ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN CRIME AND SOCIETY

Skinhead History, Identity, and Culture

Kevin Borgeson and
Robin Maria Valeri

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Skinheads go beyond the societal stereotype of hate mongers, bigots, and neo-Nazis. The community of skins also includes traditional skins (those that adhere to the original philosophy of the British movement in 1969), Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice (SHARP), and gay skins, female skins, and neo-Nazi or racist/nationalist skins. *Skinhead History, Identity, and Culture* covers the history, identity, and culture of the skinhead movement in Europe and America, looking at the total culture of the skins through a cross-sectional analysis of skinheads in various countries.

Authors Borgeson and Valeri provide original research data to cast new light into the skinhead community. Some of the data is ethnographic, drawing on face-to-face interviews with skins of all kinds, while other data is compiled from the Internet and social media about various skinhead groups within the United States, Europe, and Australia. The book covers the history of the subculture; explores the unique cultures of female, gay, and neo-Nazi skins; and explores manifestations of the culture as represented on the Internet and in music. The work discusses how skinheads derive their values and morals and how they fit into the larger social structure.

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This book is dedicated to Pam, Jade, Liam Chayse, and Logan. Without their support and feedback, this project never would have got off the ground. I would also like to dedicate this book to Michael E. Brown, an incredible mentor and friend.

Kevin

To my husband Ray, for his love and support, and to my parents Bob and Nancy, for their unfailing confidence in me, my love and gratitude.

Robin

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Preface

Dear Reader,
Thank you for your interest in our book. Skinheads are a fascinating group of individuals to talk with and it has been intriguing for us to explore and write about the skinhead movement.

What makes this book unique is that much of the information presented is based on interviews with skinheads from the north-eastern United States, conducted over the past 20 years by the first author, Kevin Borgeson. As you read through the book you will note that some of their opinions about the movement differ from those presented in other accounts. These differences may stem, in part, from the nationality, gender, or sexual preference of those being interviewed and reflect, one of the reoccurring themes of the book, that identity, in this case the skinhead identity, is dynamic.

For example, in Chapter 1 you will find that the views of the traditional skinheads interviewed, about the roots of the movement, are in some ways consistent with that of other researchers and writers. And that many of the differences between their versions of skinhead history and that of others, tend to stem from either the fact that they are American skinheads rather than English skinheads or skinheads from some other part of the world or that they joined the movement in the latter part of the 1980s or later, and so their perspective on the history of the movement and what is important to it, differs from that of someone who joined the movement when it first began or when it first came to the United States. The history of the skinhead movement, as presented by the racist/nationalist skinheads interviewed, diverges even further from the norm, for both of these reasons, but also because the racist/nationalist skinheads tend to trace their history through its racist/nationalist origins, emphasizing the events and personalities pertinent to it, more so than its skinhead origins.

As you read through the book you will note that different groups proclaim that they are the "true" or "authentic skinheads" while decrying other groups' claims to the skinhead identity. As will be discussed, identity is both created and dynamic. Identity is created and shaped from the individual's own attributes, the attributes of the group, and even the attributes of

opposing groups. Because both individuals and situations change over time, identity is necessarily forced to change and evolve as the individual and groups grow and change with time and to meet the demands of the situation. The result is that no two individuals or groups, even though they espouse the same identity, will have the same identity or "do" identity in the same way. Evidence for this is seen in the contrary views about skinhead history mentioned above and discussed in Chapter 1. The difference in stories told by American skinheads versus those from other countries or the differences between American skinheads who are racist/nationalist skinheads versus traditional skinheads is a manifestation of the constructed, idiosyncratic, and dynamic nature of identity.

In Chapter 2 we discuss why people join and leave the skinhead movement. An individual's identity is central to both their reasons for joining and leaving the movement. According to the skinheads interviewed, all were drawn to the skinhead movement because what they saw in the movement was consistent with who they were. Rather than a skinhead group approaching them and recruiting them into the movement, the accounts of these skinheads suggest the reverse. These individuals sought out the groups and joined them because the group's identity was consistent with their own identity. Additionally, many of the individuals interviewed recounted a similar tale of how, in mainstream society, they were not accepted for who they were, and had to pretend to be someone they weren't in order to gain acceptance. But among skinheads they could be who they were, reveal their true identity, and gain acceptance. For this reason many skinheads refer to their skinhead friends as their true family, the people they turn to for support and help. Some of the skinheads interviewed were able to pinpoint a specific event that spurred a change in identity that either brought them into the movement or spurred them to leave it. Once part of the skinhead movement, whether a traditional skinhead or racist/nationalist, the group's norms would further shape the individual's identity. As noted throughout the book, an individual's identity changes as they change and as they encounter and react to new situations. In the accounts of people who leave the skinhead movement you will see that what prompts someone to leave the movement is a change in identity, one that makes their new identity incompatible with the group's identity.

The second theme in the book has to do with masculinity. For the most part, the original skinheads espoused beliefs, values, and behaviors consistent with hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, in previous research and writings about skinheads, especially that of traditional skinheads and Racist/National skinheads, ultra-masculinity was often assumed and rarely discussed. However, the importance of masculinity to the skinhead identity becomes salient when discussing gay skinheads or female skinheads because stereotypes of each of these groups run counter to views about masculinity, challenging conceptions of masculinity and of skinheads.

However, in Chapter 3 you will see that it is the ultra-masculinity of the movement that attracts gay men to the skinhead movement either because it is consistent with their own masculinity and/or because of its erotic appeal. In Chapter 4 you will see that some of the female skinheads embrace the toughness and violence associated with being a skinhead while others admit that they do not like the violence. The presence of these groups within the skinhead movement poses a challenge to the identity of a skinhead. Yet, in each of these chapters, you will hear members of the respective groups defend their right to be skinheads, often by stating that their particular group represents what it means to be a "true skin." You will also hear other skinheads contend that gays, women, racists, or nationalists cannot be part of the skinhead movement because they do not represent what it means to be a "true skin."

For many skinheads, music is fundamental to the movement, and is credited with shaping skinhead culture and identity. Chapter 5, on skinhead music, discusses the importance of music to the history of skinheads. Because there are different niches within the skinhead movement, the type of music each group listens to differs. But regardless of the type of music a group listens to, music helps to shape and transmit their own brand of skinhead culture and identity, brings people into the movement by facilitating the formation of friendships, and helps keep people tied to the movement through the nostalgia it evokes. Technology, specifically the Internet, has also come to play a key role in keeping the skinhead movement alive and a global phenomenon. Like music, it too plays a key role in transmitting skinhead culture, attracting new members, and facilitating connections between and among skinhead groups.

Finally, as is evident from the above discussion, this book underscores the diversity of individuals and groups who consider themselves to be skinheads. Taken together, the range of opinions among the skinheads interviewed sheds light on the diversity within the skinhead movement and dispels any notion that skinheads are a homogeneous group.

We hope you enjoy the book.

Warmest regards,

Kevin Borgeson and Robin Valeri

Chapter 1

Skinhead History

Overview

In order to understand skinhead culture one must look at how skinheads construct their everyday definitions of situations, in which they are engaged, as well as the knowledge system they use to make sense of their daily lives within the subculture and in the outside world. Skinheads do not live in a bubble and are affected by outside social influences. The movement itself was constructed originally in the 1960s on the bases of the beliefs, morality, and values that went with English working class life. Like other historical subcultures, skins today have adapted to the changing political, social, and moral circumstances of their society. For example, some skinhead identities are opposed to animal cruelty. In order to understand this relationship of subculture to the inclusive culture, it is helpful to examine some aspects of the sociology of knowledge. This chapter will first explain social construction theory and then move to how skinheads develop a knowledge system, including the types of rationalization they use in going about their daily life, while constructing a history of the skinhead movement as they see it in regard to its relative autonomy.

Social Construction of Reality

In 1966, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann published *The Social Construction of Reality*, a work written from the point of view of the sociology of knowledge. They focus on the "process by which any body of knowledge comes to be socially accepted as reality" By reality construction they mean the process whereby people continuously create, through their actions and interactions, a shared reality that is experienced as objectively factual and subjectively meaningful" (Wallace & Wolf, 1999, p. 277).

The main point is that the knowledge an individual gains from experience takes a form of a structure, which gives it its intelligibility and meaningfulness. When Berger and Luckmann refer to this structure, they

mean "the social order, or the institutional world, which they view as human products" (Wallace & Wolf, 1999, p. 277).

For Berger and Luckmann, alienation from society plays an important part in the ways in which individuals, as members of groups, construct various versions of the knowledge system. They define "alienation" as a loss of meaning: there has been a disintegration of the socially constructed knowledge system (Wallace & Wolf, 1999, p. 277). Weaknesses of the knowledge system of society as a whole may indicate dysfunctions, which, in turn, can produce innovations in norms and ways of representing the social world in attempts to reconstitute a sense of meaning of what is happening and a way of distinguishing those who know properly from those who do not. For skinheads this is done by deciding "who is a real skin" and therefore who is not (this will be explored in the chapter on racist and non-racist skinheads). Who is a real skin depends on the understanding one has of the "true history" of the skinhead movement and the music and lifestyles in that history. Of course, there is not one history that all skins refer to. Whether one is a racist or non-racist skin depends on the culture from which they believe their subculture developed. Non-racists trace their origins to Jamaica, while racist skins believe that the "true" skinhead history did not start until the late punk movement—most specifically the Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan era of the 1980s (see below for a discussion).

Berger and Luckman argue that understanding society and its subcultures requires an account of the process of externalization and objectification. Externalization has two dimensions. First, "it means that human beings can create a new social reality"; second, human beings can re-create social institutions by their ongoing externalization of them" (Wallace & Wolf, 1999, p. 278) as things produced by them and, as such, external realities on the order of what Emile Durkheim called "social facts" (Durkheim, 2014). This implies that the skinhead subculture, like many subcultures, is fluid and changes with the times. While skinheads (whether racist or non-racist) have a hard-core belief system, some values will change with the times. For instance, most racist skins do not believe in the political process and believe that the government is "run by Jews who are trying to take over the world." But, during the election cycle of 2016, racist skinheads came out and supported Donald Trump. While some adhered to the belief of a Jewish conspiracy, others saw Trump as an "exception to the rule": he "was not affected by Jewish influence." What was important was that Trump was speaking the language of White Nationalism and therefore he was not influenced by the "Jews and their agenda of world domination."

The second part of Berger and Luckmann's account of the reconstitution of knowledge is objectivation, which means "society is an objective reality that has consequences for the individual because it acts back on its creator" (Wallace & Wolf, 1999, p. 280). This is the creation of a sense of we-ness. What is created as a "true skin" has consequences; if one does not

believe in the norms and rules of the subculture they can be kicked out of the skinhead movement as is dramatically illustrated by groups such as the Aryan Brotherhood in prisons. If members believe that one of the members is a "race traitor" he is banished from the group; the consequence is that other gangs can make them a victim of violence because they no longer have the group's protection of their original group.

Berger and Luckmann's (1967) approach also involves what they refer to as "internalization." This means that "individuals internalize the objective social reality and there is no problem of identity, for everybody knows who everyone is and who he is himself (Berger & Luckman, p. 164). Those who accept the "normal behavior" of the group are identified as a "true skin."

The main reason for using social construction theory to analyze the skinhead movement is that it allows us to look at the paradigm that skins identify with and the complexity of the relationships between identity and interpretations of history and culture in regard to the moral ideas and values that constitute the core of the skinhead subculture.

In this chapter, we refer to a history that not only refers to the experiences of male skins but female skins as well. What distinguished our research is that, in addition to recognizing and featuring women's voices, we emphasize the different identities of men and women within the movement.

Since the 1980s, skinheads and neo-Nazis have been treated as two subtypes of the same thing. Hollywood and the news media are perhaps most guilty of projecting this image. A study done on the coverage of skinheads by the *Boston Globe* reports that between 1980 and 2000 there were 436 articles about skins, with "79 from 1980–1989 and 359 during the decade of 1990–2000. All but three articles represented skins as Nazi's and hate mongers" (Borgeson, 2002, p. 12). Social Scientists have added to the problem of clarifying the skinhead movement. In 1995 Praeger Press released a book entitled *American Skinheads: The Criminology and Control of Hate Crime*, by criminologist Mark Hamm, that many researchers in the field see as the ultimate in skinhead research. Hamm's book was the first academic attempt to examine the skinhead phenomena. It focused exclusively on neo-Nazi skinheads, avoiding other identities. As will become evident in a later chapter, violence is an attribute common to all skinheads who join the movement, not just neo-Nazis. Gay skins assault other skins that they feel are effeminate, and such actions would be considered a hate crime under most state laws.

Recent research has begun to show a complexity of identities, which exist with-in the skinhead subculture. (see Borgeson, 2002, 2003; Wood, 1999). For example, Robert Wood has challenged the prevailing image of racist skinhead culture by demonstrating a greater diversity of attitudes than hatred among skinheads and correspondingly greater degrees of moral complexity. In the course of research on skinhead culture, we have

found data consistent with Wood's hypothesis that skinhead culture is not based primarily on hatred and anti-Semitism, and has a diversity of identities consistent with findings of other researchers (see Hamm, 1995; Marshall, 1994; and Healy, 1996). It is in regard to this that it is now possible to reconsider the origins of skinhead culture in punk. This requires rethinking the two major components of the culture: skinhead identity and skinhead history. Once this has been accomplished we can examine the current skinhead scene in order to see how the various identities, with their moral aspects fit into the larger American skinhead scene. The historiography of skinheads in America has traditionally been lax in representing the female voice within a skinhead culture. Our use of the term "skinhead" should be taken to refer to both males and females within the skinhead subculture, though we will discuss the issue of gender from both points of view.

Skinhead History and Identity

Since the publication of Marshall's *Spirit of 69* (1994), Marshall—a former skinhead—the skin movement has been identified in England of working class youth. Since England places a high emphasis on class division, the movement was more about expressive cultural ideology in the outward appearance of nationalism and self-pride in being working-class and a sense of unity with others who are seen as working class. The ideology is similar to that described in the Cultural Studies classic, *The Making of the Working Class*, by E.P. Thompson: Take pride in being working class, even if the social structure discriminates against you. For skinheads, the use of swears, tattoos, violence, and expression of working class pride is in defiance of the larger social order negating the issue of "a problem with working class people." For the British, class is an issue that is dealt with on a daily basis, and this type of defiance is needed in order to function cognitively in a biased social structure. It follows that skinhead history is as much a history of rebellion as it is a history of style and music. In his book, *Skinhead*, Nick Knight describes skin-style as a "counter-revolution" (1982, p. 8), and traces it to the mods of the 60s and an even earlier manifestation in the Caribbean as this skin described:

> If you really want to understand the skinhead scene you have to trace you have to look back to the beginnings of reggae and ska in Jamaica to get a true picture of where the skins originated from. The whole rudeboy phenomena in England came from there and they aligned themselves with others who were fighting for working class rights.

Like the mods, skin style was smart and clean; however, it was always clearly linked to working-class backgrounds. Clothing needed to be affordable, practical, and identifiable. The look of skins, with Levi's,