another in order to survive. He pre-warns us that if we do not end our life of hate and
start living a life of love or else “we will be destroyed by each other” (Biblegateway,
2005). We, as a world, have not fulfilled this commandment, and there are people who
are destroying each other. Gangs, clans, terrorism, wars and hate crimes are only a part of
the evidence of the horror that is all around our earth. Because we are all sinners and all
fall short of meeting God’s commandment of love, I believe we as a human race are the
cause of people’s entry into gangs. I don’t care if we are directly or indirectly related to
this cause, we all have a responsibility, and that is to love one another.

**Interview With a Person Who Had Skinhead Involvement**

For this paper I have had the opportunity to interview a person who has been
affiliated with a Skinhead gang in Orange County, California. This person requests that
his name remain anonymous and therefore in order to provide confidentiality this paper
will use the replacement name of Loki. He was involved with the Skinheads from ages
16-17 which happened to be around his Junior year in high school. As a result of the
length constraints on this paper, I will be giving a summary of what I have learned from
this person. Due to the fact that this person is no longer affiliated with the Skinheads, I
focused more on reflective questions.
I first asked Loki how he got involved with this group. He agreed with Moore in that Skinheads are not recruited. “It's more often than not that a friend of a friend happens to be into it and you just start hanging out with people...and eventually end up becoming one yourself.” He felt as if it was a form of a church group, “They want you to be taken care of and they want to teach you about what they believe.” This made me think of all of the research that has been done on how most adolescents who enter into gangs are alienated from society. This group provides exactly what is needed: acceptance.

Something interesting about the group that Loki followed, which is different from most of the Skinheads researched, is that they did not allow anyone under the age of 18 to join as an official member of the gang. As a result Loki was never able to take an oath into the gang. Not only that you had to be pure white without any Jewish descent and you had to perform a violent act such as “stabbing someone who was an enemy of the gang” and have it “witnessed by an elder.”

I then took the time to ask Loki if there was a common “type” of person who became a Skinhead. In response to this he said “Mainly you get a lot of black sheep in the skinhead scene. I find that there are so many individual reasons that the people end up a white supremacists. I ended up there because of so many reasons. I guess it mostly boils down to being angry.” He said that this anger comes from “minorities treating you like shit just because you're white. Anger from people picking on you. Anger from an un-ideal family life.” After feeling all of this anger and you come across a gang such as the Skinheads you are able to find “total acceptance from these people that will fight for you. People that will lift you up when you're down. Just [be]cause they hate someone does not mean that they are incapable of showing [com]passion.” Another factor that
caused Loki to join was that he was “in awe of the whole skinhead image. They're big, tough, and fuck people up.”

Even though Loki wasn’t officially a member of this Skinhead group he did partake in a lot of Skinhead acts. Particularly he made CD's of white supremacists music and printed informational flyers and handed them out to people that he knew. He also discussed violent stabbing and beating acts that he partook in. Their enemies were “most often other gangs. They were the ones that were found to cause more risks to us and to white people in general. There was also war between different skinhead gangs because of many things such as different politics, or someone doing something wrong to a member of the group.” He also said that White people can also be classified as an enemy if they somehow wrong his gang.

I also asked Loki reflective questions such as what good and bad did this group bring to this world. In response to the good he said, “They have taken care of kids that have been kicked out of their house. They kill murderers. I guess it's kind of a form of vigilante justice.” Even though this group may have brought good to this world he also felt they brought bad to this world by “Killing people, hurting people, and robing people.”

Loki has officially left the Skinhead scene. I asked why he chose to leave his group and he said “because I realized that a person is not better than someone else because of their skin color.” Something that caught me by surprise was that the elders of this gang “were happy when Loki left because they didn’t want him to have to live the life that they live. They knew he had a lot of potential.” This made me think that these Skinheads don’t really want to be who they are. It is probably a result that they feel like
they have to be or else they will get killed out of betrayal, or that they have no one else that will support them. I asked Loki if he felt this group helped him or only made things worse and in response he said, “Mainly I feel sad for all of the wrong things that I did and the lives that I ruined when I was a skinhead. If I could do it all over again, I would never be a skinhead. I guess all in all I wanted to fit in and that was why I did a lot of the things that I did.”

**Conclusion**

I wanted to take the time to focus on a Skinhead’s privilege and power. As Hodge discussed in his second lecture, “Privilege can be used for a positive outcome, but, unfortunately, most of the times it is used for the person own personal gain” (2005). Those who are white seem to be constructed with privilege. In the case of a Skinhead, their privilege may be used for their own personal gain (to feel accepted), but I believe it is partially due to the selfishness of this world. I say selfishness because most Skinheads have been alienated for a good part of their life and they are sick of it. I do not agree that their route of obtaining acceptance is the proper way to get it. By becoming racist they are causing those who are their enemies to feel the same alienation that they felt before they became a Skinhead. I agree with Hodge in that “privilege can blind you to the issues and concerns of other cultures” which can be better referred to as groups that are different from your own.

“Categorizing people by race can make you begin to see people in categories and in parts, not as individuals. Seeing people as a person, begins the process of being a competent intercultural communicator.” (Hodge, 2005, Lecture 3, p 4). Skinheads struggle with racism causes them to categorize people, taking away their individual
identities. If they are going to get rid of the hate that runs rampant in their hearts, they are going to have to put an end to their categorizing. If they are not able to keep from hating, they should at least focus this hate on specific individuals rather than groups. Each person is unique and different within their groups.

I really wanted to take the opportunity to “observe, engage, understand, and participate” in the Skinhead culture as Professor Hodge guided us to do in his fifth lecture (2005, p 4). By observing the Skinheads while growing up, I noticed that a lot of them are very compassionate as Loki described. They took care of me and were there for me whenever I needed them even though I did not support their Skinhead involvement. By engaging in their lives I was able to share my beliefs about racism and show them ways I believe their views are distorted. I believe that engaging in a culture allows you to truly understand the hidden feelings that the people of that culture may have. Finally, I was not able to participate in the gang because I did not agree with their actions, but I really was able to understand what it is like to participate in it from hearing Loki’s testimony.

American History X (1998) gives a good depiction of what it is like to be a skinhead. Derek, the older brother, tries to prevent his younger brother Danny from falling in his footsteps of being a skinhead. While he goes to jail he realizes how stupid it is to be a Skinhead, and when he gets out he wants to prevent his brother from continuing on in it. Those who are skinheads should take Derek’s advice, even though he is not their big brother. Growing up as a little sister of a Skinhead, I went through each day scared that I wouldn’t have my brother any more because he died. After recently talking to him about how much I loved him back then, he seemed to have no clue how much he truly meant to me. As a result, I want to encourage those to put extra effort into displaying their love for
people who are involved in gangs. These people are very apt to blinding themselves from compassion and love that is sent toward their way.

As a whole, I believe that what is needed to prevent more kids from joining the Skinhead scene is to live a life of love. I would also agree that schools and families should follow Sermons-Ward and Mikulski six simple steps to prevent violence within school’s and communities:

First, we are supposed to make an effort to identify kids with problems and then to find appropriate mental health care that would suit them properly. Second, we need to be promoting tolerance and teaching conflict resolution. Third, there should be monitoring and eliminating of bullying. Fourth, there should be an improvement in awareness and communication between adults and youth. Fifth, communities need to take the steps that are necessary to develop peer support programs. Finally, the sixth step is to enhance parental and community involvement. (2005)

Skinheads were born violent free and so were we. Therefore a normal person is very capable of becoming a skinhead. These steps of prevention need to be followed, and those of us who have not turned over to gangs should take steps to retrieve those who have. Society can impact a person to join the Skinhead scene and therefore society can impact a person to leave the Skinhead scene. Anyone who knows a Skinhead should never give up on them and should continue to be displaying unconditional compassion and love toward them.
References


