Belonging to the subculture of skinheads in the context of resilience

Abstract: The aim of the studies featured in this article was to determine the influence of belonging to a youth subculture on the resilience of skinheads. To search for correlations between belonging to the subculture of skinheads and resilience, a questionnaire on resilience was used developed by Sandra Prince-Embury. Fifty men belonging to the subculture of skinheads for at least a year, and fulfilling all the criteria of belonging to the subculture indicated by researchers, participated in the study. The analysis of the study results shows that due to belonging to this subculture, changes occur in the subjective perception of one’s resilience in terms of effectiveness, support and vulnerability. These results demonstrate that belonging to the subculture of skinheads may have a positive influence on the resilience of its members. Nevertheless, one must consider the extent to which it is possible for a young person to participate in the constructive aspects of a subculture functioning, while at the same time resigning from its destructive activities. Dependencies between belonging to subcultures and resilience are yet to be researched extensively, and the results of such research may be of interest to persons working with youth and wanting to help it develop high resilience. Key words: youth subcultures, resilience, skinheads.

The phenomenon of resilience, despite the fact that it was discovered decades ago, has recently become an object of interest of public opinion, including many
psychologists and pedagogues. This is confirmed by the published books¹ and articles², and even printed³ and Internet guides⁴.

Humanities define the concept of mental resistance in various ways. In English literature, mental resistance is referred to as “resilience”, a term borrowed from science.

Some scholars compare resilience to a set of personality traits which reflect the ability to solve problems and deal with difficulties, to cope with stressful situations and the strength of character and adaptability to changing living conditions⁵.

The Polish translation “mental resistance” is not very precise, as it suggests stability, rigidity, hardness, while the essence of this phenomenon is a mental plasticity⁶.

The implications of the research carried out so far indicate that resilience is the result of interactions of complex factors, among which a significant role is played by the external environment of the individual⁷.

There is also a theory, according to which resilience is considered to be a relatively permanent human property, necessary for its proper development. In recent years, in order to operationalize the phenomenon of resilience, various subscales were used, such as optimism, efficiency, perseverance, competence, self-assessment and social skills. The basic style of the human functioning is associated with individual attributes of the individual, such as for example: commitment, motivation, self-efficacy, self-regulation, controlling impulses, cognitive development. The approach focused on personal characteristics of an individual, which in every person can be differently developed, explains why some people function better than others in situations of adversities in life⁸.

Borucka in her article Koncepcja resilience draws attention to two key concepts related to the concept of resilience: elevated risk level and positive adaptation, which is a response to emerging adversities. Risk factors can be divided into the following groups: family, like for example mental disorders of parents, living in poverty, crimes of parents, divorce, low education of parents, lack of parenting skills, addictions of parents; individual, e.g. genetic and biological-related vulnerability: temperament, low level of intelligence; environmental e.g.: high level of unemployment, crime, violence in

¹ W. Junik, Resilience, Warsaw 2011; R. Opora, Ewolucja niedostosowania społecznego jako rezultat zmian w zakresie odporności psychicznej i zniekształceń poznawczych, Gdańsk 2009.
² Neurobiologia odporności psychicznej, “Świat Nauki” 2011, no. 4(236), April, p. 27–31.
⁵ See W. Junik, op. cit., p. 12.
⁶ See Neurobiologia odporności psychicznej..., p. 28–29, 31.
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...the place of residence, low level of education at school\(^9\). Risk factors can be considered difficult situations that require special mobilization of body energy. Difficult situations can have their basis in stress resulting from the action of harmful factors threatening the individual or adaptive, associated with the changeability of the environment, inflow of new stimuli or changes related to the stimuli occurring before.

Peer groups are an important context for the proper development of a young person. The subculture of skinheads can be considered to be a specific form of a reference group for young people. Subcultures can be both a reflection of social needs as well as pathologies. Each subculture is different and represents a different system of values, different ideals. Skinheads are perceived as one of the most aggressive groups. It is worth asking what motivates young people to join their ranks, is there a predisposing factor, or selecting this particular subculture by a teenager is just a matter of chance. Rebellion, the need for acceptance, sociopathy of education, are just some of the causes of young people joining subcultures described in literature.

Skinheads is a typically male group, whose members in the eyes of public opinion have unwavering confidence, persistence in pursuing the implementation of their goals, strength and independence, they also often cause fear of the environment, primarily through stereotypes from movies\(^{10}\), documentaries\(^{11}\), or television programmes\(^{12}\). Such perception of skinheads also results from identifying them with Nazi sections by society. Due to the lifestyle and nature of the subculture, it requires from their members self-confidence, adaptability, resistance to strong stress, one can say – great resilience. In the context of this subculture the image of a member of that group dominates, created by the media and literature, as a person full of complexes trying to compensate for his low self-esteem through activity in an aggressive organization, promoting the superiority of its members above the rest of society.

Usually it is reported that the low self-esteem attributed to skinheads results from a difficult childhood and non-acceptance of peers\(^{13}\). Scientific literature discusses the topic of skinheads to a small extent. Most of the publications are from the 1990s. While subcultures evolve, and therefore some of the information pre-


\(^{11}\) For example, report Skinheads z Częstochowy: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyPeiF7z5oY 24 II 2014.

\(^{12}\) For example, programme Życie Poza Prawem, episode entitled: Bractwo Aryjskie. In the Internet, in links to this episode of the programme, often the term “skinheads” also appears, because a lot of people associate boneheads and the Nazis with skinheads.

\(^{13}\) The following movies can serve as an example here: This is England (2006, Shane Meadows), American History X (1998, T. Kaye), as well as the novel: H Hassenmüller, Czarne, czerwone, śmierć, Ossolineum, Wrocław 2006.
sent in these items has expired. Most of the publications after the year 2000 describes skinheads only in selected contexts. One can also often encounter the repetition of common and superficial definitions from older literature\textsuperscript{14}. Indeed in 2005 a monograph on skinheads by Bąk was published, but one could find a couple of issues worth including in it, which the author himself mentions in the summary of his work\textsuperscript{15}.

The aim of the research presented in this article was to determine the effect of the skinheads subculture on the sense of resilience.

In this respect, skinheads were asked to specify in the questionnaire assessing the level of resilience their current level of functioning and level of functioning prior to joining the group. In this way an assessment was made of the level of resilience of skinheads prior to joining the subculture in their subjective feeling and during active participation in it. For the purpose of measuring the level of resilience, the Sandra Prince-Embury’s questionnaire on resilience was used.

Questionnaires were filled out anonymously, the aim of the study was not presented to the respondents, in order not to suggest answers.

In view of the aim of the study the following research question was formulated: Has resilience changed while participating in the subculture?

To obtain the answer to the above questions, a group of 50 men were surveyed. The participants were selected to the study on the basis of individual interviews. The selection criteria for the study group was knowledge of the subculture’s history (the indicator of sufficient knowledge of the skinheads subculture’s history was knowledge of the circumstances of its creation and its original assumptions.), listening to music genres typical of this group, active participation in various forms of activity, such as: participation in events and concerts associated with the subculture (part of the research was carried out directly before the start of concerts), an active participation in the social life of the skinheads of a given town. This information was obtained from the person recommending the next respondent. In the selection for the study group, also the period of belonging to the organization was taken into account, which was a minimum of one year. Skinheads declaring Nazi views were excluded from the group of the surveyed people.

The selection of the surveyed people was based on the snowball method. Studies were carried out in the environment of skinheads.


\textsuperscript{15} T. Bąk, Skinheadzi w Polsce, Warsaw–Sandomierz 2005.
The results of the resilience of skinheads in their subjective feeling prior to joining the subculture were compared with the results at the time of research. The length of time of being in the subculture of skinheads was in the range from one year to 32 years and amounted on average to 8.98 years, which is almost 9 years.

Table 1. Age of joining the subculture and age of the respondents at the time of conducting the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of joining the subculture</th>
<th>Age of the respondents at the time of conducting the studies</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimum age</td>
<td>10 y.o.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maximum age</td>
<td>20 y.o.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>14.94</td>
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<td></td>
<td>23.92</td>
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Source: own research.

On the basis of the conducted studies, it can be said that the average age of the surveyed skinheads is 24 years old, while the age of entering this subculture is about 15 years old on average. The lowest reported age of entering the subculture is ten years old, while the highest is twenty years old. The age of the respondents at the time of the research was between 17 and 47 years old.

For comparison of the results of resilience prior to joining the subculture and during functioning in it, tests for dependent samples were used. In these dimensions, where distribution of the differences between the result prior to joining the subculture and the current result of the resilience level was normal, the t-test for dependent samples was used. However, in a situation when distribution of the differences between the initial and final result was different than normal, Wilcoxon's test of statistical significance was used. The description below includes only those dimensions of resilience, in which statistically significant differences before and after joining the subculture of skinheads were observed: support $p = 0.001$, effectiveness $p = -0.00$, vulnerability $p = 0.03$.

The results of the study indicate statistically significant changes in the scope of three of the seven dimensions that constitute resilience. These changes, in the opinion of the surveyed people, occurred from the moment of their joining the subculture. It would be optimal to survey the people who are just joining this subculture and repeating the survey with the same people after a longer time of functioning in the group; however, it would not give a complete picture of changes in the scope of resilience, because it can also be influenced by factors unrelated to being a member of the subculture.
The conducted studies show that in view of the respondents, belonging to the subculture of skinheads is a factor that strengthens resilience in terms of the sense of effectiveness, which is the component of the pillar “sense of mastery”. Persons with a high sense of effectiveness can create for themselves the right conditions to interact with others and have pleasure from these interactions.

Theories relating to the sense of effectiveness emphasize learning more than innate motivation. Albert Bandura — the creator of the theory of social learning — in his concept of the sense of effectiveness he focuses on internal mechanisms, intermediary in learning expectations through direct and indirect interactions with the social environment. This concept especially stresses cognitive and social skills associated with solving tasks and coping with social problems. According to this theory, experiencing one’s own efficiency positively affects shaping the sense of effectiveness. An important role here is also played by expectations regarding results and expectations regarding self-efficacy.

Expectation of a result is defined as an assessment made by the individual whether the given behaviour would bring the expected effect. Expectation of effectiveness is defined as a belief of the individual about his own ability for effective implementation of the task necessary to achieve the desired results\textsuperscript{16}. The

\begin{table}[h]
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\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Skinheads} & \textbf{Average before joining the subculture} & \textbf{Current average} \\
\hline
Optimism & 16.64 & 17.06 \\
\textit{Effectiveness} & 24.42 & 28.54 \\
Adaptation & 6.58 & 7.14 \\
Trust & 16.52 & 17.32 \\
\textit{Support} & 16.36 & 18.22 \\
Comfort & 10.16 & 10.80 \\
Tolerance & 18.52 & 19.28 \\
\textit{Vulnerability} & 10.40 & 9.18 \\
Returning to the initial state & 3.98 & 3.82 \\
Weaknesses & 15.88 & 15.24 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Average results in the scope of dimensions of resilience before joining the subculture and after some time of functioning in it}
\end{table}

* Dimensions of resilience for which the analysis showed statistically significant differences are marked in italics.
Source: own research.

\textsuperscript{16} See R. Opora, op. cit., p. 223.
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justification for such a division of expectations is the fact that people can be convinced that a certain mode of action is appropriate and will bring a positive effect, but they do not have to be sure as to whether they will be able to attempt such an action themselves. The power of believing in own effectiveness is most often a factor determining the decision about attempting to cope with a certain situation. The implications arising from this concept indicate that direct learning and learning through observation is associated with internalized anticipation of self-efficacy\(^\text{17}\).

The development of the sense of self-efficacy often depends on an adequate explanation of one’s own or someone else’s behaviour. Therefore, there are three components of attribution: looking for causes of an event in internal properties of a person or in external situational factors, looking for the cause of an event in something permanent or something short-lived and perception of the cause of the event as something global or specific. Reasonable and adequate attributions are characteristic of resilient people and focus on external situational factors, as well as short-lived and specific aspects of explaining events\(^\text{18}\).

Successes raise expectations towards own competences, while defeats lower them. Frequent experiencing of successes helps forge a strong sense of self-efficacy, in light of which the negative impact of occasional failures will be significantly weakened\(^\text{19}\).

Human behavioural context according to Bandura depends on how he sees his personal effectiveness. Positive expectations for own effectiveness are closely linked to the phenomenon of resilience: they allow for the prediction of a better adaptation to stressful situations. A person with a high sense of effectiveness in highly stressful situations does not need to mobilize any extraordinary coping strategies, he can cope with the situation and achieve the desired effect\(^\text{20}\).

A sense of effectiveness largely depends on the actual achievements of a person, it may affect the quality and number of the life goals and requirements set, and because it supports the belief in one’s own ability needed for their implementation, it increases perseverance and self-confidence\(^\text{21}\).

In view of the above, improvement of results in terms of the sense of effectiveness leads to believe that belonging to the discussed subculture can develop skills related to solving tasks and coping with social problems, believing in one’s own ability and effectiveness of actions, it also allows one to set possible goals and increases self-confidence, mobilization for action and making tough decisions. In view of the above, the question arises to what extent the formulated objectives

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\(^\text{17}\) See ibidem, p. 223.

\(^\text{18}\) See ibidem.

\(^\text{19}\) See ibidem, p. 83, 84, 175, 176.

\(^\text{20}\) See ibidem, p. 175, 176.

\(^\text{21}\) See ibidem, p. 176, 226.
and undertaken subculture activity have pro-social character. Studies suggest that skinheads in their own opinion can deal with problems, however, on the basis of these studies it cannot be unambiguously said that the surveyed individuals use constructive or socially accepted methods when solving problems. Increase in the effectiveness of actions may result from the development of the psychological characteristics of the individual, but can also be caused by, for example, reduction of ambitions, taking up only challenges that are easy to implement.

The studies also show that from the moment of joining the group of skinheads, the dimension of the sense of support has improved in a statistically significant way, which is strongly associated with the dimension of trust. It can be said that these dimensions complement one another. This explains the fact that people are willing to trust the people, from whom they receive support and vice versa, they support people who they trust. Both trust and support help build the sense of security. Improvement of results in the dimension of support proves that belonging to the subculture of skinheads helps its members build a sense of security, it is very important at the age of adolescence, in which young people eagerly join subculture groups. Perhaps the sense of security increases in members of this subculture thanks to the high sense of solidarity in the group and friendly relations between them.

Skinheads, due to the fact that compared to other subcultures they are a less numerous group, can appreciate each other more. Each new person joining the group is important for the rest of its members. Efforts put to joining this subculture consolidate the individual in thinking about it as something worthy of effort and dedication, which to some extent is conducive to the cohesion of the group, which in turn can raise the level of support flowing from it. Skinheads, due to the fact that today they are a less numerous subculture, often come into closer interpersonal relationships. Thanks to this, they function to a lesser extent as an informal group, and more like a friendly circle. This provides greater support for its members than superficial relationships in a large organization. In greater numbers skinheads usually meet at so-called gigs, that is large concerts of their favourite bands. During these meetings, they can also feel the support resulting from the number of members of the subculture which they identify with. The source of support for skinheads may also be various organizations bringing them together, in which they can at the same time feel support and feel important and needed to one another, which may also raise their self-esteem, important in the sense of the mastery pillar. The dimension of trust is very well described in the words of a Greek philosopher, Epicurus: “It is not so much our friends’ help that helps us, as the confidence of their help”.

In the dimension of vulnerability, as well as in other dimensions that make up the pillar of emotional reactivity (returning to the initial state and weakness), in accordance with the structure of the tool, the results must be interpreted the other way round – the lower the score, the higher the level of resilience. Therefore, also in this dimension the resilience of skinheads has increased. Vulnerability is defined here as a property that allows people to understand what effect their behaviour has on others, and vice versa. Persons exhibiting the characteristics of high vulnerability, at the same time have highly developed empathy, which is the ability to look from the perspective of others, and a sense of ethics. They avoid harming others not only because of the awaiting punishment, but also due to the need to avoid pangs of conscience nagging at them because of this. Conscience of such a person is activated even before he commits an anti-social act\textsuperscript{24}.

With the observed change, when analyzing the questionnaire it appears that the respondents to a large extent through belonging to the subculture became less vengeful, it happens less frequently that they easily fall into sadness, they are less angry when something is incompatible with their beliefs, they care less when others do not like them, they get agitated less frequently, so much that they cannot endure that feeling. Increased vulnerability may result from the adoption by the respondents of values and ideals promoted by this subculture. It is not appropriate for a skinhead to worry what others think about him (often this motto emerges as an extreme negation of the point of view of others), he must be “tough”, he cannot show sadness, weakness, he cannot be too emotional, because according to them it is a typically feminine feature, and this subculture focuses on the traditionally recognized standard of masculinity. In skinhead zines often references and images of knights appear, to symbolize traditional values such as honour and patriotism. The previously mentioned sense of ethics may result from these patterns. Are they less vengeful? Perhaps experience has shown them that revenge, and especially one measured with fists, does not always pay off? It can be concluded from the studies that belonging to the subculture of skinheads raises vulnerability, but it should be considered how and at what cost it takes place and whether there are no alternatives more favourable and less risky ways for the individual of raising the level of vulnerability.

To summarize, the studies showed statistically significant differences in dimensions such as support, vulnerability and effectiveness. In each of these dimensions, the difference indicates positive influence of the subculture on the resilience of its members.

These results demonstrate that belonging to the subculture of skinheads may have a positive influence on the resilience of its members. Youth subcultures have the tendency to go in and out of fashion very quickly. It must be said though,

\textsuperscript{24} See ibidem, p. 219.
that there is something specific in belonging to a youth subculture, something that influences the functioning of a human being and stays inside of him until the end of his life. Participating in a subculture arguably bears some risk of becoming a socially maladjusted person. Therefore, the question arises, to what extent is it possible for a young person to participate in the subculture life with the exclusive use of its manifestations not threatening his proper development. From the pedagogical point of view, it is very important for a young person joining the subculture to be able to make pro-social choices and undertake activity valuable from a social point of view, positively affecting his future life. Dependencies between belonging to subcultures and resilience are yet to be researched extensively, and the results of such research may be of interest to persons working with youth and wanting to help it develop high resilience.

**Literature**

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