

Pro-Integration: Disengagement and life after extremism

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List of Acronyms

| Acronym | Meaning |
|----------------|--|
| IPA | Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis |
| IRA | Irish Republican Army |
| Jl | Jemaah Islamiyah |
| LTTE | Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam |
| NSM | New Social Movement Theory |
| PIM | The Pro-Integration Model |
| RWE | Right-Wing Extremist |
| SIT | Social Identity and Self-Categorisation Theory |
| TRIM | The Radicalisation Indicators Model |

Abstract

This thesis investigated individual disengagement from violent extremism in liberal democracies. Despite enormous investment of the last two decades into responses to terrorism, the exit and reintegration processes of extremists back into the community are not well understood. Whilst most extremists struggle with the transition back into society, most are eventually able to move on with their lives, becoming citizens again. Most do so unassisted. Therefore, studying the phenomenon of natural disengagement is a critical avenue to understanding why people choose to leave, how they leave, how they reconnect and what areas of their lives undergo change in doing so.

Given the paucity of empirical data on this topic, the primary purpose of this research project was to generate such data. The second goal was to analyse the empirical data from the perspective of participants themselves, addressing the question: 'What is the experience of disengagement from the perspective of extremists themselves?' The final aim of this study was to integrate any new findings with current literature to advance the state of knowledge about disengagement from violent extremism. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 former extremists of different ideologies, including former militant Tamil separatists, former neo-jihadists, former right-wing extremists, a former left-wing militant, and former nonviolent but direct-action radical environmentalists. The participants discussed how and why they stopped their involvement, how their sense of self and identity changed, as well as how they coped afterwards and renegotiated their relationship with mainstream society. Each participant described multiple reasons for leaving. Several cited the ineffectiveness and/or the horror of violence, whilst some burnt-out. Overall disillusionment was the most common trigger for eventual disengagement. Once disillusioned 'pull factors' such as having a family or a career became attractive. Most reported a delay between early doubts and actual exit, and most experienced a difficult transition out. Some had longer-term difficulties.

Fifteen themes emerged directly from the transcripts of the 22 participant interviews. These themes clustered into five domains which collectively represent the phenomenological essence of disengagement from extremism, including subsequent re-engagement with society. The domains are Social Relations, Coping, Identity, Ideology, and Action Orientation, each with three component themes. A key finding was that sustained disengagement is actually

about the proactive, holistic and harmonious engagement the person has with wider society afterwards. This has been termed 'pro-integration'.

Finally, this research project went further than anticipated and, building on existing empirical research, proposed a tentative five domain, three level model of disengagement called the Pro-Integration Model (PIM). It is suggested that incorporating pro-integration into the research, policy and intervention agenda is a strengths-based way of assisting people to genuinely connect with civic society after their involvement into extremism. It is concluded that for former extremists to identify with, and have a sense of belonging in mainstream society is not only good for them as individuals, but advantageous for a resilient society, and as a side-effect, cultivates strong protection against re-involvement in violent extremism.

Declarations

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Kate Barrelle

Date

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Whilst extremism itself is rare in a Western liberal democracy, and violent extremism even more so, disengagement from extremism is more common than most people realise. In fact, most people who join extremist groups leave, voluntarily, at some stage (Bjorgo, 2013, p.86). Despite this, there has been only a small amount of research conducted specifically into disengagement. For a topic that has individual, family, community, social, economic, and national-security implications, it is surprising just how under researched it is. This research project contributes by generating new empirical data about disengagement from interviews with 22 former extremists. This data is analysed from the perspective of the former extremists themselves to draw out the nature of disengagement itself as a phenomenon. Thirdly, this new knowledge is incorporated with existing theoretical and empirical literature. Finally a holistic model of disengagement and societal re-engagement, called the Pro-Integration Model is developed in an effort to contribute to a more comprehensive appreciation of the complex phenomenon of disengagement.

This introductory chapter will present reasons why this research is necessary, the scope of the research, and then an overview of the entire thesis. Then an extended exploration of the relevant background issues will be conducted. The topic under investigation is disengagement, but disengagement is a comparative concept; it is related to and proportional to the engagement experience, more commonly referred to as radicalisation. For this reason, this chapter begins by briefly explaining models of radicalisation, and their notable silence on disengagement. The idea that disengagement is actually a transition in one's identity is not entirely new; it has been peripherally mentioned in the literature, but rarely been given a central position, as it will be in this research.

1.1 Why this research is necessary

Violent extremism has been cited by the United Nations as one of the most serious issues of our time (UN, 2014) and yet we know so little about how and why extremists walk away, and why they stay away. The issues of how people physically disengage from extreme groups, whether they relinquish extreme beliefs, and how they reconnect into

society are pressing issues for democratic nations concerned about promoting social cohesion. Scholars and historians agree that even if root causes are comprehensively addressed there will always be some people who seek to use violence as a means to change the way society works. Extremism, violent or otherwise is unlikely to go away (Bjorgo, 2005; Neumann, 2013, p893; Noricks, 2009b). Consequently research of this kind is urgently needed. Not just to reduce the impact of political violence in liberal democracies, but to reduce the damage done to the extremists, their families and their communities also.

This research is particularly relevant to the Australian context. Australia has experienced little in the way of modern large-scale terrorism, and most Australian casualties have taken place overseas, notably in Bali in the 2002 Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) attacks (Zammit, 2013a). However, in relation to violent extremism on Australian soil in modern history, there have been four distinct neo-jihadist plots, in addition to a small number of right-wing extremist (RWE) murders (Baker, 2006; Brawley & Shaw, 2009; DMPC, 2010; Harris-Hogan, 2012, 2013; HREOC, 1991; James, 2005; Koschade, 2006; Lentini, 2008a; Mullins, 2011b; Porter & Kebbell, 2011; Zammit, 2013a). There is a large Tamil diaspora in Australia but only two convictions related to providing support to the proscribed terrorist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Other than 22 neo-jihadist convictions related to the neo-jihadist plots, these represent the only other terrorist convictions in Australia (Lowe, 2012, p.1). Australia is therefore in the rare position of being able to determine policies to counter violent extremism *a priori*, that is in advance of, rather than after a terrible incident that would almost certainly distort emotions, stretch resources and take away the luxury of time to construct an evidence-based response.

Like radicalisation, the research field of disengagement from violent extremism suffers from a dearth of empirical studies. This adds to a disjointed research agenda, which is further impaired by the absence of a unifying theory. Instead of rigorous debate and sophisticated intellectual cross-fertilisation, theory specialists from a range of different disciplines working on terrorism have become “lost in the wilderness of a hostile, alien and new intellectual non-state centric environment” (Ranstorp, 2007b, p3). The lack of “individual-level, data-driven evidence to test hypotheses, build reliable case studies and support the emergence of new theories” is a serious limitation of social

science research on radicalisation (Horgan, 2012, p.195). In particular, the absence of empirically driven research constitutes a “serious gap” in our disengagement knowledge (Horgan, 2009c, p.160). We do not have a good understanding of why individuals leave, how they leave, what is involved psychologically and practically in leaving, how they cope afterwards, or under what conditions former extremists re-engage with society in a sustainable way. There are deradicalisation programs already underway in prisons around the world, and yet we do not even have a fundamental understanding of natural disengagement.

Therefore new primary source data is worthy in itself. In a recent review of empirical studies on disengagement from violent extremism in the Western democratic context, only 15 academic publications were identified, yielding a total of 216 actual interviews with former extremists (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). This current study involves in-depth interviews with former members of a range of extreme ideology groups, providing more much needed primary data. Specifically, this study will give deeper understanding of how and why individuals disengage in Australia and other comparable environments. It will improve knowledge about the conditions that support or hinder a person’s re-engagement with society. Moreover, using an approach called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), it will do this from the perspective of the extremists themselves, a perspective that is notoriously difficult to access, but critical if we are to encourage sustained societal integration after a person has left violent extremism. A more extensive understanding of the basic principles of disengagement is definitely needed. This current research project aims to contribute to this understanding.

Social psychology theories of social identity and self-categorisation (SIT) are used as a guiding framework in this work. As such this study will make a modest contribution back to the field of social psychology by illustrating the role of identity in a naturally extreme scenario that social psychologists rarely have the opportunity to study: the phenomenon of leaving violent extremism to return to society.

Finally, violent extremism has been a long-standing feature of modern and ancient societies and is unlikely to abate. In fact the impact of violent extremism has increased over the last century with the advance of modern weaponry, globalisation and information technologies such as the Internet and social media (ISD, 2011; Musawi, 2010; Stevens & Neumann, 2009). If it is inevitable that people will always be drawn into becoming

involved in extremist groups, then we need to have a much better understanding of how they leave and integrate with society afterwards. Therefore, the final contribution of this research is to merge the new findings about disengagement with the literature to develop a model of re-engagement with society after leaving a violent extremist group, that this study calls the Pro-Integration Model (PIM). PIM has five domains and three levels of societal engagement and collectively describes the experience, the challenges and the range of outcomes possible for a person attempting to re-engage with society after disengaging from violent extremism. The three levels of engagement are: ‘Minimal’, ‘Cautious’ and ‘Positive’, and the five domains are: ‘Social Relations’, ‘Coping’, ‘Identity’, ‘Ideology’, and ‘Action Orientation’. Each domain comprises three themes, which are detailed in later chapters. A key finding is that sustained disengagement is actually about proactive, holistic and harmonious engagement the person has with wider society afterwards, referred to here as ‘pro-integration’. Given the pressing and persistent need to deal with violent extremism and foster disengagement and rehabilitation it is intended that PIM and this thesis will be useful for researchers, practitioners and policymakers.

1.2 Scope of this research

Peter Neumann condemns analytical work in this field that “lumps together groups and individuals in vastly different situations of violent conflict just because they use similar tactics” (2013, p.883). To be clear then, the scope of this research is restricted to disengagement from violent extremism within liberal Western democracies with a strong rule of law, such as Australia, UK, Scandinavia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. This research does *not* aspire to specifically address disengagement that occurs within war-zone, authoritarian, or failed-state contexts¹. Nor does it address collective group-level disengagement, or how conflicts end and groups disband in their entirety.

¹ The process of radicalisation towards violent extremism is different in war zone states compared to non-war zone states. Key differences include the impact of root causes relating to war crimes, subjugation and genocide, as well as other radicalising influences such as intergenerational trauma, revenge, degraded social services, non-democratic governance, and policing and security forces that do not protect citizens (Reinares, 2005). Not surprisingly, this can result in a complete breakdown of trust in the government by

Whilst this study is about disengagement, it is impossible to truly understand the end of such a significant period in someone's life without understanding how they radicalised in the first place. Hence, because it makes a vital contribution to building a contextualised understanding this introductory chapter briefly reviews what we know radicalisation. Nonetheless, the primary focus of this study remains the phenomenon of leaving violent extremism rather than deconstructing how and why people became involved. In this study in-depth interviews explore the phenomenon of disengagement from the perspective of 22 former members of a range of extreme and violent ideology groups. Participants comprise six former neo-jihadists, five former militant Tamil separatists, and three RWEs including one who had previously been a violent left-wing extremist. Eight former direct-action radical, but nonviolent, environmentalist extremists were also interviewed in order to expand the analysis to nonviolent extremism. The majority (two-thirds) of the participants were Australian, with the remaining third comprising a mix of British, Swedish, Danish and New Zealand individuals. Even if they were radicalised elsewhere, as in the case of the former militant Tamil separatists all participants disengaged and/or reintegrated into a Western democratic society. The interviews themselves focused on the individuals' experience of leaving their respective extremist group as well as their subsequent re-engagement with wider society.

1.3 Overview of thesis

The remainder of this introductory chapter covers a range of issues and concepts central to the topic of disengagement. Contemporary debates about the nature of radicalisation and disengagement are explained, as are the different levels of analysis typically employed in this type of research. The three most relevant models of radicalisation are briefly presented, and it is noted that there are no comprehensive framework models of disengagement available in the literature. An argument is made for the centrality of social identity in radicalisation and disengagement, because it is the membrane between the individual and the group. The social identity literature explores how identification with a group's beliefs, values and norms accelerates radicalisation in the form of group commitment, increasing ideological fundamentalism and more extreme actions, so it is

large sections of the population. It is reasonable to expect both radicalisation towards and disengagement from violent extremism in peaceful democratic states to be quite different.

important to explore what role social identity plays in disengagement. After an extended discussion about social identity, other key concepts such as extremism, political violence, radicalisation and disengagement are also defined.

The second chapter describes the methodology and analysis adopted in this research. A grounded theory phenomenological approach is taken which means that the unit of analysis is the phenomenon of disengagement itself, rather than the individual participants, as in a case study method. IPA, the approach adopted in this study is powerful for directly investigating experience-based phenomena where there is a limited knowledge base (S. Dukes, 1984; Langdrige, 2008; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Moustakas, 1994; Smith & Osborn, 2004). Within IPA, the analysis itself involves systematic scrutiny of interview transcripts to identify themes from each interview participant, building successively on previous themes in an iterative fashion. At the same time SIT provides a guiding theoretical lens for this study. Methodological details are provided in Chapter 2, including inclusion criteria and sampling techniques, data collection and consent processes.

Whilst it is the phenomenon of disengagement, and not individual cases studies that is the focus of this research, in order to achieve cohesion across 22 stories of disengagement, a vignette of each participant is provided for context in Chapter 3. The substantial thematic analysis of the interview transcripts is laid out at length in Chapter 4. To do this IPA is utilised and five domains are employed, each with three themes emerge to provide a comprehensive account of the phenomenon of disengagement. Direct quotations from the transcripts are used liberally to illustrate all themes. It is expected that many topics already mentioned in this introductory chapter will surface, though it is also expected that new issues will also emerge, especially in relation to matters that have not been thoroughly researched to date, such as the role of social identity in disengagement and societal re-engagement after leaving extremism. A key finding is that satisfying engagement elsewhere in society is central to personal wellbeing and sustained disengagement from violent extremism.

In Chapter 5, the extant literature is presented and reviewed in light of the current findings, using the five domains and their constituent themes as a structure. There are no comprehensive models of disengagement to map the new findings against, but existing empirical research is reviewed. Given there is very little written directly on

disengagement, relevant parallel areas such as youth gangs, cults and offender rehabilitation are reviewed, together with experimental and theoretical SIT findings.

Chapter 6 represents an ambitious attempt to develop a tentative model of disengagement and subsequent engagement with society. The concept of ‘pro-integration’ and a pro-integration model (PIM) are developed in this chapter to describe holistic, harmonious and sustainable engagement with wider society. Pro-integration describes both the process and the most integrated position on a spectrum of possible outcomes for former extremists. This new pro-integration model is developed by supplementing the data from this study with other research on disengagement. The five domains of PIM are well supported in the wider literature. The domains are ‘Social Relations’, ‘Coping’, ‘Identity’, ‘Ideology’, and ‘Action Orientation’. There are three levels of societal engagement after disengagement: ‘Minimal’, ‘Cautious’ and ‘Positive’. PIM is described in detail in Chapter 6, illustrated with empirical data, and its potential use described.

Chapter 7 summarises the entire research project and estimates its contribution to the field of knowledge, particularly the potential offered by PIM. Research findings are linked back to issues raised in the introductory chapter as well as to the literature review and conclusions about research methods and future research directions are drawn. What is needed to achieve pro-integration, that is, to assist former extremists to genuinely become citizens again is discussed. Finally, a set of appendices provides detailed information that augments the main body of the thesis.

1.4 Understanding radicalisation to understand disengagement

Richardson identifies a combination of “a disaffected individual, an enabling community, and a legitimizing ideology” as being the essential elements of the “lethal cocktail” of radicalisation that drives engagement with violent extremism (2007, p.xxii). Radicalisation in a Western context can be broadly understood as the “progression of searching, finding, adopting, nurturing, and developing [an] ... extreme belief system to the point where it acts as a catalyst for a terrorist act” (Silber & Bhatt, 2007, p.16). In simple terms then, disengagement that follows, is the process of ‘unbecoming’ an extremist and becoming reengaged with broader society. This immediately raises the question of who or what does a former extremist become after they have left violent extremism behind, and again brings identity to the forefront of this research.

1.4.1 Definitions

Definitions of extremism, political violence, violent extremism, terrorism, radicalisation and disengagement will now be presented before turning to a discussion of the serious problems with these concepts. Three relevant models of radicalisation will then be introduced to exploit them for any insights into disengagement, with particular attention given to SIT concepts since identity emerges as the backbone of this research. This is followed by an extended discussion on disengagement and the very little that is known about it.

1.4.1.1 Extremism

The Macquarie Dictionary defines the word ‘extreme’ to mean “going to the utmost lengths, or exceeding the bounds of moderation” (2013). In either the physical or social sciences, something that is extreme involves a very small percentage of cases at both ends of any given spectrum. In many situations extreme ideas and commitment to an extreme course of action have the potential to produce great social benefit and should not be considered inherently threatening² (Sunstein, 2009, p149). This current research is focused on the experience of coming back from a position of radical political ideas and extreme violent or illegal methods, whether religiously, ethically or ethno-nationally motivated.

The term ‘extreme’ is used inconsistently in the literature to refer variously to extreme ideas, extreme actions or both. When they co-occur, the causality and order are hotly debated as reflected in the debate above (DeAngelis, 2009; Harris, 2010; Neumann, 2013). Where grammatically sensible the term ‘extreme’ will be used in this thesis as an adjective, for example ‘extreme ideology’ or ‘extreme methods’. On its own, the term ‘extremist’ or ‘extremism’ will be used to mean a person or movement endorsing extreme political ideas. There is no necessary or simple correlation between extreme views and violence. Whilst it might be slightly lengthy, the nomenclature of ‘a nonviolent extremist’

² For example, Mahatma Gandhi, Malcolm X, Mohammed Yunus and Galileo Galilei challenged ideas, values and expectations and their actions resulted in undeniably positive economic, social and political behavioural change.

or conversely 'violent extremism' provides clarity and reduces unnecessary concern regarding intolerance of extreme or radical ideas that are not accompanied by violence, which is not of legal concern in Australia. The phenomenon of radicalisation is broad and complex but for the purposes of this thesis, the word 'radical' will be used to mean the same as 'extreme'.

1.4.1.2 Political violence, violent extremism and terrorism

As a particular manifestation of extremism, political violence has also been around for as long as there have been political systems and power differentials (Crenshaw, 2005; Hoffer, 1951; Laqueur, 1999; Wilkinson, 1974). The meaning of terrorism, radicalisation and extremism has defied consensus among researchers and policymakers (Cooper, 2001; Lentini, 2009; Ruby, 2002b). For the purpose of this thesis, the term 'violent political extremism' is taken to mean the same as 'political violence'. The Australian Institute of Criminology defines political violence to be "violent acts which result from attempts either to change or resist change to a country's political system or aspects of it" (Pinto & Wardlaw, 1989, p.2). Violence in turn is defined by the World Health Organization as:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation. (WHO, 2002, p.215)

Terrorism is a specific form of political violence involving the use or threat of violence against non-combatants and/or civilian infrastructures, in order to bring about or stop political change from those in authority (Crenshaw, 1992, pp.81-93; Marsella & Moghaddam, 2004, p.23; McCauley, 2001; Post, 2007, pp.5-6; Ruby, 2002b, pp.10-11). Terrorism as a method of political influence dates back to the French Revolution, the anarchist notion of 'propaganda by the deed' and revolutionary Marxist thought (Crenshaw, 2005; Festenstein & Kenny, 2005, pp.353-379; Garrison, 2004, p.265; Gray, 2003; Hoffman, 1998, p.16; Leach, 1993, pp.195-213).

Political violence and terrorism and are often conflated. In reality terrorism is a highly politicised concept with no universally agreed definition³. Weinberg and his colleagues attempted a consensus definition of terrorism by analysing how the term had been used over recent decades by academics. Two clear findings emerged: firstly, that psychological aspects were strikingly absent in the definitions, and secondly, that the consensus definition was too general and vague. Unless terrorism is simply accepted as a very wide range of violent activities, “we may be better off finding another governing concept or looking elsewhere for a definition” (Weinberg, Pedahzur, & Hirsch-Hoefler, 2004, p787). With this in mind, although the ‘terrorism studies’ or ‘terrorism researchers’ will be referred to in this thesis, the term ‘political violence’ or ‘violent extremism’ will be used wherever possible instead of ‘terrorism’.

To be clear, political violence is violence enacted in an attempt either to change or resist change to a political system. Unlike domestic or interpersonal violence, political violence is usually premeditated, rather than impulsive or reactive to a personal situation. It is usually directed at a symbolic target rather than a victim personally known to the aggressor. If it is directed at a specific individual it is because that person belongs to the hated out-group that is seen to threaten the aggressor’s in-group, again highlighting the relevance of SIT. Political violence is also distinct from the unpredictable violence associated with crime, drug use, mental illness or impulse control problems. Most political activism in peaceful democracies actually does not involve violence as a deliberate, necessary or even desirable strategy. Sometimes lawful protests escalate into violence, but it is when violence is deliberately planned, endorsed or forms a regular aspect of the group methodology that it is labelled political violence.

1.4.1.3 Radicalisation

Whilst radicalisation is not synonymous with either terrorism or political violence, it is the process that underpins both. Radicalisation is the process of becoming progressively more extreme in one’s views, and radicalisation towards violent extremism is when these

³ Many jurisdictions (including the USA) only recognise an act as terrorism if it is carried out by non-state or sub-government actors, meaning that sovereign countries cannot be accused of terrorism even if the actions are identical.

ideas begin to include notions of using violence to achieve the extreme goals (Ashour, 2009; McCauley, 2001; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Moghaddam, 2006). For the rest of this thesis ‘radicalisation’ will be used to mean ‘radicalisation towards violent extremism, whilst acknowledging that people can indeed have radical views without actively supporting or participating in intergroup conflict. Typically, but not exclusively, radicalisation is a process that occurs in a social context, generally involving membership in a group (Bjorgo, 2013, p.43; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008, 2011). Radicalisation is easy to recognise in hindsight but difficult to define with precision. Like terrorism and extremism, radicalisation is an ambiguous term. The following definition of radicalisation by Lentini is adopted for this thesis:

Radicalisation is a process in which individuals develop, adopt and embrace political attitudes and modes of behaviour which diverge substantially from those of any or all of the established and legitimate political, social, economic, cultural, and religious values, attitudes, institutions and behaviours which exist in a given society [...] also involves advocating either replacing and/or attempting to replace the status quo [...] and in its most threatening forms, using or condoning the use of violence. (Lentini, 2008b, p9)

This definition was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, it does not restrict itself to one form of ideology. It also acknowledges that radicalisation is a process rather than an outcome. It notes that radicals wish to transform, if not entirely revolutionise, the existing social order. Further, it acknowledges that often but not always this quantum change involves methods that are extreme, anti-social, violent and/or illegal. Finally, it is a definition that has relevance to a liberal democracy such as Australia. Informed by terrorism studies literature, and specifically by Lentini’s definition and SIT concepts, radicalisation can therefore be understood as a process of becoming increasingly disconnected from and in some cases, aggressively opposed to mainstream society, or sub-groups thereof.

1.4.1.4 Disengagement

Not surprisingly, ‘disengagement’ suffers from the same lack of clarity as its conceptual cousins ‘radicalisation’ and ‘extremism’: different terms are used inconsistently across different forums. Reflecting the bipolar approach to radicalisation, two key elements of disengagement often discussed are behavioural disengagement and psychological disengagement. The former denotes a reduction or cessation in the use of violence as a

method, but does not speak to whether the person has retained or relinquished their extreme ideological beliefs and any associated radical political goals. Psychological disengagement on the other hand is synonymous with the term ‘deradicalisation’ and implies a change in beliefs and ideology as well as a change in behaviour. This research will use the term ‘disengagement’ as an umbrella term to refer to the process of both behavioural and psychological disengagement as per a modified version of Omar Ashour’s definition:

Deradicalization is a process of relative change in which a radical group reverses its ideology and de-legitimises the use of violent methods to achieve political goals, whilst also moving towards an acceptance of gradual social, political and economic changes within a pluralist context. (Ashour, 2009, p.5)

For this study, the term disengagement encompasses deradicalisation. It refers to all extreme ideologies, not just neo-jihadism. It includes individuals, not just groups as in Ashour’s original definition. To call for an acceptance of gradual social, political and economic changes within a pluralist context is entirely consistent with the normative practices of a liberal democracy. This entails accepting that other people may differ in their beliefs, but that all are entitled to the protection of the state, as well as equally subject to the rule of law. If these numerous elements are fully embraced, along with adjustments in social relations, self-care, and identity, then the term ‘disengagement’ approximates a working definition of what policy makers mean by ‘deradicalisation’. This is an early suggestion that ‘deradicalisation’ from violent extremism can be conceptualised as sustained, holistic and non-destructive engagement elsewhere in the community. The phrase ‘moving towards’ captures the idea that disengagement from extremism and subsequent engagement with democratic mainstream is a process that takes place over time.

1.4.2 The problem with radicalisation

The title of this section mirrors that of a recent influential paper by Peter Neumann in which he lays out fundamental differences in assumptions between the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ approach and the ‘European’ approach to radicalisation (Neumann, 2013). There is significant international policy debate about whether prohibiting behavioural radicalisation is sufficient, or whether it is also necessary to forbid radical but nonviolent

anti-democratic groups. This also informs the disengagement debate where a pressing question is whether behavioural disengagement is sufficient, or if psychological disengagement ought to be sought as well. The very same distinction between belief and behaviour, and their corresponding assumptions, informs the program logic of deradicalisation programs as well as guiding the direction of research and policy related to preventing violent extremism.

In general terms these different approaches can be delineated as the ‘behavioural perspective’ versus the more holistic ‘behavioural and cognitive perspective’. Neumann denotes the behavioural perspective as the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ approach, which has been adopted by Australian, UK and US governments. The alternative perspective is the ‘European’ approach embraced by some European countries, such as Germany, where extreme ideas are seen to be as significant a threat to democracy as extreme actions. This divide reflects a fundamental difference in how radicalisation and extremism are conceptualised, and therefore speaks to how disengagement and deradicalisation have been differentially approached. It also accounts for the apparent confusion and lack of clarity in the literature. In one of the clearest discussions on this complex topic, Neumann cogently delineates these two different approaches:

Stressing behaviour, legality and violence the Anglo-Saxon approach towards counter-radicalisation is cleaner, clearer and less politically controversial than the European approach. It does not raise complicated questions about freedom of speech, nor does it blur the line between law enforcement and politics. But this clarity is gained at the price of turning a blind eye to non-violent extremists and their efforts to undermine and threaten democracy and societal cohesion. While it may be effective at stopping violence in the short term, the Anglo-Saxon approach is difficult to reconcile with the vision of a robust democracy that stands up for its values. The European approach, however, also has its weaknesses. It can be overly vague and distract governments’ attention from the prevention of violence as their top priority. Most worryingly, it lends itself to overreach, and – in the wrong hands – may be licence for oppressing dissent. (Neumann, 2013, p893)

Neumann considers the debate between cognitive versus behavioural radicalisation to be extraneous and potentially counter-productive. His call for research to consider the “complex nexus between belief and behaviour as a whole” applies just as much to disengagement as it does to radicalisation (Neumann, 2013, p889).

1.4.3 Models of radicalisation

The conceptual models offered in the field of terrorism studies are more holistic than legislative definitions used by most Western governments, including Australia. However, most have been developed with only one extremist ideology in mind, most frequently neo-jihadist, but sometimes right-wing extremism. Some apply in non-Western or war zone contexts, and some apply to groups but not individuals. Ten models of radicalisation were identified but only three were developed for individuals in Western democracies. They are described here in order to glean what might be learnt about disengagement from them. From the perspective of understanding disengagement in a Western democracy, New Social Movement theory (NSM) and SIT gives rise to two of the most relevant models of radicalisation, both of which will now be reviewed along with a third model that is entirely empirically based. A table of the remaining seven models is provided in Appendix A.

1.4.3.1 NSM and the social exclusion model of radicalisation

NSM has been influential in framing violent extremism as an extreme version of societal collective action, and has much to offer in explaining the rise, demise and splitting dynamics of groups. NSM offers theories of collective action based on the ‘frustration-aggression hypothesis’ which posits that frustrated people become aggressive when other options are exhausted (Berkowitz, 1990; Nasser-Eddine, Garnham, Agostino, & Caluya, 2011; Rinehart, 2009). Social movements themselves are the “combined actions of hundreds of people who work towards common goals, most of the time without even knowing one another” (Hutton & Connors, 1999, p.xi). Researcher Donna della Porta differentiates social movements from other social gatherings along three dimensions: (i) they involve conflict with clearly identified opponents; (ii) they have dense informal networks; and (iii) they have a distinct shared identity (2006, pp.20-28). Most social movements “form because they feel threatened by some aspect of the dominant culture” and seek to “expand civil society and to reorganize relations between economy, state and society” (Hutton & Connors, 1999, p.10). Social movements usually demonstrate self-limiting radicalisation meaning they restrict their activity to “fighting within the perimeters of liberal democracy” (1999, p.6). Some do not observe this self-restraint, becoming more extreme in their methods. Also, when elements of a movement are

adopted by the mainstream, this can result in group fragmentation where some people split-off and become more extreme or ‘deviant’ in social movement terminology.

A common critique of terrorism studies from the NSM perspective is that it focuses only on cohesive violent groups *after* they have split from the rest of their respective social movement. The most relevant types of social movements to this discussion are revolutionary ones, which do not practice self-restraint (Aberle, 1966). Although non-revolutionary social movements occasionally employ radical techniques⁴ they are more commonly found in the regular arsenal of the revolutionary groups. NSM proponents contend that not to consider the early evolution of violent extremist groups is misguided and limiting. Gentry summarises it well:

New social movement theory exposes politically violent groups as the social phenomena they are. Politically violent groups do not just come into being fully formed and ready to commit violence. They have a previously formed identity and located history somewhere. (2004, p279)

The social exclusion model of radicalisation arises from NSM and emphasises social exclusion. NSM has been well developed in an Australian context (Halafoff & Wright-Neville, 2009; Pickering, McCulloch, Wright-Neville, & Lentini, 2007; Wright-Neville, 2006). It is depicted in Figure 1.1 below and maps an individual’s increasing separation from the mainstream as he or she identifies more and more with an extremist group and its cause. In summary, the individual feels they have been treated unjustly by ‘the system’ and develops feelings of political helplessness and cultural alienation. Religious or political ideology plays a catalysing role, and “provides the already alienated individuals with a common identity (thus cohering them as a group), and with a pseudo-ethical justification for them to vent pre-existing anger and hostility towards the society/government that they feel has wronged them and others like them” (Pickering et al., 2007, p.107).

⁴ Such as but not restricted to legal protest and activism, civil disobedience, minor illegal acts, organised crime, to threats and actual acts of outright violence (della Porta, 2009; della Porta, Andretta, Mosca, & Reiter, 2006; della Porta & Diani, 2006).

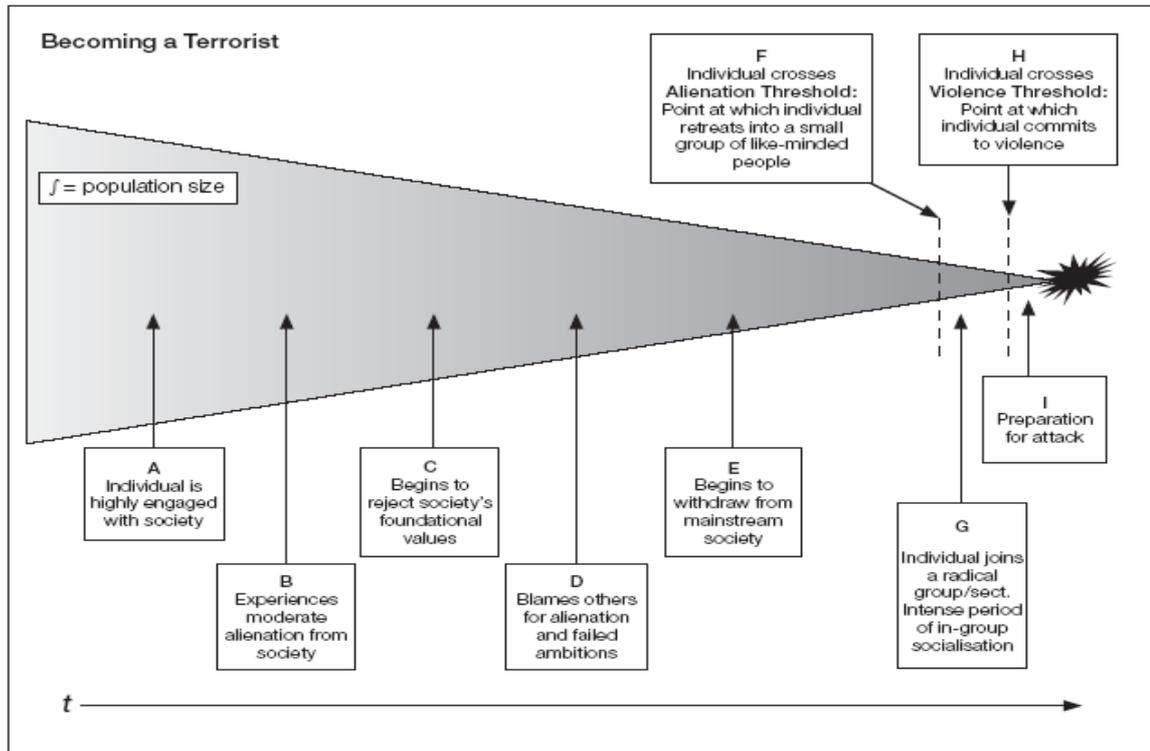


Figure 1.1 The social exclusion model

Whilst this model does not explicitly discuss disengagement, we can infer a significant insight: as the population size of those remaining involved diminishes because fewer and fewer people move in time from left to right across the figure, the inverse population of those leaving is, logically, getting larger. If this figure were reversed, like a photographic negative it might well represent a visual model for the numbers of people disengaging naturally from a pathway of radicalisation.

1.4.3.2 SIT and the five-step social identity model of collective hate

The relevance of identity and therefore of SIT has been identified and has inspired a rich vein of social psychological research that rarely finds its way into the terrorism studies literature (Borum, 2011; Brewer, 2001; Crenshaw, 2000; Herriot, 2007; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Hymans, 2002; McCauley, 2007; Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). For this reason an extended discussion on some SIT background concepts is provided.

According to SIT, there are three levels of identity. Human identity is being a member of the human species. Personal identity is the unique, individual sense of self that comes of one's specific experiences, preferences and personality. Finally, social identity is that sense of self that emerges when a person feels they belong to a particular identity group. It is a "psychological state which is quite distinct from being a unique and separate individual, in that it confers social identity, or a shared collective representation of who one is and how one should behave (Hogg, 1992, p3). Whilst it is widely agreed that social identity is the link between individual and group levels of analysis, there are several schools of social identity studies (Brewer, 2001). The social psychological approach focuses on cognitive processes, intergroup differentiation and the role of social context for determining identity salience. The sociological or symbolic integrationist approach emphasises social roles, as well as social processes, intra-group differentiation and internal structure as determinant for identity salience. Developmental and psychoanalytic models of social identity focus on identification with the leader as a result of deeply socialised relationships between two people attributed to the parent/child dyad. This thesis draws on the social psychological tradition of social identity because the focus is on how individuals disengage and reintegrate into society, not on their specific roles within a group or their relationship with the group leader *per se*.

The social group a person self-identifies with is called the 'in-group'. People inevitably have multiple social identities (for example: as a mother or father, a work/professional identity, as a fan of some sporting team or club, as a Muslim, Christian, or other religious group, etc.). Although it sounds simple, the consequences of self-identification as a member of a social group, and the internalisation of that identity are quite profound (Brewer, 2001; Brown, 1990; S. A. Haslam, 2001; Hogg, 1992; Hornsey, 2008; Maslow, 1943; Moreland, 2006; Oakes, 1987; Turner, 1991). Specifically, SIT explains intergroup bias and discrimination evident under minimal group conditions (Oakes, 1987; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). SIT speaks to the nexus between the individual and a group; where being a part of the group goes far beyond 'rank and file' membership and becomes a central and meaningful part of a person's identity. Strong psychological identification with a group results in a commitment to the beliefs, values and norms of that group (S. A. Haslam, 2001; Herriot, 2007; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When a young person joins a radical group for whatever reason he or she often find the group ideology explains a complex and disappointing world, justifies

action when previously he or she felt powerless, provides a stronger positive sense of self, promotes belonging and acceptance, and encourages purpose and skills. This results in a strong sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, or in-group versus out-group. In short, it is because of the fact that person A belongs to group A that person B, a member of group B, wants to hurt or kill person A, despite probably never having actually met them. Violent extremism is conflict based on strongly and intensely held group identities.

Most accounts of radicalisation in Western liberal democracies include themes of identity and belonging⁵. Many of the same in-group, out-group social identity effects also apply to specialist members of national armed forces (Harris, Gringart, & Drake, 2013). Maajid Nawaz, the co-founder of the Quilliam Foundation and one of Britain’s high profile ex-Islamist extremists said of himself as a teenager at the start of his own radicalisation process, “feeling totally rejected by mainstream society, we were looking for an alternative identity” (Hari, 2009). Violent extremism results when a person identifies so strongly with a group that they are willing to engage in aggressive intergroup conflict, rendering the concept of social identity highly germane (Hornsey, 2008; Reicher et al., 2008). Much has been written about social identity and conflict, but only some of this work has found its way into the terrorism literature (Ashmore, Jussim, & Wilder, 2001; Brewer, 2001; Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010; Reicher et al., 2008; Rothbart & Korostelina, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; D. M. Taylor & Moghaddam, 1987). Even less has found its way into the disengagement literature even though it is clearly relevant. For example, as an adult man having fully disengaged from the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir, the other co-founder of the Quilliam Foundation, Ed Husain reflects on his identity and relationship with society:

I feel as though I belong to both the East and the West, and sometimes I find it difficult to reconcile the two sides of my personality. And then I remind myself that, before anything, I am human, and in this I am at one with the world. (Husain, 2007, p269)

⁵ Detailed accounts of right-wing radicals, Marxist revolutionaries, Islamist extremists, ethno-nationalist militant, anarchists, religious cults and environmental/animal rights extremists attest to this (Abbey, 2006; Bankston, Forsyth, & Floyd, 1981; Bjorgo, 2009; Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b; Crenshaw, 2005; FBI, 2008a; Gray, 2003; Hartwright, 2002; Hoffer, 1951; Horgan, 2009b; Horowitz, 1998; Jensen, 2006a, 2006b; Jordán & Mañas, 2007; Long, 2004; McCauley, 2001).

The ‘Five-Step Social Identity Model of the Development of Collective Hate’ complements the social exclusion model, by focusing on the intersection between the individual and the radical in-group (Reicher et al., 2008). This is perhaps the most detailed radicalisation model that describes, explains and predicts how people progress to the point of violent extremism, and is based on a wealth of empirical research. However, like other models, it does not address disengagement. A visual representation has been developed in Figure 1.2 below.



Figure 1.2 The five-step social identity model of collective hate

The first of five steps that allow for acts of extreme inhumanity is the “creation of a cohesive in-group through shared social identification” (Reicher et al., 2008, p.1326). The other four, in sequence are: the exclusion and discrimination against specific populations; defining this excluded out-group to be a threat to the existence of the in-group; depiction of the in-group as “uniquely virtuous”; and finally the “celebration of

outgroup annihilation” in perceived defence of in-group virtue in an environment where “those who kill have moral strength and those who don’t are morally suspect” (Reicher et al., 2008, pp.1326-1337). Although this model does not discuss disengagement *per se*, it is clear from it why it can be so difficult to disengage from violent extremism.

Reviewing this model gives some clues from a SIT perspective about what might be required to disengage from violent extremism. Core elements of the transition out of an extremist group would include a reduction in the strength of identification and commitment to the group (that is, reducing this specific social identity). An emergence of a renewed sense of personal identity would be required to disconnect the individual from the beliefs, values and norms of the extremist group they have internalised. Many things can constitute a crisis of confidence in the beliefs, values and norms of the group and in turn cause the individual to review the goodness of fit between the group identity and themselves. It will be fascinating to explore these issues in interviews with former extremists to see if they resonate in relation to disengagement.

1.4.3.3 The radicalisation indicators model

The Radicalisation Indicators Model (TRIM) was developed by this writer and fellow researchers at the Global Terrorism Research Centre at Monash University (Barrelle & Harris-Hogan, 2013). This radicalisation model is ideologically neutral and was deliberately developed by drawing on empirical examples from a wide range of extremist ideologies. Whilst the report in which it is cited is classified, the following information about TRIM has been utilised in community programs (AMF, 2013) and so is repeated here. TRIM is a three domain by three level model of behavioural indicators of radicalisation in a Western context. It is not a predictive model but rather describes what radicalisation looks like from the outside. The three domains are ‘Social Relations’, ‘Ideology’ and ‘Action Orientation’. As a person radicalises, the intensity of each is expected to increase through the three levels: ‘Notable’, ‘Concerning’ and ‘Attention’. It is only if a person approaches the centremost level in all three areas that they have radicalised to the point of violent extremism. A visual conceptualisation derived from public presentations is presented in Figure 1.3.

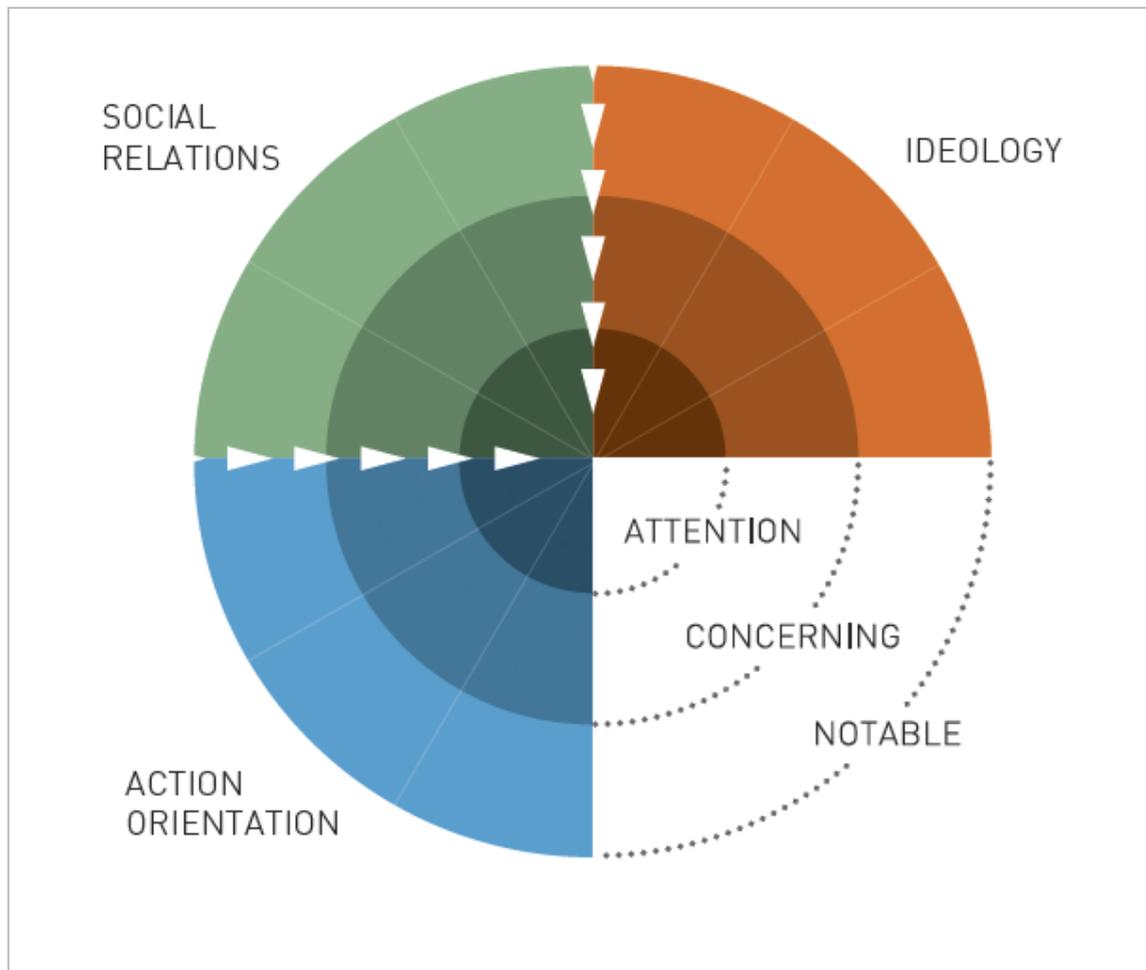


Figure 1.3 TRIM domains relevant to radicalisation

Based on Lentini’s definition of radicalisation and over 200 empirical examples, TRIM heeds Neumann’s plea for a holistic and non-binary approach to radicalisation (Barrelle & Harris-Hogan, 2013). TRIM domains correspond to Neumann’s cognitive and behavioural aspects (‘Ideology’ and ‘Action Orientation’ respectively) and identify ‘Social Relations’ as a third domain. TRIM allows for disengagement, which would be indicated by not proceeding, or by reversing back through one or more of the three levels of intensity, across one or more of the domains. Interventions at the different levels correspond to the widely known principles of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention.

It is clear that different combinations of factors can make for different outcomes. TRIM also allows for criminal but non-political violence, or fundamentalist but

nonviolent ideological extremism⁶. What is often overlooked is the fact that most people who commence a radicalisation process never progress to commit acts of violent extremism. Indeed, most who join an extremist group “end their involvement sooner or later, voluntarily or involuntarily” (Bjorgo, 2013, p.86). In TRIM, this means they simply do not progress to the ‘Attention’ level. Alternate outcomes include early disengagement and a return to non-radical life. Some pull back from extremism but continue with legal democratic activism. Another possibility is early disengagement but progression to other forms of anti-social engagement such as crime or gang behaviour.

1.5 What we do not know about disengagement

Despite the fact that most violent extremists disengage, we do not possess a good understanding of how or why people leave extremism behind, or what can trigger an early voluntary exit, rather than a delayed or forced one. Nor do we have sufficient knowledge of what is necessary to facilitate a sustained return to society. Less than 20 empirically based publications on individual disengagement in a Western context means there is a slim evidence base for understanding disengagement. Nonetheless it is well accepted that there are three broad phases in the life-cycle of radicalisation, ‘Becoming’, ‘Being’ and ‘Leaving’, highlighting the normality of disengagement and emphasising identity in all three stages (Horgan, 2008a, p3). Radicalisation spans the first and the second of these phases, whilst disengagement as it is conceptualised in this thesis occurs during the third phase of ‘Leaving’ and extends beyond. Numerous first-hand accounts testify to the problems involved with extremism. The personal damage suffered by members can be significant: including anxiety, paranoia, trauma, poor physical health, drug/alcohol abuse, physical injury, loss of relationships with family and friends, disrupted education and career, criminal charges, and/or imprisonment leading to limited future employment,

⁶ There are strong parallels between radicalisation towards violent extremism and the drift towards anti-social activities resulting in youth gangs, outlaw motorcycle groups, crime syndicates, separatist cults, and other aggressive counter-cultural groups (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b; R. L. Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997; Gardner, 1997; Greene & Pranis, 2007; Lalich, 1988; Mayer, 2001; Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 2004). This literature is presented in the analysis chapters to enable comparison with the findings from this study.

housing and social opportunities. The damage inflicted on a person’s community as a result of their involvement in political extremism can be enormous, ranging from economic disruption, to hate crimes, to large-scale attacks, as well as the significant policing and social resources that go towards preventing and responding to acts of political violence. Clearly, it is desirable to minimise both the impact on, and the impact of violent extremists. Therefore, it is critical to understand under what conditions former extremists disengage and reconnect with society. Whilst disengagement is not simply the reverse of the radicalisation, there is some evidence of a thematic relationship for each individual between the entry and exit experiences. Having conducted research with numerous different extreme ideology groups, pioneering deradicalisation researcher Tore Bjorgo notes their primary reason for disillusionment in Table 1.1 (2012; 2013, p.44):

| Type | Reason for disillusionment |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Political and ideological motivation | The cause is lost, or doing more harm than good, contradiction between the ends and the means, ethical dilemmas, fall in status. |
| Search for friendship and community | The group does not live up to their expectations of friendship and loyalty, backstabbing, feel manipulated by group and it becomes easier/necessary to find an attachment to a new outside friend/group. |
| Frustration and anger ⁷ | Involvement is more dangerous than they thought. |
| Search for action and excitement | Being a terrorist is boring much of the time. |

Table 1.1 Reasons for disillusionment by participant type

There are many variations on what disengagement might look like in practice. In this vein, the primary goal of this research is to gain a better appreciation of the phenomenon of individual disengagement from violent extremism, with a focus on the

⁷ According to Bjorgo this ‘type’ of extremist often come from a dysfunctional family situation with trauma or violence in their background already, so they are good at violence and get recognition for it in the group.

Australian context. In contemplating this issue, many questions are raised. How and why do some people change their action orientation such that they no longer use or endorse violence as a method to achieve their ideological end? How and why do some people change their ideological beliefs such that they no longer have radical ideological goals? How and why do some former members of extremist groups successfully reintegrate into wider society and some do not? It is highly significant that John Horgan, together with Tore Bjorgo one of the pioneers of this field and someone who has conducted hundreds of interviews with former extremists, is forced to conclude that, “there is no clear sense to date of what disengagement even implies”. Disengagement might involve a “complete break with the social norms, values, attitudes, relationships and social networks” if a person has made a complete split with the group (Horgan, 2009c, p29-30). Or it might be a more subtle disengagement where they have changed their position or responsibilities in the group, or even left, but maintain relationships with the group along with its beliefs, values and norms (Bjorgo, 2009; Horgan, 2009c, p29-30).

In SIT terms, voluntarily pulling away from a group or ideology signals that the identity fit is not so good any more. This goodness of fit may degrade on one or more ideological, social, and/or methodology dimensions (Bjorgo, 2011, 2012; Harris, 2010; Horgan, 2009b). It may be that personal identity has re-emerged and is inconsistent with the collective group identity. Overall this results in a reduction in ‘commitment’ or strength of identification with the group. In some cases ‘leaving’ a radical group is actually about wanting to come back into mainstream society. In these cases it is usually career/income and family considerations that tip the balance. Not surprisingly, it is almost always a combination of wanting to avoid negative ‘push’ factors whilst being drawn towards attractive ‘pull’ factors (Bjorgo, 2009, 2011; Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b; Horgan, 2009b; Wright, 1987). In aggregate this becomes about identity and belonging. In theoretical terms this change indicates a dramatic shift in terms of which group the person desires to be ‘in’ or ‘out’ of; which in turn speaks directly to changes in their in-group and out-group categorisations.

1.6 Summary

Joining and leaving significant identity groups is a natural part of life (Bennett & Sani, 2008; Ebaugh, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore in this thesis disengagement is

explicitly viewed as a natural phase, more expected than not, for anyone who becomes involved in violent extremism. From the outset, an argument is made that disengagement from violent extremism is really about engagement with something else. Social identity, that is identifying with a group so strongly it becomes a part of who one is, is suggested as the existential issue at the heart of both radicalisation and disengagement. If this is the case, a former extremist will need to reconstitute their social and personal identities in some manner if they are successfully to re-engage with mainstream society. This is why such a substantial introduction to these concepts was provided above.

This introductory chapter presented the *raison d'être* of this research and provided an overview of issues related to disengagement and reintegration of an individual after leaving violent extremism. Empirical and theoretical underpinnings of radicalisation were summarised, and the central role of social identity became apparent. It is reasonable to view disengagement as a transition in one's identity as one leaves a significant identity group and attempts to rejoin wider society. Therefore even though this research is embedded in grounded (that is inductive) research methodology, the nexus between the group and the individual is particularly relevant to understanding disengagement. To reiterate, the term 'disengagement' will be used in this thesis to refer to both the process moving on from violent extremism as well as the full suite of possible outcomes after a person has left.

The method and analysis that will be used to explore these issues directly with former extremists will be set out in Chapter 2. Then the demographics and participant vignettes will be presented in Chapter 3, ahead of the analysis in chapter 4.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework, methodological approach and analytical methods used in this study. First, existing research in terrorism studies is discussed where it becomes apparent that disengagement is an under-developed subfield. A recent review of empirically based studies of disengagement counted a total of 16 articles and books published since 1990 which used interviews (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). Apart from this small body of work, the remainder of the disengagement literature has not generated substantial new empirical data. There is a pressing need for more empirically-based studies on the topic of disengagement. This study makes a contribution with 22 new in-depth interviews.

An overview of the methodologies used in different research fields relevant to disengagement is provided. The Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory literature indicates strong precedent for investigating identity based transitions in the ‘messy real world’ outside of controlled laboratory conditions. All roads convincingly point to an approach that places the phenomenon of disengagement as the central focus. It is determined that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is most suitable for the current study. IPA is distinct from a case study approach in that it gives primacy to the participants’ *experience*. It is the essence of disengagement that is being investigated rather than the participants themselves. It is concluded that qualitative interview-based field research with former extremists from a range of ideological backgrounds will yield the most useful data for this study. The structured method and analytical steps of IPA are also described in this chapter. Finally, practical and ethical considerations are addressed.

2.1 Disengagement and radicalisation research to date

Based on a literature review about individual factors associated with leaving al Qaída influenced terrorist groups, the UK Home Office concluded that “the available evidence provides a limited basis for policy development” (Disley, Weed, Reding, Clutterbuck, & Warnes, 2011, p.xi). Given there are less than 20 empirically based publications in this field, this represents a massive understatement. Five years ago Horgan cautioned about the political implications of such a poor knowledge base, and whilst there has been some progress since, there is still more that we do not know about disengagement than we do:

Despite some important contributions in the 1980s and early 1990s, little is known even today about what happens for the individual terrorist to leave terrorism behind. Consequently, there is no available evidence that may serve to inform policy that is any way related to thinking critically about what could be developed to facilitate or promote disengagement at any level. (Horgan, 2008a, p.3)

A recent review of the post-2000 literature indicates that not much has changed to warrant modification of this dismal assessment (Nasser-Eddine et al., 2011). Deficiencies in the literature regarding disengagement and countering violent extremism include a lack of primary source analysis, a shortage of experienced researchers many of whom have not met with extremists or undertaken fieldwork, limited methodologies and analysis along with minimal critique of existing research.

In a large meta-review where 14,000 terrorism articles were grouped into 17 subject areas, not one of the 17 areas related to disengagement, again highlighting the need for research on this topic (Lum, Kennedy, & Sherley, 2006, p.493). Within the research on radicalisation, the same criticisms are levelled. Of 260 empirical publications on terrorism Neumann and Kleinmann found one-third were either methodologically or empirically deficient, and more than ten percent both methodologically and empirically deficient (2013). There are numerous damning reviews of terrorism research (Ranstorp, 2007a; Silke, 2001, 2008; Wilkinson, 2007). In 2001 Silke assessed that only nine percent of contemporary terrorism research is based on interviews with current or former extremists, and only one percent from structured systematic interviews (2001). A more recent review of the last three decades of radicalisation research from 1980 to 2010 notes the almost complete reliance on secondary sources (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013); as does a recent paper looking at the use of primary sources in terrorism research (Schuurman & Eijkman, 2013).

Some of these deficits are a product of the sudden and large amount of direct government funding in this area (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013; Silke, 2001; 2008, p.379). Not only is some of this funding outside the traditional structures of academic research finance, but it comes from one of the stakeholders, introducing implicit pressure to deliver findings that are useful to the government. In non-academic research fora research outcomes are held to different standards “largely driven by policy concerns” rather than by intellectual paradigms which means “the area has fallen into a trap where is

it largely limited by government agendas” which “rarely if ever stretch beyond the next election” resulting in “short-term tactical considerations” (Silke, 2001, p.2). In summary, thought pieces, theoretical discussions and opinions are valuable to advancing knowledge, but they are not sufficient. There is a paucity of empirical data and a scarcity of empirical analysis in both radicalisation and disengagement research, something to which this current study aims to make a modest contribution.

2.2 Challenges in disengagement and radicalisation research

Turning now to look at why it is difficult to conduct empirical research in the field of terrorism studies, it becomes apparent there are several impediments. Experienced researchers in the field concede that “quite simply is not a topic easily researched” (Silke, 2001, p.2). There are many reasons why empirical fieldwork into disengagement from violent extremism is difficult. But it is also the case that there are almost 20 studies where it has been achieved, and this current study adds another to the list, so there is reason for cautious optimism. Challenges include access to participants, personal safety and ethical issues, and the complexity of the topic. Each of these will be considered in turn, and comments made in relation to this study.

The primary difficulty with disengagement research is the difficulty accessing participants. Although disengagement from violent extremism is more common than people realise, it is still a subset of those who have radicalised in the first place and therefore extremely rare in epidemiological terms (Giebels & Taylor, 2012, p.235). In research terms this means it is difficult to identify, difficult to characterise and difficult to study the people directly involved with any consistency (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013, p.378). Numbers aside, identifying and locating potential subjects for research participation pose another practical challenge. With the exception of very high profile leaders, individuals who disengage from violent extremism do not tend to publicise their involvement or their departure, making it hard to locate them and to seek their participation in research (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b).

Even if violent extremists can be identified and contacted, and are agreeable to participating in research, there are a number of substantial ethical considerations to address to ensure researcher and participant safety. It is argued that in many ways this is no different to any other form of research using human subjects, but university ethics

committees are largely unfamiliar with terrorism research and so tend to be cautious in overseeing this work (Bickson, Bluthenthal, Eden, & Gunn, 2007; E. Jones & Bhui, 2009). This can result in the imposition of restrictive requirements on researchers, which in some cases might mean the research cannot go ahead (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013, p.378). When the research takes place outside traditional research structures, as is the case with some government funded projects, then there may be an absence of proper oversight resulting in unethical practice involving deception, damage and exploitation at worst, or data of uncertain provenance (Bickson et al., 2007, pp.70-82; Schuurman & Eijkman, 2013, p.5).

In the case of this research, the ethics approval certainly took longer than average to be granted because of multiple concerns that needed to be addressed, but the process was not prohibitive, nor unreasonable. As to finding potential participants, the process was akin to the way an investigative journalist might approach a sensitive topic. A more detailed account is provided later in this chapter but it was a combination of persistence, planning and engendering trust that resulted in a greater number of interviews than expected. The role of intermediaries cannot be overstated. In reality there are more disengaged former extremists living quietly in the suburbs than one would estimate, and once a researcher proves trustworthy, the snowball effect of being ‘referred on’ to other contacts is surprisingly efficient. That said, it took over six months to generate the first interview and then almost three years of sporadic interviews to accumulate 22 interviews on disengagement. It will be discussed properly in an upcoming section, but there was no time at all during the interviews that there was any threat to the researcher undertaking this study.

Secondly, disengagement (and radicalisation) are indisputably complex phenomena that require cross-disciplinary effort. However as Ranstorp observes, this has resulted in “contradictory assumptions” and clashing theoretical frameworks which make a structured and cohesive research agenda difficult to achieve (2007a, p.7). Although some of the greatest intellectual breakthroughs in history have come as a result of intersecting paradigms, the disparate approaches in this field have generally had a scattering effect to date. Terrorism literature appears across psychology, sociology, anthropology, military studies, international relations, politics, and religious studies. Within these disciplines the literature is found variously within their respective

anthologies, monographs, popular and professional journals, newspaper reports and institutional chronicles. Databases, yearbooks and encyclopaedias also hold valuable information, as do unpublished PhD dissertations (Gordon, 1999, p.142). Unlike more established fields, a corpus of seminal material is not available in one location. This places researchers, old and new, at a disadvantage because unless they are exceptionally thorough and venture far outside their discipline they will only see a fraction of the work already done. This is akin to viewing a topic through the facets of a diamond – change the angle slightly and your perception will be radically different – a thousand times over. In the case of this research project, the author benefited enormously from being located in a highly experienced broader interdisciplinary research team, the Global Research Terrorism Centre at Monash University, with at least ten different discipline backgrounds represented. Additionally, she herself has almost two decades working as a clinical and forensic psychologist. Further, her three supervisors are subject matter experts in three distinct areas of specialisation. In aggregate, access to such layers of multi-disciplinary expertise stimulated valuable integration of information for this project.

2.3 Methods used in disengagement research

Disengagement from violent extremism is a social and psychological process, so to conduct research logically necessitates, at some point, direct contact with individuals who have had this experience. It is necessary to seek out concrete context-dependent knowledge. Phenomenological perspectives are concerned with extracting the essence of an experience (Langdridge, 2008, p.1126). Of the 16 empirical studies on disengagement identified by Dalgaard-Neilsen, all but two utilised direct interviews. The interviews were mostly semi-structured in format, which gives the optimal balance between flexibility required for grounded research with reliability in that the same approach is taken with each participant.

In considering the most appropriate method for this project, parallel fields were considered. Social identity research spans a wide spectrum from experimental to quasi-experimental to qualitative non-experimental (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Cult and gang research involves mixed-method survey and interview techniques (Greene & Pranis, 2007; Lalich & Tobias, 1994; Mayer, 2001; Wright, 1987). Offender recidivism and rehabilitation research tend to rely on large statistical samples as

well as qualitative methods (Blagden, Winder, Thorne, & Gregson, 2011; Ogloff & Davis, 2005; Serin & Lloyd, 2009; Ward & Maruna, 2007). All these parallel fields have larger samples to draw on and therefore a wider range of methodological techniques available. The small amount of empirical data in terrorism studies is largely qualitative, and this approach has drawn positive appraisal.

Harré and Flyvbjerg convincingly argue that quantitative analysis techniques appropriate for the large-scale demographic numerical data are totally inadequate to understand nuanced, complex human experiences, such as disengagement (Brewer, 2000, p.13; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Harré, 2004). After dismantling the five most common misunderstandings about qualitative case study research, Flyvbjerg concludes that:

A discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and that a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one. (Kuhn, cited in Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.242)

Silke reported that only 13% of terrorism articles were based on substantial interview data, and that only one percent of the interviews were systematic or structured (2001, p.7). This speaks to reliability as a tenet of research⁸ (Breakwell, 2004; Ferguson & Bibby, 2004; Hulbert, 2004; Parker, 2004, p.98). If each interview is completely unstructured then there is no guarantee that the same items will be covered with different interview participants. Whilst such flexibility might allow for full answers and unique conversations, it offers no protection against the personal influence and bias of the researcher, however unintended. Even phrasing a question in different ways can have an impact on the answer given. Therefore the use of standardised or semi-structured interview protocols and strategic sampling can reduce this bias; which was the method adopted in this research (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Silke, 2001, p.8).

Apart from the rarity of the phenomenon and the scarcity of relevant individuals willing to participate, there is an issue with extreme sampling that needs to be addressed. There is no wider population for extremists to represent because they are few and extreme

⁸ Reliability is confidence that the “objects of study remain stable over time rather than being liable to change” (Parker, 2004, p. 98).

in themselves. Whilst in the normal course of research opportunity sampling is often looked upon as improper, it is a common method when dealing with interview subjects who are not readily available in the main population. Some would argue that in the quantitative realm a lack of random or at least stratified sampling would normally mean there were serious limits to the generalisability of findings to wider populations (Breakwell, 2004; Brewer, 2000; Ferguson & Bibby, 2004; Hulbert, 2004; Lippa, 1988). Others challenge this view however, and assert instead that “case studies are valuable at all stages of the theory-building process” and indeed that they are better for testing theories than for producing them (Eckstein, cited in Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.229). To critics, these advocates say that problems with generalisation can be ameliorated by careful case selection.

There are two types of non-random selection that are valuable in the generation of knowledge about a rare phenomenon such as disengagement. They include selecting for extreme or deviant experience, and maximum variation. Flyvbjerg advises that deviant or extreme experiences are good for “getting a point across in an especially dramatic way, which occurs for well-known cases studies” (2006, p.30). Maximum variation cases can be used to demonstrate the presence of a factor across three or four cases that are very different, making the point that it generalises across distinctly different conditions. Finally, critical case studies are defined as “having strategic importance in relation to the general problem” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.230). Both these selection types will be utilised in the current study.

2.4 Phenomenology

Within the domain of qualitative methodology, there are five broad approaches; narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. Creswell (2007) outlines each in some detail, a summary of which follows. Narrative research explores the life of an individual by constructing a narrative, usually via interviews and documents. Phenomenology also uses interviews and documents, but instead of studying specific individuals as the unit of analysis, it focuses on understanding the essence of an experience common to several individuals. Grounded theory inductively develops patterns and themes from observations or interviews in the deliberate absence of theory. Ethnography describes and interprets the shared culture of a group, and case studies

provide an in-depth understanding of a case (which is usually a bounded system with defined parameters, for example a specific group, an event, program, or activity). Creswell illustrated these different foci as per Figure 2.1 over page (Creswell, 2007, p.94).

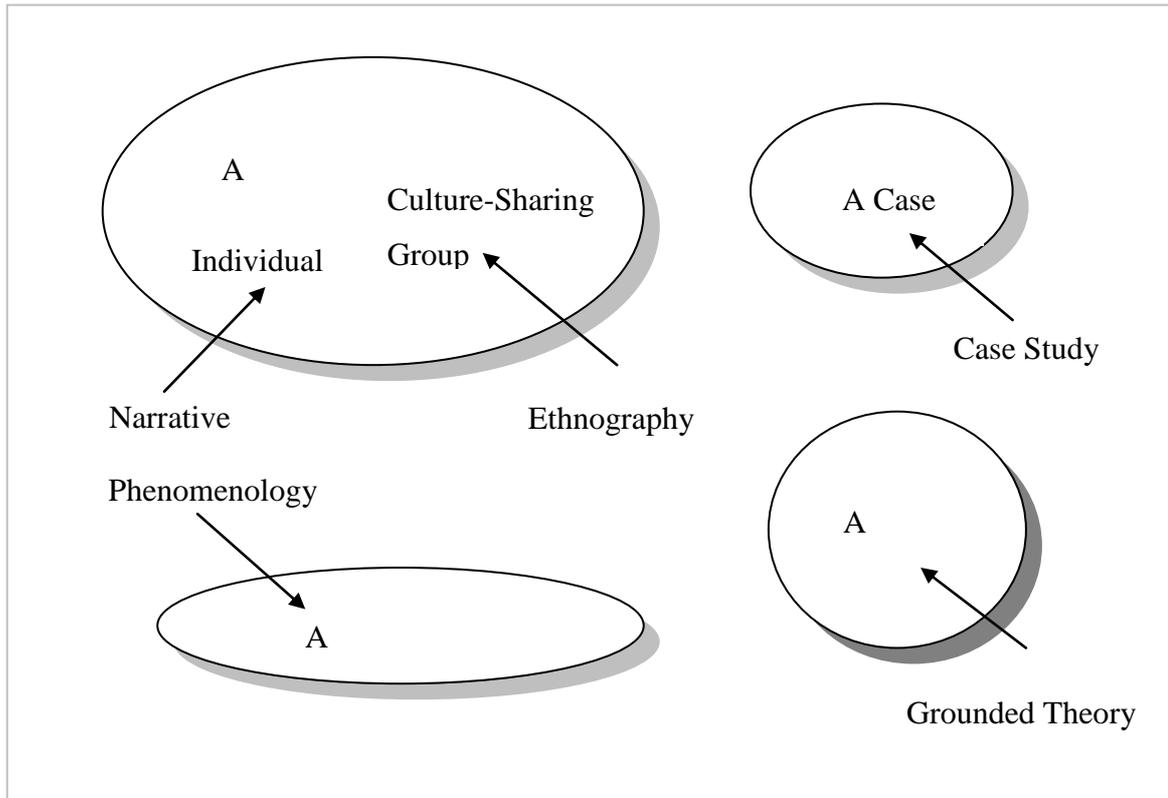


Figure 2.1 Differentiating approaches

Drawing on a matrix provided in Creswell’s seminal text on the topic by a dual process of positive selection and elimination, it will become clear that phenomenology is the most appropriate of the five qualitative approaches for this study (Creswell, 2007, pp.78-79). Firstly, this research is interested in the specific experience of disengagement, not the person who had the experience *per se*, so narrative research is not appropriate. Disengagement of former members of a range of different extremist ideologies is the focus here, not describing and interpreting a single group as in an ethnographic approach. There are many similarities between a phenomenological or case study, but the critical difference between them is the unit of analysis. In case study research in-depth description and analysis attempts to understand the individual or group level examples under scrutiny; the goal is to understand the experience of disengagement. This brings us

to phenomenology where the focus is to understand the essence of the experience, not the essence of the person.

At times the distinction between case study and phenomenology can be difficult to see. Conceptually it is as though one is looking horizontally across all the participants' experiences of disengagement, rather than looking deep down into each individual's life story. One key feature of a phenomenological approach is the attempt to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the participant in order to derive the constituent elements of the experience under study. Phenomenological research is "particularly suitable where the topic under investigation is novel or under-researched, where the issues are complex or ambiguous and where one is concerned to understand something about process and change" (Smith, 1996, p.231).

Phenomenological research has its theoretical roots in ideography, phenomenology and hermeneutics. As mentioned already a phenomenological study is one that "describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" or in other words, capturing "the universal essence" of the experience (Creswell, 2007, pp.57-58). Hermeneutics refers to the "process of engagement and interpretation on the part of the researcher", and in fact there is a "double hermeneutic, whereby the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Smith, 2011, p.10). Finally, it is ideographic in "its commitment to analyse each case in a corpus of detail" usually involving "detailed analytic treatment of each case followed by the search for patterns across cases" (Smith, 1996, p.10).

2.5 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Smith, Flowers and Larkin have written extensively about IPA and why it is the most appropriate method for "looking in detail at how someone makes sense of a major transition in their life" (2009, p.3). The procedure for conducting phenomenological research and analysing phenomenological data will now be outlined. The first step is for the researcher to 'bracket out' as much as possible, the researcher's own experiences, in order to allow the genuine essence of the phenomenon to emerge whilst reducing any bias from prior knowledge (Creswell, 2009; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Moustakas, 1994). *Prima facie* this was relatively straightforward in this study because the researcher has

had no personal or close family/friend experience of disengagement from an extremist group, violent or otherwise. Further, she has never held radical views on any political or religious topics. She has however, like all people, had experiences of disengaging from important identity groups and transitioning to a new one. Dukes notes that phenomenological bracketing also refers to setting aside the particular facts of a situation as well as the researchers' inclination to explain what caused it. Bracketing assists in the overall goal to reveal and describe the "invariant structure of the experience, the characteristic way in which it 'hangs together'" (S. Dukes, 1984, p.199).

The next step in IPA is data collection and this takes the form of in-depth and/or multiple interviews with participants (Creswell, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2004). The typical number of interview subjects in a phenomenological study is between five and 25. Although it can be done with a sample size of one, IPA is more reliable if there are several subjects (Polkinghorne cited in Creswell, 2007, p.61; S. Dukes, 1984, p.200). Moustakas recommends asking participants one or two broad general questions with a series of structured prompts to be used as necessary (1994).

The outcome or 'results' of a phenomenological study are the "structural invariants of a particular type of experience" that emerge from the "instantiations of the same experience and must effectively make sense of the experience" and although the nature of the phenomenon implicitly exists, "seeing is not a matter of one careless glance" (S. Dukes, 1984, pp.200-201). In order to grasp the nature of the experience, IPA involves several iterative and inductive cycles of analysis (see Smith et al., 2009, for detailed instructions). The first cycle is to read through a transcript fully, ideally whilst simultaneously listening to the audio recording, as this gives a holistic sense of the participant's experience of the phenomenon. Then the transcript is read and listened to again slowly, whilst highlighting significant statements, sentences and quotes in the transcript that express how the person experienced the phenomenon. Descriptive comments are noted first, then linguistic observations, followed by conceptual interpretations. Emergent themes are identified, as are connections between these themes. Meta-themes, termed 'domains' in this thesis, are constructed from clusters of themes where they exist. This is then repeated with each subsequent case, allowing for new themes as well as confirming or modifying existing ones. Finally, a search for patterns

across cases allows the characteristic themes to surface (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009, Chapter 5). Smith and his colleagues explain:

The main task in turning notes into themes involves an attempt to produce a concise and pithy statement of what was important in the various comments attached to a piece of transcript. Themes are usually expressed as phrases which speak to the psychological essence of the piece and contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual. (Smith et al., 2009, p.92)

2.5.1 IPA process and examples from the current study

In this study all interviews were read, then reread individually before going through each one line by line. Transcripts were coded for recurring themes, relationships identified, then clustered into domains. As a guide to transcript notation, this thesis will italicise participant quotations, using the following notation (following Smith et al., 2009, p.119):

| | |
|---------------|--|
| ... | significant pause |
| [] | material omitted |
| [her husband] | explanatory material added by researcher |

A computer program called NVIVO was used to assist in the collation of themes. This data analysis software “helps capture, manage, explore and understand data” (2013). Deidentified transcripts are imported into the program, and then the software enables digital highlighting and annotation of transcripts, in order to code extracts of each participant’s transcripts to themes that can be nested within superordinate domains. The capacity to electronically store and sort this narrative data was invaluable. As outlined already, there were 15 themes that clustered into five domains, presented in Table 2.1.

| Domain | Theme |
|--------------------|---|
| Social Relations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disillusionment with Group Members • Disillusionment with Leaders • Relations with ‘Others’ |
| Coping | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical and Psychological Issues • Social Support • Resilience, Skills and Coping |
| Identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in Group Identity • Emergence of Personal Identity • Alternate Social Identity |
| Ideology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disillusionment with Radical Ideas • Find Own Ideas • Acceptance of Difference |
| Action Orientation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disillusionment with Radical Methods • Stop or Reduce Radical Methods • Prosocial Engagement in Society |

Table 2.1 Domains and themes for leaving extremism and societal reintegration

An extract of the manual notes (Figure 2.2) as well as screenshots of the NVIVO coding (Figures 2.3 and 2.4) are provided to give a sense of how statements were coded and then interpreted into themes. The transcript is an extract from the interview with Lena, as she reflects on the early part of disengagement from a violent Right-Wing Extremist group. In the example, the green highlighted sections in Figure 2.2 indicate ‘Social Relations’ domain themes such as ‘Social Support’ in the form of talking to someone outside the group. This enabled Lena to question how good the fit of the group was for her personally and whether she really did want to stay indefinitely or not. She felt socially isolated in the group, and wondered if she had any external friends after her past actions. It was a novel idea to her that others might not be as obsessed with the same issues as the right-wing group, and eventually, after six months of vacillating and suppressing doubts she contacted an old friend to help her get out. This friend made her

feel special but not judged or exploited as had been the case by the group previously. ‘Coping’ domain themes such as experiencing mental health problems and being able to cope with these issues are highlighted in yellow. Lena explains that once she stumbled across an external, non-judgemental person to talk to about her neo-Nazi involvement, she “*used him like a therapist without thinking about it in that way*”. To use this language indicates she felt she needed outside help, from professionals who had her interests at heart, not a group-driven agenda. She also recognises her need to be “*the centre of attention*”, which is partly what drew her in to start with, but she achieved this in a constructive way rather than being exploited by the group as happened previously. Also coded in yellow is her reference to feeling depressed and wanting to get out but not knowing how; these are difficult emotions to deal with when one’s social resources and personal coping mechanisms are depleted.

Recognising that she was being damaged by staying in the group and seeking social support to help her cope and plan to leave, meant that she began to consciously “*think and reflect about my situation and my future in a different way*”. This is coded in orange for ‘Ideology’ in the manual extract, and indicates that Lena was no longer able to suppress her doubts as easily, and that she was beginning to question whether the beliefs, values and norms of the group explained her situation and whether they ought to guide her future decisions after all. She goes on to consider that others have different beliefs and that maybe this is acceptable. With the assistance of her outside supporter she contemplates alternative strands to her personal and social identity such as being intelligent, politically engaged and working for society. Not surprisingly this triggered anxiety and identity confusion as she has spent several formative years as a young teenager in violent far-left then far-right extremist groups. It is hard to imagine who she might be without this ‘extreme’ identity to define her, “*the thought of being on my own and not being an important person [like she was in the extremist groups], that was very scary*”.

‘Action Orientation’ domain themes (coded in blue in Figure 2.2) do not feature heavily in this portion of her interview, though there is one point where Lena recognises that being a member of an extreme right-wing group that operates outside of society’s rules means she cannot partake in some elements of society like having a satisfying career. Figure 2.3 shows electronic coding of the same interview section, and Figure 2.4

shows the aggregated list of coded extracts by theme. This process was conducted with every page of interview transcript, for every participant, resulting in a rich body of themes that circle around the five higher-order domains.

SOCIAL
BELIEFS
ACTION
IDENTITY
SELF-CARE

791 Interviewee → Lena identifies the need for social support .. that is actually about self-care
 792 And I think I just wanted someone to talk to really, so I think I used him as like a therapist without thinking about it in that way. like
 793 Interviewer therapy would be
 794 Yeah.
 795 Interviewee → she has awareness that she needs attention, but also can
 796 And then again I felt like I was the centre of attention which made me feel good, but the difference was that this time he wasn't there to
 797 kind of judge me, or... distinguish between helpful/constructive
 798 Interviewer attention, versus manipulative or
 799 Or use you in the same way, yeah? judgemental attention like in both
 800 Interviewee the left-wing and right-wing groups.
 801 He was just asking these open questions about everything, just trying to understand my way of thinking. That made me think and reflect
 802 about my situation and my future in a different way, and that kind of started making me think like - I remember he was saying all these
 803 things that I had not thought about, saying so seem very kind of intelligent, and engaged in politics, and interested in society, and
 804 normally I would say maybe pursue a career or something related to these topics that you obviously care about, but obviously since
 805 you're part of an extreme right wing group you can never do that really because...
 806 Interviewer
 807 You won't get a job. → she begins to look at her
 808 Interviewee only personal identity
 809 Yeah, you would never get a job, and I remember thinking I never thought - I never really thought about this, how this is going to... and contemplate other social identities too
 810 Interviewer this conversation gets Lena
 811 The consequences. → reviewing and critically
 812 Interviewee → evaluating her ideas & beliefs
 813 No I didn't, it made me think do I really want to stay here forever. Then I think I began shifting back and forth, like sometimes I would
 814 be really firm, almost like I was trying to convince myself by convincing him that these are my beliefs, and this is truly what I believed
 815 deep down. Sometimes he would meet me and he would think she is going to stay definitely forever, and then sometimes I would be
 816 really depressed, and feel really isolated, and just wanted to get out but had no clue how. He said well have you tried to contact people
 817 from your past, friends and stuff like that, and it was like what friends, I don't think I ever had any friends, especially not now. But he
 818 started asking questions like what do you think would happen if you decided to leave, and I initially thought well everyone would hate
 819 me, both the left and the right. → vacillating between
 820 Interviewer doubts and suppressing them
 821 Both sides covered. → she is questioning whether
 822 Interviewee → the group is the right fit
 823 But then he made me start thinking about - like that there are people in society that doesn't care about any of these groups and that
 824 was a very new idea to me. → contemplating
 825 Interviewer other people's perspectives
 826 There was more to the world than just these two groups, yeah. → referencing other people
 827 Interviewee
 828 Yeah and that scared me a bit too because how can that be, this is so important to me, how can it not be important to other people.
 829 The thought of being on my own and not be an important person, that was very scary. So I think it just started a process, these
 830 conversations kept going on a regular basis for about six months.
 831 Interviewer
 832 So it took a while. → recognised the anxiety,
 833 Interviewee isolation - fear that
 834 And then I think one night I decided that - right I'm going to call one of my old friends that I really missed. → again, a process over
 time
 → reaches out to 24
 previous friend

CONFIDENTIAL

Figure 2.2 Differentiating approaches

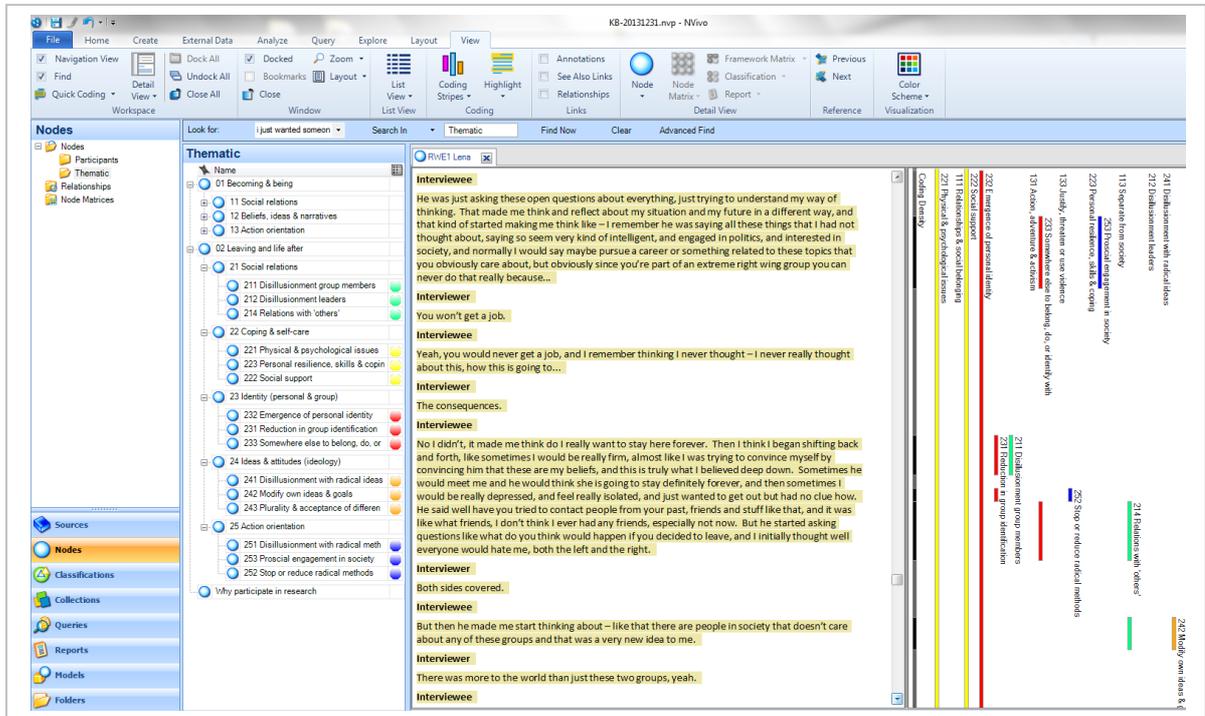


Figure 2.3 Screenshot of NVIVO coded IPA transcript

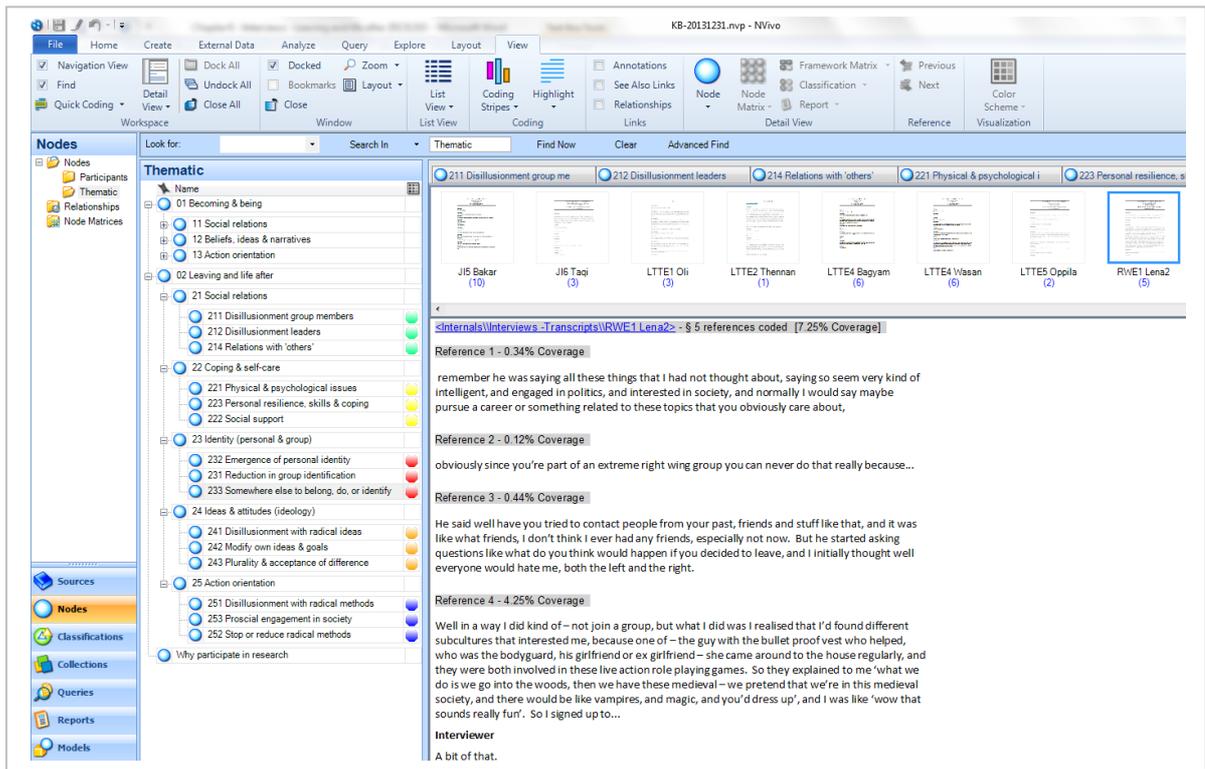


Figure 2.4 Screenshot of NVIVO coded IPA theme extracts

2.6 Interviews

IPA data collection method of choice is an in-depth semi-structured interview, which is what was used in this study (Smith, 2011, p.10). Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed prior to analysis. Participants were former members of radical groups.

2.6.1 Formulation of interview topics and questions

No consensus exists with regard to the methodology of interviewing former extremists (Horgan, 2004, p.31). Introductions, explanations, provision of confidentiality statements and consent procedures were completed before the interview started⁹. Following Moustakas's advice, two broad interview questions were posed: 'What has been your experience of leaving this important identity group?' and 'What has been your experience reconnecting to society since leaving?', and participants were encouraged to tell their story freely. A standardised list of prompts was constructed. In some cases there was no need to ask additional questions because the participants were eloquent and fulsome in their narrative. In other cases, they were less articulate and/or actually asked for structured questions to respond to. These prompts were drawn from themes in the introductory chapter, such as the different elements of disengagement and reintegration. The role of group dynamics, ideology, and relationships all feature. Shifts in role and emergence of personal identity as well as reduction in the strength of the social identity are relevant so these were included if the person needed prompting on the topic. All participants were provided with a printed copy during the interview to refer to. In this way they were all exposed to the full range of identical questions, but self-selected what was relevant to their individual stories. The interview scope is presented in Table 2.2.

⁹ In almost every case there had been a long lead-in to setting up the interview wherein the researcher had been questioned in detail about her research intentions before sitting down with the participant. This means that in many cases the participants were already familiar with the research interests, as well as with the nature and scope of inquiry. Nonetheless, a summary overview was given again in each interview to make sure the person was comfortable and able to provide informed consent.

| |
|---|
| Preliminaries |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductions, overview of research provided and consent procedures |
| “What has been your experience of leaving this important identity group?” |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How, when, why and with whom did you leave? What difference did these factors make? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you come to this decision? Doubts, delays, influences, reflections? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjustment to life after group membership: where did you land and what helped/hindered? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of new role/identity outside group. If arrested, what effect did prison have? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long before it felt like you had left psychologically as well as physically? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did leaving correspond with any change in: beliefs, attitude towards violence, legitimacy of society, previous enemy groups, personal interests such as family or career? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What made it easy/hard for you to leave this radical group? |
| “What has been your experience reconnecting to society since leaving?” |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any changes in sense of self and social identity during time in group |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification with radical group, ideology and methods? Relations with them now? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relations with: previous enemies, family of origin, peer, personal, and wider community? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current health, education/work, hobbies, interests and activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What made it easy/hard for you to join mainstream society? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where to now? What does the future hold? Where do you find belonging, identity, purpose? |
| Personal background (pre-joining) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships – family of origin, peer, personal |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational and work history |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hobbies, interests and activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of self, identity – personal and social |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups, people and ideas that the participant identified with whilst growing up |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement and sense of connectedness with wider society before group |
| Becoming and being a member of a radical group |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal life circumstances at time of joining group |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of ideology/politics |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of self and social identity as a member of the radical group |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What made it easy/hard for you to join this radical group? |

Table 2.2 Semi-structured interview scope

2.7 Participant recruitment

2.7.1 Inclusion criteria

Participant inclusion criteria for this study were straightforward. Former members of groups with extreme political or religious ideologies and corresponding radical socio-political goals were sought. Whilst each participant was not required to have participated in acts of violence or illegality themselves, they had to have knowingly been a member of a group that did so, and to have endorsed and actively supported the use of violence and/or illegal methods in pursuit of their group's goals. Participants must have been over 18 years of age at the time of interview and freely consented to participate. Given the focus of the research was disengagement it was obviously a requirement that they had ceased their involvement with the group. An additional prerequisite was that there could be no outstanding legal proceedings related to their involvement.

2.7.2 Sampling technique

Clearly disengaged former extremists are not expected to be representative of the general population, but then this cannot be assumed (Smith, 1996, p.231). IPA "makes no pretence of attempting to obtain a random sample or one representative of a large diverse population" (Smith & Osborn, 2004, p.232). Several sampling techniques were used in this research to purposively obtain participants with an experience of disengagement. Referrals were sought from various gatekeepers such as community leaders, protest groups, journalists, activists and advocates of different causes. The author had no personal connections to former extremists, so she developed contacts and leads from open-source information such as court documentation and public records and similar. All potential participants received a written and/or verbal explanation of the research, and were invited to contact the researcher if they were interested so there was no pressure to participate. A range of standard and additional measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality and participant privacy. Trust was a big issue. In some cases there were up to twenty preliminary steps including meeting with intermediaries, phone calls, and emails to provide assurances there were no agendas other than genuine research. Some were concerned that the researcher might be an undercover journalist looking to expose them, or making investigations for police. About 20% of people approached showed interest, of which about 75% finally agreed to be interviewed. Of those interviewed about

50% passed on the written invitation to other apposite participants from their own knowledge circles. This is a common technique and is called purposeful snowballing¹⁰ (Smith, 1996, p.231). It was successful in about 50% of cases. The written invitation to participate in attached in Appendix B.

Selecting participants with a range of ideological backgrounds was deliberate. Gaps in the research field include knowing whether there are similarities or differences between different ideology groups, or between individuals with different motivations for joining or leaving. In order to grasp the structural nature of disengagement at the same time as illustrating any divergent patterns it was necessary to seek maximum variation in ideological backgrounds of participants. To understand and illustrate the distinction between different types of disengagement meant the sample would similarly require heterogeneity.

The greatest threat in Australia is from neo-jihadist extremists, though there is a persistent lower-level threat from RWEs (ASIO, 2012; Williams, 2013). Ethno-separatist groups have perpetrated violence in the past in Australia, and whilst the Tamil separatist struggle has not spilled blood in Australia, there are many members of the Tamil and Sinhalese diaspora in Australia who have actively supported the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In fact, the only terrorism charges in Australia that have not been directed at neo-jihadist plots were levelled at Tamil-Australian citizens for fundraising for the LTTE. Therefore, former members of each of these groups were sought. There has been a strong environmental and leftist activism in Australia, never aiming to kill members of the public, but with a radical element that strategically utilises illegal direct-action methods. This means they constitute an excellent nonviolent comparison group that embodies a radical ideology, goes well beyond mainstream activism, but does not seek to physically hurt or kill their out-group enemies like other extremist groups in this study. Former members of these four radical ideology groups were sought in Australia, and where unavailable, in similar Western countries, as participants for this research.

¹⁰ Horgan writes about how he employs this same method in his own interviews with former IRA members, as well as obtaining interviews with other participants such as police and intelligence personnel as well as conservative American Republican party members (Horgan, 2004, p. 47).

2.8 Risk and ethical issues

Informed consent, risks to the participant and issues relating to the safety of the researcher are discussed in this section. All participants gave consent, and care was taken to ensure the participant and the researcher were safe and respected at all times. There were no issues identified at the time of the interviews or raised afterwards.

Informed consent is the right of research participants to be “informed about the nature and consequences” of research they are involved in. As described already, discussions extended as long as necessary with each participant answering their concerns, and interviews only proceeded where informed consent was voluntarily provided. Several of the participants wished to use pseudonyms on the consent forms and one gave verbal but not written consent. In that situation the consent form was read out and the individual verbally indicated their agreement to each point on the form. All participants gave permission for their data to be stored and used beyond five years, and all freely consented to the use of their de-identified material in this thesis as well as any associated publications or documents. All gave permission for the interviews to be audiotaped. The consent form is attached at Appendix C.

Just as it is critical that research subjects are not coerced or threatened into participating, it is vital they are not harmed psychologically or physically in any way by the research. Other harms that must be avoided include social, economic and legal harm – all of which are possibilities when the participants are former extremists (Bickson et al., 2007, pp.85-90). In relation to physical harm, there were no physical risks associated with the interview itself for participants. In terms of psychological risk, a concern that must be addressed is whether asking participants to reflect on their experience, in this case leaving an extreme group and adjustment afterwards, may cause some to experience high levels of distress. Being involved in a violent political group may have been a negative experience for some and therefore they might want to avoid thinking about it. According to the most experienced researchers in this field, this is the case for some extremists, but most in fact report numerous positive aspects of their involvement (Bjorgo, 2012; Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b; Horgan, 2009b). If belonging to an extreme group was positive, then leaving might be a negative experience, in which case they might be distressed by this memory. Both scenarios are possible. It was assessed that a person agreeing to participate

in this research had already made an internal self-assessment that they were willing and felt able to cope with talking about their disengagement experience. Whilst some of the participants became emotional during the interview, all were able to cope with their emotions, no-one terminated or even paused the interview. Most commented that it felt good to tell their story to an interested, neutral person where there were no social consequences in their own lives. Some said it had made them reflect more deeply than they had previously done and that it had triggered connections in their own understanding. All expressed their gratitude for the research interest.

Legal risks are of particular concern with this research sample. However, participants were screened out if they had ongoing legal proceedings, and to ensure they did not unwittingly place themselves in any legal risk the following written caution was provided to them:

It is important that you do not give me operational details of any illegal activities – this is because if you provide any information relevant to a criminal investigation that is later subpoenaed, I would have to comply with the Court orders to provide this information. Also, whilst I have no knowledge or expectation of covert surveillance, sensitivities around radical activities do mean that people under suspicion are sometimes the subject of such surveillance. (Explanatory Statement, Appendix D)

Despite the explicit presence of the word ‘violent’ in the term ‘violent extremism’, it was assessed that there was actually a relatively low risk of danger to the researcher undertaking this study into disengagement. This is for three reasons. Firstly, the primary criterion for inclusion was that participants be no longer involved in their respective extremist groups. Secondly, participants volunteered for this research indicating their goodwill towards the process – as distinct from a mandated interview. Political violence is also different to the unpredictable violence associated with drug affected people, mental illness or impulse control problems¹¹. It is therefore highly unlikely that any of

¹¹ It is also relevant that the research literature in this area has consistently concluded that violent political extremists and terrorists are not ‘mad’ in any clinical sense, and in fact suffer mental illness and personality disorder no more than the general community from which they come (Horgan, 2005; Richardson, 2007; Ruby, 2002a).

these issues would present at interview. Nonetheless, precautionary security measures were put in place. All participants were met in a public venue. The researcher familiarised herself with the venue ahead of time and ensured there were multiple exit points with easy access. She identified a contact person who was geographically proximate on the day of interview, and advised them of the location and expected completion time of the interview. There was an emergency plan if contact was not made afterwards. A police officer colleague was consulted about venue selection and a personal security plan. The researcher did not experience any concern or fear across the 22 interviews, and suffered no threat, violence or physical harm.

2.9 Data collection

Interviews were conducted at a public place of mutual convenience, such as a hotel foyer, a public library, a university, public gardens, or a cafe. The interviews were audiotaped then transcribed, and the participants were advised that they could refuse to answer any question, pause, or cease the interview at any time. The length of the interviews was restricted by the availability of the participants, and ranged from a minimum of 45 minutes to a maximum of six hours (across several sittings).

2.9.1 Cultural issues in collecting data

Cultural and religious sensitivities were relevant to several of the participants who maintained a strong commitment to their beliefs. Cultural courtesy was displayed in all interactions with all participants, such as refraining from any form of physical contact and being mindful of prayer times, dietary restrictions, fasting and festivals when scheduling interviews. Breaks were scheduled for both personal comfort and to allow all participants to observe cultural rituals as needed. Other than not offering to shake hands with the observant Muslim men, the researcher conducted herself broadly in the same manner across all interviews. In practice this entailed dressing modestly, being friendly and courteous, and taking social cues directly from the participant. Consequently, depending on the participant's own style and preference, some interviews were more formal in tone, while others were more relaxed.

Participants were provided with independent university contact details should they wish to complain, and were encouraged to contact the researcher directly if they had

additional thoughts or wished to redact any comments (see Appendix D). None used these opportunities for recourse and none of the participants communicated any discomfort or apprehension concerning the conduct of the research.

2.9.2 Privacy and confidentiality

Names have been withheld from any documentation and have been replaced by pseudonyms. Descriptions are such that individuals cannot be identified. Due to the possibility that a participant's identity may be deduced if significant information regarding criminal charges, associations, geographical locations, or actions were disclosed, all work stemming from this research limits personal information to a very general nature.

2.10 Actual participants

Twenty-two former extremists were interviewed. Between them they had 23 experiences of disengagement from extremism. Specifically, there were six former neo-jihadists, one former militant left-wing extremist, three former RWEs, five former militant Tamil separatists, and eight former nonviolent direct-action environmental extremists. The former militant left-wing extremist disengaged from this group to join the opposing far right-wing group, so there are two disengagement stories for her. The next chapter provides demographic data and introduces the participants ahead of Chapter 4 where the analysis is presented.

Chapter 3: The people

Disengagement, like most socio-psychological experiences, does not exist outside of the person experiencing it, must be understood in their specific socio-cultural context. This chapter provides the personal context for disengagement experienced by each of the participants in the form of an individual vignette. These are organised by ideology, and preceded by a brief overview of how each type of ideology manifests in the Australian context, providing the socio-cultural milieu. It will become apparent from the ensuing vignettes that the participants' disengagement stories are as varied as their radicalisation stories. The predominance of personal and social issues that prevail both in engagement and disengagement is striking.

Although the vignettes in the first half of this chapter give an overview of the radicalisation process for each participant, the demographics section concludes with a collective summary of why they became involved. Multiple reasons were cited by each person, highlighting the complexity of this phase in the radicalisation life-cycle. This demographics section also confirms that extremism tends to be a young person's game. The exception is those who were converted at an older age (for example Kalim and Rob) but who nonetheless became extreme in the early years following their conversion. All types of ideology groups, except for the neo-jihadists, had female members, roughly reflecting gender participation in extremism worldwide. In this study most former members left their respective groups within one to five years, reinforcing extant reports about high turnover rates in extremist, gang and cult groups. A striking finding was just how highly identified and committed participants were at the time of their involvement. This all acts as a backdrop to the analysis chapters to follow, where Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is used to identify the invariant characteristics of disengagement as a phenomenon.

To recap, 22 people who were involved in and subsequently left extremist organisations were interviewed about their disengagement and reintegration experience in this study. They were drawn primarily from Australia, with about one-third from comparable Western democracies. A wide variation with the participant sample was deliberately sought, aiming for maximum variation. Participants comprised former members of neo-jihadi, militant Tamil ethno-separatist, extreme right-wing extremist, and

nonviolent but radical environmentalist groups. One of the right-wing extremists had also been a left-wing extremist, furnishing two disengagement stories, and representing a critical if not paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.230). As a research approach, IPA respects the individual and their subjective experience, but with 22 participants it is easy to look past the people in attempting to identify the constituent and disembodied components of the phenomenon. Therefore, a précis of each person's radicalisation and disengagement story is provided. For confidentiality reasons pseudonyms have been used and identifying details omitted. A brief overview of the underpinning ideology and manifestation in Australia precedes the introduction of the participants.

3.1 Neo-jihadist participants

Whilst there are fundamentalist, extreme and violent manifestations within every religion, the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department of Australia, along with policy makers, researchers and commentators have consistently identified neo-jihadi extremism as being the primary threat of political violence in Australia:

The main source of international terrorism and the primary terrorist threat to Australia and Australian interests is from a global violent jihadist movement – extremists who follow a distorted and militant interpretation of Islam that espouses violence as the answer to perceived grievances. This extremist movement comprises al Qa'ida, groups allied or associated with it, and others inspired by a similar worldview. (2010, p.ii)

Neo-jihadi ideology has an Asian and Middle East lineage of fundamentalist, anti-Western ideas, and is championed by organisations such as al-Qaida and Jemaah Islamiyah¹². The long-term goals of JI is to “overthrow the Indonesian Government and establish a pan-Islamic state in Southeast Asia – through violence if necessary” (AGD, 2013). Mohammed al Zawahiri, the younger brother of al-Qaida emir Ayman al Zawahiri, recently released a statement stating that jihad and democracy are mutually inconsistent and opposing systems of society and government that cannot co-exist. According to

¹² JI is the jihadist group responsible for the 2002 Bali bombing and is linked to the splinter groups responsible for the 2006 Bali, 2003 Marriott Hotel and the 2004 Australian Embassy in Indonesia bombings.

Mohammed al Zawahiri, democracy is “one of the greatest deceptions used by the enemies of Islam” and pushes people away from their obligation to perform jihad (Joscelyn, 2013). Lentini defines neo-jihadism as:

...simultaneously a religious, political, paramilitary and terrorist global movement, a subculture, a counterculture, and an ideology that seeks to establish states governed by laws according to the dictates of selectively literal interpretations of the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (normally) through enacting violence. (Lentini, 2008b, p.181)

Typically neo-jihadists in Western countries reject the elected government, wider society and/or specific sub-groups as illegitimate. Following this they tend to disassociate themselves socially and declare their group exempt from obligations issued by an illegitimate government. Sometimes this takes the form of symbolic delegitimation, as in the cases of a Sydney man who refused to stand for a female magistrate in his own trial appearance (Bolt, 2013). In the case of the neo-jihadist men convicted in the four JI and al-Qaida inspired plots in Australia to date, rejection of the Australian democratic system went well beyond symbolic delegitimation, and extended to plots to kill large numbers of the public. What follows now are the summaries of six former neo-jihadists: Kalim, Bilal, Jari, Bakar, and Taqi. They are all ‘home-grown radicals’ in that they all radicalised and disengaged from violent extremism in the Western country they grew up in.

Kalim

Kalim’s mother died when he was young and his father was alcoholic. He felt he never fitted into society. Kalim himself was alcoholic for much of his adult life before converting to Islam, where he said he felt he finally belonged somewhere. By virtue of geographic proximity he was introduced through the Muslim community to a radical Islamist group where he felt highly valued. He developed radical and extreme beliefs after travelling to Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern Islamic countries where he received spiritual guidance and jihadi skills training. He met senior al Qa’ida and JI leadership and was tasked to carry out an act of targeted public violence. He says he pretended to comply with, but secretly rejected these orders. In-fighting between the local and the international leadership led to a deterioration in the group harmony. Kalim says he was “absolutely devastated” when he was rejected by the Australian members because he had been favoured by the international leadership. After separating from the group he

tried to alert authorities about the planned violence, but was himself arrested for his role in preparation of these activities. Kalim perceived this as another serious societal rebuff. Time in prison cemented his feelings of rejection from wider society and contempt for Western culture. He believes a society in which ‘Sharia’ law is strictly applied is best for all, but is now willing to move to where this exists rather than to impose it by force.

Bilal

Bilal is the youngest of seven children born in a war-affected Middle Eastern country. He moved between family members after his parents separated and his father subsequently died. He migrated to Australia at age 11 and as a teenager became involved in petty crime and local gangs. At his mother’s request an uncle introduced him into a strict Muslim community. This inadvertently connected him to a fundamentalist group that was Islamist in ideology, and criminal in day-to-day functioning. Bilal swore an oath of loyalty and within a year was married to the daughter of one of the leaders. He felt trapped from the start, and it became even harder to leave after he and his wife had children. Eventually he left his family and fled interstate. In retribution he faced persistent harassment from the group, leading to physical assault and being stabbed and shot. Almost a decade later he remains socially isolated, but has since remarried and now identifies as a “*non-practicing kind of Muslim*”.

Jari

Jari described his family as warm and loving. He was an active teenager and a self-described “*adrenaline junkie*”. As a young man he travelled internationally pursuing adventure sports whilst working as a labourer. He married a Muslim woman whilst overseas in Europe and after several years of conversations with his brother-in-law, converted to Islam himself. He and his wife knew few Muslims when they returned to Australia, so he joined a study group that played paintball. The religious beliefs of the group were fundamentalist and Islamist. Various members, including Jari, trained overseas for jihad. He thought this was justifiable overseas, but when he learned of the group’s plot within Australia he contacted an external imam, effectively stopping the operation, and then immediately left this group. He and his wife moved back overseas. He describes himself still as an observant, conservative Muslim, but one who is now much more “*chilled out*” and “*less hard-core*” in his beliefs compared to before.

Bari

Bari was raised a Christian but converted to Islam in his early-20s because he was attracted to a religious community that was “*traditional and firm*”. He was deeply drawn to the fraternity. Some years later he was flattered into joining a radical group by a powerful sheik who increasingly preached hatred and violence. Bari eventually became disillusioned by the behaviour of the sheik and many of the group members. He reluctantly travelled overseas to attend a training camp but withdrew before arriving at the camp in Pakistan. On his return he was shunned by the group and even though he disengaged voluntarily, he suffered anxiety and depression, and self-medicated with alcohol and other substances for years afterwards. Slowly he rebuilt his life through family support, outside interests and involvement in the mainstream Muslim community. Now his focus is on work, family and helping others. He describes himself now as a practicing Muslim with progressive social views.

Bakar

Bakar’s professional atheist parents were political dissidents who fled Iran to give their children a better life in Norway. Bakar recalls that his parents loved him growing up, but nevertheless he felt he never fitted in culturally. Although a bright boy, he was aimless. He craved belonging and meaning, and explored several religions before deliberately settling on fundamentalist Islam. He rejected music and secular ways, along with his girlfriend and friends. He became obsessive about Koranic study and adopted radical Salafist views. This led to conflict with his family and others. He was readying himself to train for jihad when he suffered a mental breakdown. The group offered no support, but his family took him back. It took at least two to three years before he stabilised psychologically, but he reports that he still struggles socially. He describes himself now as believing in a form of God but says that he does not subscribe to any organised religion. He is avidly against violence and wants to study psychology when fully recovered.

Taqi

Taqi grew up with his mother in what he recalls as a bad part of London. From a young age he felt on the outside and believed the system had “screwed” him. He became a drug dealer and crime boss as a teenager. He converted to Islam in prison for protection, and

quickly adopted a Salafist Islamist ideology that blamed Western Christian hegemony for the problems facing Muslims of the world. This felt empowering. Once released, Taqi stopped crime and began to study politics at university, which is where he came to see extremist Islam as “*just another form of hustling*”. He stepped away, but returned to drugs and crime for a while. He then “*got straight again*” and became an advocate for vulnerable youth. Taqi is now avidly anti-extremist and promotes nonviolence. He feels he does not really belong in the non-criminal world, but explains he is a “*good chameleon*” so he gets along with most people.

3.2 Militant Tamil separatism

Ethno-nationalist separatist groups usually emerge from conditions of dictatorship or civil oppression where democratic processes are not available. Apart from the early Aboriginal resistance to European settler invasion in the late 18th and early 19th century, this has not occurred in Australia. A contemporary example relevant to the Australian context arises from the large number of Tamil Australians escaping the decades long civil war in Sri Lanka. Until 2009 when they were defeated, armed resistance groups in Sri Lanka demanded an independent homeland in north eastern Sri Lanka for Sri Lankan Tamils and appealed for help from the million-strong diaspora of Tamils spread worldwide (Bandarage, 2009; ICG, 2010a). There is a large body of academic and official literature to attest to abuse of the Tamils by the ruling government (Bandarage, 2009; ICG, 2010a, 2010b; Rotberg, 1999; Tambiah, 1986; 1985; Volkan, 1998). Whilst the oppression and various attacks on the Tamil community in Sri Lanka is not really in dispute, what divides Sri Lankan Tamils at home and abroad is what form resistance should take. The longest standing armed resistance group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has been described as “unequivocally the most effective and brutal terrorist organization ever to utilize suicide terrorism”, responsible for more than half the world’s suicide bombings between 1980 and 2000¹³ (Canter, 2009; Chalk, 2008; Crenshaw, 2005; FBI, 2008b; Kruglanski et al., 2013; Post, 2007; Schweitzer, 2000).

¹³ The number of suicide attacks by the LTTE was almost double that of the nine other major terrorist organisations between 1980 and 2000. The LTTE did not reduce their use of this tactic after 2000, but following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 suicide bombing became a routine tactic to resist the occupation

Like many displaced people and refugees, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora worldwide retains a profoundly strong ethnic identity (Hoffman, Rosenau, Curiel, & Zimmermann, 2007; ICG, 2010a; Wayland, 2004). Additionally, those who were accepted as refugees in Western countries like Australia, UK, Canada, US have significant resources, can generate political pressure, and have provided strong support to their Tamil brothers and sisters fighting in Sri Lanka (ICG, 2010a). By 2010 approximately 40,000 Tamil Sri Lankans were citizens or permanent residents of Australia (ICG, 2010a, p.2). Financial support from the international Tamil diaspora, including elements of the Tamil community in Australia, is estimated to have been in the region of US\$100 million per year, and was critical to sustaining their activities in Sri Lanka (ABC, 2010). The only individuals charged under Australia's terrorism laws who are not neo-jihadists are three Australian Tamil men who pleaded guilty to providing funds to the LTTE (Coghlan, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2010e). Five former militant Tamil separatists were interviewed. Their vignettes are as follows.

Oli

Oli is a Sri Lankan born, Tamil Australian man who was raised, educated and employed in a Sinhalese majority area of Sri Lanka. He does not recall experiencing racial tension until the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, when the racism and discrimination became "*intolerable*". At the time, he was a professional man in his late 20s so he supported the armed struggle by assisting in the training and medical care of separatist militants. He was also involved in supporting the displaced Tamil population. Over time Oli became disillusioned by the militants' use of violence against other Tamil groups and civilians, and became an anti-LTTE dissenter. Feeling no longer welcome in either Sinhalese or LTTE areas of Sri Lanka, Oli immigrated to Australia with his wife. He continues to support Tamil humanitarian projects back in Sri Lanka, and has remained a strong anti-LTTE spokesperson whilst agitating for the democratic needs and rights of Tamil people.

by the US, and the numbers in Iraq increased, thus reducing the proportion attributable to the LTTE (Sheehy-Skeffington, 2009, p. 3).

Thennan

Thennan grew up in a Sinhalese majority area of Sri Lanka. Raised in what he describes as a happy family, he migrated to Australia for work when he was 25. He was politicised by the 1983 anti-Tamil riots and supported armed struggle towards independence. He became involved in a pro-LTTE group in an administrative capacity, and eventually took on a leadership role. After more than a decade he stepped aside for internal political reasons, and was effectively pushed out of the group. For the next 15 years he shifted his efforts exclusively to humanitarian work, although he remained ideologically committed to an independent Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka. Thennan was deeply upset by the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009. He accepts the fight is over but feels guilty because of the wasted lives in the absence of victory. He has no interest in any future armed struggle but he remains deeply committed to Tamil humanitarian work in Sri Lanka.

Bagyam

Bagyam is a Tamil man who grew up, studied and worked in a Sinhalese majority area of Sri Lanka. His educated siblings and parents are close to each other and involved in social justice issues. He worked internationally for a number of years before immigrating to Australia. Along with many Sri Lankan Tamil expatriates in Asia at the time, Bagyam was deeply politicised by the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, and became an active supporter of the armed struggle for independence. Violence has always been at odds with his personal values and religious beliefs, but he genuinely believed all other options had been exhausted. Bagyam was shocked by the military defeat of the LTTE, and no longer supports any form of armed struggle. Still depressed and distressed by the defeat of 2009, he has modified his political goal to achieve an integrated society in Sri Lanka, and has completely refocused his efforts into recovery and rehabilitation projects.

Wasan

Wasan was raised in the Tamil majority area of Jaffna on the northern tip of Sri Lanka and remembers his childhood as happy and adventurous. In 1983 when he was a young teenager, the government forces killed one of his school friends and 13 of his neighbours. In response he joined the LTTE and became a leader in the militant wing. Eventually Wasan became frustrated with the absence of strategy, disillusioned by the in-fighting and disgusted by the killing of other Tamil resistance groups. He dared not leave for fear of

retribution. He was injured in battle and sent to Indian state of Tamil Nadu for treatment. He deserted the LTTE but was pursued by both the pro- and anti-LTTE groups. He fled to Southeast Asia, and with the help of family immigrated to the UK. He is now against violence of all forms and is working towards an integrated Sri Lanka within the political and diplomatic system. He is a mainstream activist for human rights, Black rights, and women's rights.

Oppila

Oppila grew up in a privileged family in the north of Sri Lanka. She joined the LTTE as a teenager despite having serious doubts about the group because she felt no one else was fighting for the Tamils. She was a militant cadre who fought in the jungle for years until she felt she could not take the deaths anymore; she was emotionally and physically burnt-out. Because she had a good relationship with the local leader he agreed to her going home. She thought she would be killed for disloyalty, as others were, but she was not. Her family subsequently sent her to boarding school in India to complete her education. She then came to Australia for tertiary study, married and settled here. She now has a successful professional career and a young family. Oppila no longer supports the notion of Tamil Eelam and hopes for Sri Lankan integration. She is an outspoken anti-LTTE advocate and remains a mainstream activist for Tamil rights. She still suffers symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

3.3 Former Right-Wing Extremist participants

Moore (1995) summarises key characteristics of Right-Wing Extremist groups and individuals¹⁴. They are more extreme, more vehement, and more “shrill” than their mainstream conservative counterparts. Conspiracy theories dominate the far-right construction of ‘us versus them’ though precise identification of who the conspirators are is poorly defined: “sometimes they are the banks, ‘the Establishment’, international finance and the Jews; at other times they may be non-Anglo-Celtic groups or ‘the communists’”. RWE groups promote an idealised nationalism that romanticises history

¹⁴ In this thesis the terms ‘far right’ and ‘radical right’ mean the same as ‘extreme right’.

and their role in it. Intense racism is another cardinal element of the radical-right that separates these groups from the mainstream, and whilst this is usually aimed at Jewish people, in Australia it has also been directed at Aboriginal and other Australians with non-European ethnic origins. Whilst far-right extremists groups are predictably hostile towards socialist or left-wing politics, their adherents are more fundamentally anti-democratic. From their authoritarian perspective there ought to be no choice other than their own perspective. In summary, they distrust heterogeneity and diversity, both socially and politically (Moore, 1995, pp.2-4).

Although in Australia the security focus has shifted discernibly over the last two decades towards neo-jihadist threats, the most recent report from the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation notes that RWE groups continue to operate in Australia. As the premier security agency of the country they remain “alert to any foundation or support for extremist ideologies that could result in extremist right-wing groups, or lone actors, engaging in acts of violence” (ASIO, 2012, p.4). Reactive co-radicalisation, a process of mutual radicalisation in which two groups, neo-jihadist and right-wing extremists in this case, react to each other’s narratives and actions have occurred (Bartlett & Birdwell, 2013; Eatwell, 2006; Iqbal, 2013). In response to the politicisation of Islam since the newest wave of international neo-jihadist violence, ultranationalist right-wing groups such as the Australian Defence League¹⁵ have begun to overtly oppose even mainstream Muslims.

Since its rise in the 1970s, the RWE movement in Australia has maintained a modest but persistent presence, with under reporting of hate and property crimes being the most common manifestation (1991, p.11). There is a “disturbing inventory of hate

¹⁵ The Facebook page of the Australian Defence League states that they are “a group against Islam and Islamic immigration. We are against those who worship a so-called Prophet who in his own words, raped, murdered, enslaved people and worse. He was a coward and a paedophile.” Asserting that their motivation is “a love of country, promoting democracy and the rule of law,” a central part of their mission is to “ensure the public gets a balanced picture of Islam”. On their Facebook and Twitter account members threaten to kill and hurt Muslims. However, their focus is broader than just an anti-Islam stance; multiple male and female members banter about raping, killing and humiliating the former Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard (<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2013/07/01/anti-islam-group-seeks-expand>).

related crimes against Asian and Islamic migrants, against gay and lesbian communities, and against... Jewish Australians” (James, 2005, p.108). Rarely do far-right groups or individuals target government or public infrastructure. Depending on the jurisdiction the crimes are often classified as interpersonal rather than political, racial or religious motivated incidents.

No former right-wing extremists in Australia were located for the research, however three such individuals were interviewed in Norway: Lena, Freya and Rick. Lena had joined a neo-Nazi group after defecting directly from a militant far-left extremist group, so she has two disengagement stories to contribute.

Lena – Part 1

Born in Norway, Lena recalls that she was emotionally unstable as a child and struggled with identity issues. As an adolescent she was drawn to dark counter-cultures. She explains that she also held passionate views on social justice issues and became a youth activist. At age 13 she sought out and joined a violent underground Marxist group that was in direct conflict with equally aggressive local right-wing groups. Within 12 months of active involvement the violence, alcohol and trauma destabilised her emotionally. Suffering from low self-esteem she offered to spy for the opposing right-wing group which made her “*feel special*”. She remained in the Marxist group as a double agent for the neo-Nazi group for almost a year before being identified publically as “*the mole*”, forcing her exit. Whilst her real views and politics are more left-leaning than right, to be able to fit in and feel loved was more important for Lena. She adopted the extreme right-wing political views as a price for this new group membership.

Lena – Part 2

After betraying the militant left-wing group, Lena was elevated to the elite inner-circle of the opposing right-wing group. The drinking and violence was even more extreme. When she became aware that group members did not trust her because of her previous disloyalty she began to destabilise again. She said she had never subscribed to their political ideology *per se*, so once the social fit did not feel right she became highly distressed and contemplated leaving, but was too scared to do so. She reached out to a supportive outsider, and after almost a year of deliberation she finally decided to leave. She contacted an old friend, and a rescue intervention was staged in the middle of the night

with police protection. It took Lena several years of therapy and personal development to deal with her trauma, depression and personality issues. She eventually returned to study and now has a successful career. She has embraced a socially progressive view of politics and speaks out against violence in all forms.

Rick

Rick was exposed to the far-right in junior high school in Norway. He liked partying, drinking, and fighting. This aligned him naturally with the local neo-Nazi group which was picking fights with the same targets – immigrants, Black people, homosexuals and left-wing youth. In his ignorance he also adopted the racist and hateful ideology of the neo-Nazi group that he was spending more time with, even though they did not really talk about politics. His progressive liberal parents knew nothing of his involvement until he was arrested at the age of 15. Later in prison for the first time, which he also kept from his parents, Rick received support letters and books from international Aryan groups, which he says radicalised him exponentially. On release he committed even more violent hate crimes, and was jailed multiple times. He and his group became paranoid about leftist government persecution. They committed armed robberies but were arrested before implementing even larger-scale operations against the government. One particular prison guard and a chef were instrumental in Rick's change of heart, as were some experiences he had whilst travelling in which Black individuals behaved in a warm way towards him. Once he decided to leave the RWE group his family supported him, but he said it took years before he felt he could operate normally in society again. He completed higher education and now has a professional career.

Freya

Freya grew up in a small town in Sweden. She had troubles at home and felt she did not belong. From the age of 13 she separated from her community and increasingly identified with the local extreme right-wing movement, which made her feel valued. After two years of intense involvement she became disillusioned with the lack of leadership and infighting. She felt paranoid about who to trust, and whether her peers really liked her. Time in prison on terrorism charges consolidated these doubts. As part of her sentence Freya attended a community organisation that specialised in disengagement. Even so, it was many months until she broke with the group completely. Years later she has had

psychological treatment, reconciled with her family, developed a few new friends and is studying. Freya is against violence as a tool and has moderated her beliefs enormously. She remains aware of her desire to belong and vulnerability to extremist groups.

3.4 Nonviolent direct-action radical environmentalists

Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess coined the term deep ecology to “express the idea that nature has intrinsic value and to criticise anthropocentric, ‘shallow’ environmentalism, which he criticised for its instrumental view towards nature” (B. Taylor, 2001, p.179). Naess himself states that shallow ecology “fights against pollution and resource depletion [for the benefit] of the health and affluence of people in the developed countries”, as compared to the deep ecology “philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium” (Naess, 1973, p.95). Although not formally a religion, deep ecology is characterised by a way of relating to nature, in which its followers find “ultimate meaning and transformative power in nature” (B. Taylor, 2001, p.175). Radical environmentalist ideology aligned with deep ecology is biocentric, meaning human beings are “just an ordinary member of the biological community, no more important than, say, a bear or a whale”, and that equal rights should be applied to all living creatures from a virus to a cow to humans (Eagan, 1996, p.3). This fundamentally rearranges the existing inter-species order as does the desired rollback of industrialised civilisation and reintroduction of indigenous wilderness. In social identity and self-categorisation theory terms, this supervenes upon the higher order human identity group that encompassed all humans. It raises other species up to the human level – a fundamentally radical idea.

Echoing della Porta’s work on social movements, Neumann notes the fluidity between activist and radical groups, and between legal and illegal methods within the extremist movements. He reasons that “pamphleteering, street protest, street battles, fire bombings and assassinations may not all be the same, but they are of the same: they are collective expressions of political ideas (Neumann, 2013, p.884). That said, direct-action radical environmentalists do not use violence to attack the general population. Some have targeted individuals or corporations involved in environmentally detrimental activities, or used a range of illegal methods, a list of which appears in Appendix E. Using nonviolent methods in pursuit of their ideological and political goals the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front are thought to have caused approximately \$USD 110

million worth of damage since 1979 (Abbey, 2006; Jensen, 2006a, 2006b; Long, 2004). Because of this economic damage “eco-terrorists” have been identified “as the leading domestic terrorist threat [in the USA] in the post-9/11 ‘war on terror’” (Vanderheiden, 2005, p.425). Potter makes a compelling and growing argument, captured in the title of his recent book – ‘Green is the new red’ – about the damaging and improper use of the term ‘terrorism’ and terrorism legislation to outlaw direct-action environmentalist activities. The allegation is that nonviolent but commercially disruptive environmental activists are being painted as dangerous in order to protect economic and corporate interests (Potter, 2011).

Radical environmentalism has not led to political violence in Australia. Antipodal radical environmentalists been mild by international standards, reaching their peak of activity in the 1980s (Hutton & Connors, 1999; Tranter, 1999). Direct-action radical environmentalism in Australia has taken the form of multi-pronged campaigns that interrupt commercial activity and sometimes result in property damage. It has not involved premeditated violence against members of the public (FBI, 2008a; Laqueur, 1999, p.425; Vanderheiden, 2005). Even in the US and Europe most radical environmentalists and indeed most analysts writing on the topic reject the label of ‘terrorist’ and ‘eco-terrorist’ in favour of ‘monkey wrenching’ or ‘ecotage’, referring to “economic sabotage of inanimate objects thought to be complicit in environmental destruction” (Amster, 2006; Vanderheiden, 2005, p.425; Wagner, 2008). To be clear, former direct-action radical environmentalists are included in this study because they are an example of nonviolent extremism. In order to fully understand disengagement across the full spectrum, former violent and nonviolent extremists were sought. Indeed, as will become evident in the next chapter, there is much we can learn about disengagement from the experiences of former members of particular extreme ideology type. I interviewed eight former nonviolent direct-action radical environmentalists.

Dean

Dean challenged the status quo from an early age and said he was disillusioned by the hypocrisy of middle-class suburbia. He was 15 when he became active in anti-nuclear and peace activism; environmental activism seemed a natural extension of his left-wing politics. He moved from group to group to participate in numerous direct-action environmental campaigns, which often resulted in clashes with police. His only doubts

were ever with the effectiveness of methods, not with the ideological cause. He came and went from campaigns to tour with his band. He eventually left direct-action activism and moved into paid employment with a mainstream environmental organisation when he had his first child. He remains convinced that radical changes are still necessary for humans to live sustainably. Although he now thinks market forces and climate change will force some of these changes, he thinks it is good that younger people are involved in direct-action.

Eric

Eric grew up in a politically active left-wing family. As a teenager he actively searched for active environmentalist groups and quickly adopted leadership roles. He said that being an activist was his destiny, and he was completely consumed by it. After eight years of immersion in the radical environmental movement, Eric burnt-out physically and psychologically and had a year of self-imposed exile. This triggered an acute “identity crisis”, the effects of which have lingered for many years. Almost a decade later he is beginning to identify alternate aspects of himself and his role in the world. Although he no longer describes himself as a radical activist, he still participates in protests and is occasionally arrested. Whilst he still holds radical views regarding human interaction with the environment, he has started to become interested in other topics and to form relationships with wider groups of people.

Sean

Although he describes growing up in a happy family Sean felt he never really fitted in. In his late teens he searched for and moved interstate to attend a university renowned for left-wing activism. He campaigned for human rights, anti-globalisation, peace, and became involved in radical environmentalism and direct-action campaigns. He says that he has never doubted the deep-ecology philosophy, and still believes there is much change needed by humans to live harmoniously with nature. At the time of his involvement he fully supported illegal methods including strategic property damage, but not harm to humans, because it would be counter-productive. Whilst he was deeply committed for the four years of his involvement, he thinks his maturity played a role in him moving on. After graduating from university he took overseas work. He now works

in a mainstream environmental organisation and feels he is working towards the same goals using different methods.

Nadia

Nadia became involved with environmental politics through her university boyfriend. She suspended her studies to spend several years living in a forest blockade. The “*euphoria of fighting for the environment*” weakened over time with fatigue, harsh living, limited operational success, social isolation and not fitting in very well with the ‘hard-core’ activists. She began to question the efficacy of her role, and was ready to leave when the next opportunity presented. Another person confided he was leaving camp, so they left together. In hindsight Nadia recognised that she was burnt-out and depressed. She completed her studies and moved into professional human-rights work. She says that the birth of her first child caused her to reflect on her values and is keen to become more active again in the future, using mainstream methods.

Ed

Ed grew up in a conservative middle-class family who did not understand his concern for social justice and environmental issues. He got involved in environmentalism at university because of adventure, girls and his political values. He did not think direct-action was sufficient so he also became involved in political lobbying and strategic communications. He never doubted the cause, but was disappointed with the conduct of other activists, and sometimes doubted the effectiveness of direct-action methods. He eventually disengaged for financial reasons and sought mainstream employment in the same field. More than a decade later he was approached to lead a high profile campaign for which he was arrested and imprisoned. His ideological commitment to radical environmentalism remains strong but he is also concerned about other left-wing issues. He said he will not participate in illegal direct-action again but is tacitly supportive of others doing so.

Daphne

Daphne grew up in what she described as a loving conservative family. She became involved in the alternative music scene, student politics and environmental activism when she moved to university. She began dating a fervent direct-action boyfriend and in the

following years her involvement shifted from occasional activism to full immersion. She travelled overseas after breaking up with her boyfriend, during which time she re-affirmed her commitment to the radical environmentalist movement. On her return she was very effective in leadership roles. Almost a decade after becoming involved, Daphne finally became disillusioned by persistent in-house politics and questioned the efficacy of direct-action methods for sustainable change. Recognising she was burnt-out, she took a paid job with a mainstream environmentalist organisation. This was the beginning of a painful transition out of activism, where she struggled to define identity and her role. She has modified her ideological beliefs to Buddhist eco-philosophy, and views direct action as a short-term bandaid.

Barrie

Barrie came from a poor family and lived on and off with his grandmother. He left school at age 14 to live at a barricade protest camp for 18 months where he was strongly influenced by an older charismatic activist. Direct-action environmentalism was totally defining for the next four years. After complete physical and psychological burnout Barrie 'drugged out' and joined the punk scene. He eventually returned to direct-action environmentalism in a leadership role. Six years later he burnt-out again, particularly disillusioned with in-house dysfunction and schisms. He took a job with a mainstream environmental organisation, but it was a toxic workplace and he resigned. He has been unwell and unable to work since. He is no longer involved in activism of any sort. Barrie is now in his mid-30s. He is still searching for identity. He is still healing, and still feels he does not belong in society.

Rob

Rob became involved in direct-action radical environmentalism after working on an industry project that exposed him to the issues. He made a commercial sale to an activist group and assisted them with the equipment. Over the following months his ideological commitment shifted from moderate sympathy to active engagement. During a direct-action operation he was arrested and jailed, but the group denied any association. Rob felt betrayed and abandoned, so when he was released from prison he left the group. However, by this stage he had internalised a radical ideology justifying the need for extreme action to change environmental practices. As a result of the split he established

his own group. Rob is not an Australian citizen, does not work or live in Australia, and does not engage in direct-action in Australia. He is careful not to hurt or kill people in his operations, though he acknowledges that it is a risk.

3.5 Participant demographics

As has been demonstrated repeatedly in the terrorism literature, there is no distinguishing profile of those who radicalise towards violent extremism (Horgan, 2008b; Silke, 1998). This sample is no different in its heterogeneity. This section reports on the demographic characteristics of the 22 participants. Dimensions include ideology type, gender, age at joining, length of time in the group, years lapsed since leaving, and whether they completed the questionnaires or not. Other features related to their experience in the group – such as reasons for joining, reasons for staying, strength of commitment at the time, reasons for leaving, modification of views, and current levels of integration – are reported in the upcoming analysis chapters.

3.5.1 Ideology type

Including two experiences of disengagement from Lena, who left a violent far-left group to join a violent far-right group, there are 23 disengagement stories from 22 participants. This is represented in the pie graph of Figure 3.1.

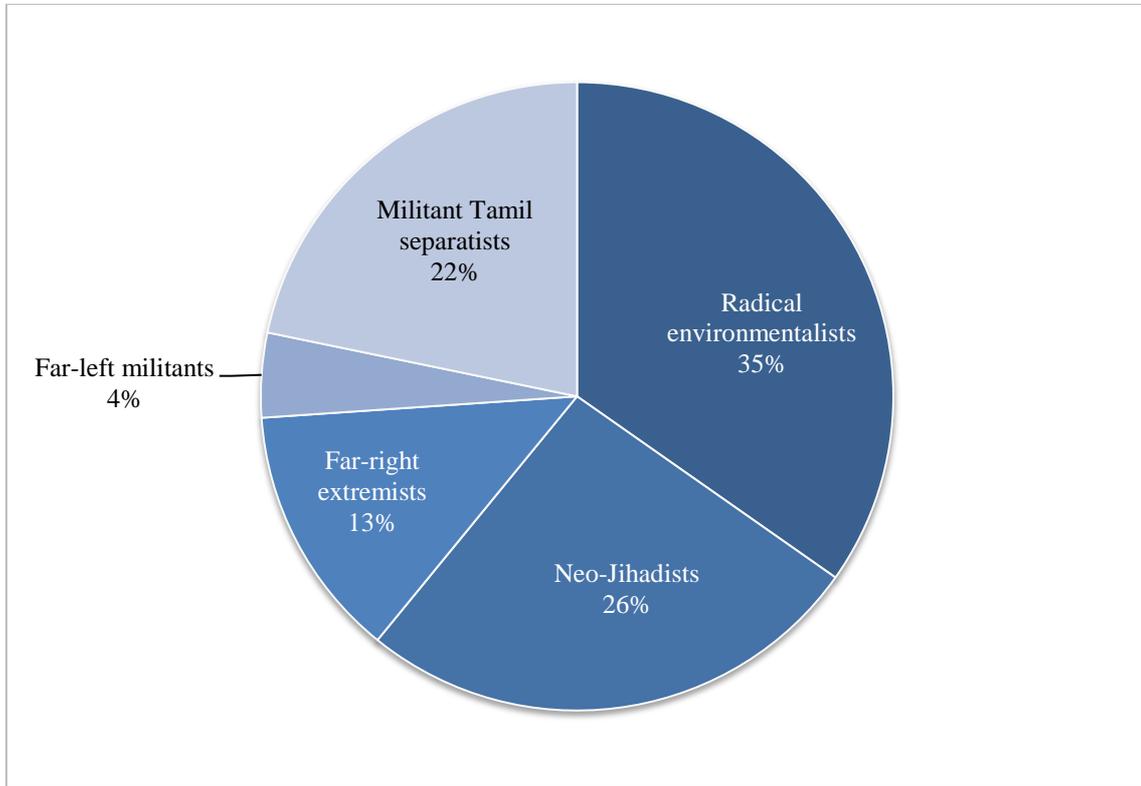


Figure 3.1 Distribution by ideology type

3.5.2 Gender and age of joining

Recognition that young people are disproportionately prone to getting into trouble is noted throughout history. Some 2,300 years ago Aristotle said, “the young are heated by Nature as drunken men by wine” (Aristotle, cited in Dobbs, 2011). In *A Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare’s shepherd wishes “there were no age between 10 and 23, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing [and] fighting” (Shakespeare, 1982). Taking the entire global population, 25% is aged between ten and 24 years of age but in the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia this ration is much higher (PRB, 2013). A robust, cross-cultural criminological finding is that the age of crime perpetration peaks between ten and 18, then slowly abates thereafter (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Shulman, Steinberg, & Piquero, 2013; Sweeten, Piquero, & Steinberg, 2013). Violent extremism, as a specific high risk, anti-social crime mirrors this pattern. Most participants are male and aged between 18 and 35 years; indeed according to the FBI 90% of people on the US FBI ‘most wanted’ terrorist list are males under the age of 34 (Ehrlich & Liu, 2002, p.187;

Sageman, 2004; Zedalis, 2004). This same pattern holds true for Australia. About 23% of the Australian population is aged between ten and 24 years of age, but almost half (48%) of convicted offenders in Australia are in this same age bracket; exactly 50% of people arrested on terrorism related offences in Australia are aged 25 or under (AGD, 2012; Brawley & Shaw, 2009; GTReC, 2013; Harris-Hogan, 2012; Koschade, 2006; Lentini, 2008a; Mullins, 2011a, 2011b; Neighbour, 2009; Porter & Kebbell, 2011; Zammit, 2013a; Zammit & Harris-Hogan, in press, 2014).

The majority of the sample (74%) were male. Sixty-nine percent were under the age of 25 when they became involved, and 17% were even younger than 15. As can be seen in Figure 3.2, females were interviewed from all but the neo-jihadist ideology type, which is consistent with other findings (P. Taylor & Jacques, 2013; Zedalis, 2004). It was expected that there might be greater female representation in the other ideology categories, though overall numbers are far too small to expect any kind of proportional representation as seen in large random samples. In any case, this is not a quantitative study that requires even, equal or proportional numbers in each category.

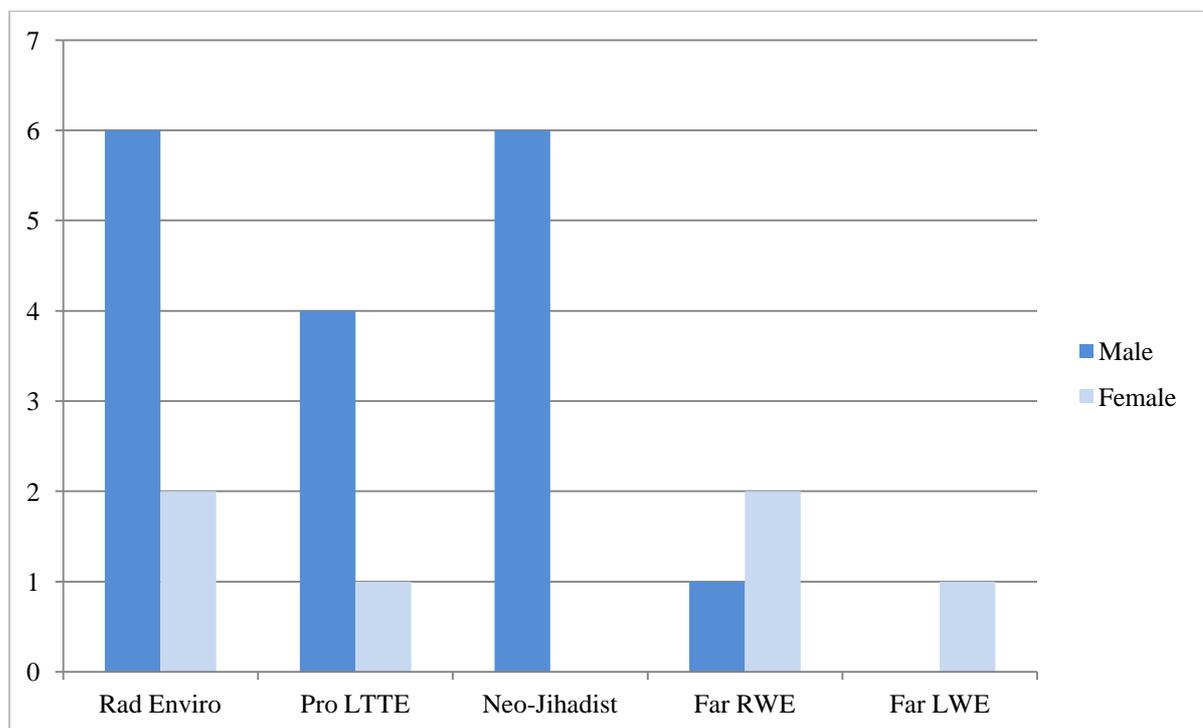


Figure 3.2 Gender distributions in different ideology genres

The pie chart and accompanying bar chart in Figures 3.3 and 3.4 illustrate the overall youthfulness of the joining age across different ideology genres. Every type of

ideology group had members join when they were under 16 years of age. Among those in neo-jihadist ideology groups, half joined when they were under the age of 25. With one exception, the other half converted to conservative Islam as adults and joined a radical group soon thereafter. The age at which the former pro-LTTE members joined the militant movement depended on the age they were in 1983 when the ‘Black July’ riots occurred. This was a pivotal event for all but one of the militant Tamil separatists, and explains the random spread of age at time of joining for that particular group. All but one of the former radical environmentalists joined when they were young teenagers or in their early-20s. The single left-wing extremist was a young teenager when she joined the violent Marxist-anarchist group, and still a teenager when she left some years later to join a rival right-wing extremist group. All the right-wing extremist group members were in high school when they became involved.

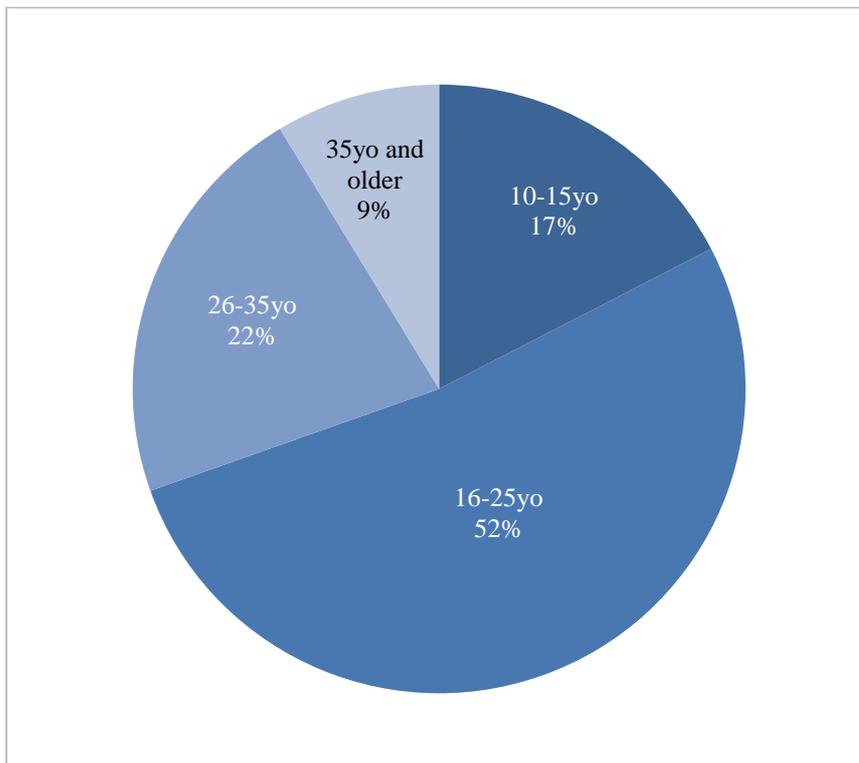


Figure 3.3 Participant age at joining

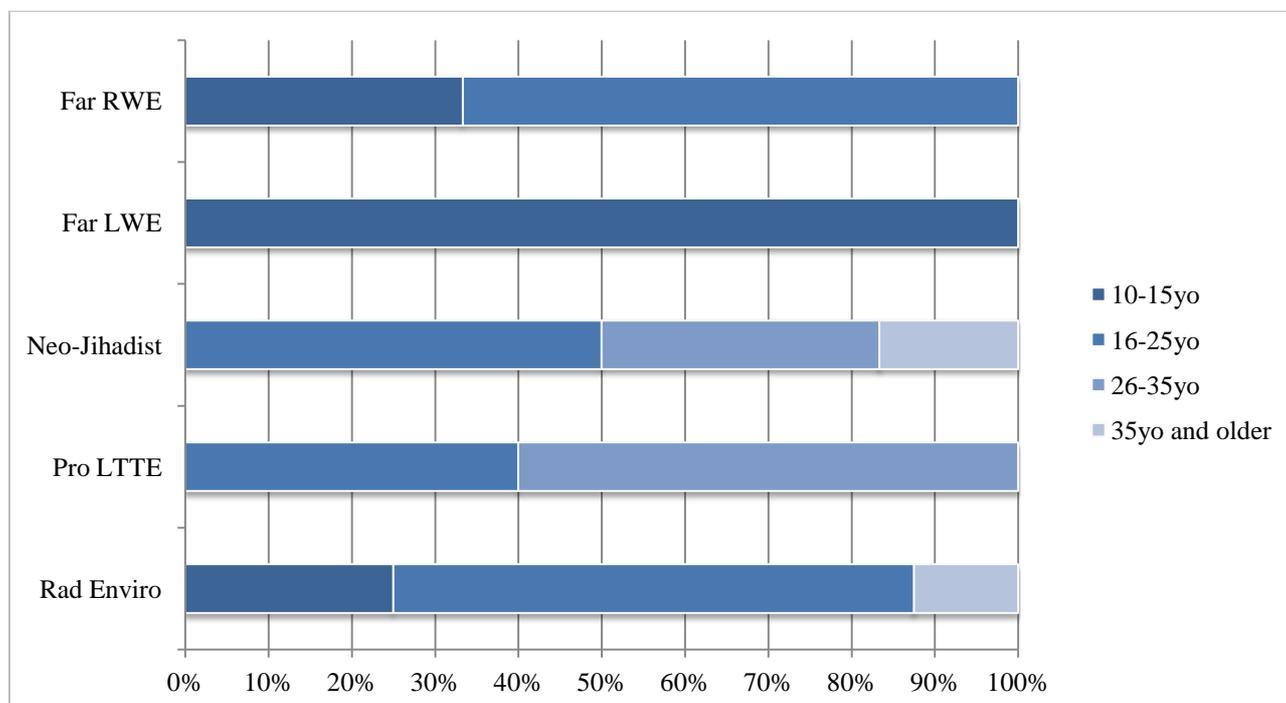


Figure 3.4 Age at joining, by ideology type

3.5.3 Identification and commitment

Within social psychology theories of social identity and self-categorisation, strong identification with a social group translates into commitment. Each participant was asked to give a percentage to indicate how strongly they identified with their group at the time of involvement. Despite hardships implicit in being a member of a radical group as well as the social hostility that some groups experienced, and the scrutiny from authorities, the participants nevertheless reported extraordinarily high levels of identification at the time of their involvement¹⁶. Figure 3.5 outlines the self-reported levels of commitment at the time of their involvement.

¹⁶ It is relevant to reiterate that being a member of a violent or radical group can be hard work psychologically and in some cases, physically as well. The Tamil Tiger fighters and the radical environmentalists tend to live in encampments, are malnourished and generally endure harsh living conditions. Far-left and far-right groups typically engage in fights and beatings, as well as heavy drinking – so some physical strain is present in these groups too. Emotional and physical breakdown was evident in the reports of those participants in the harsher groups.

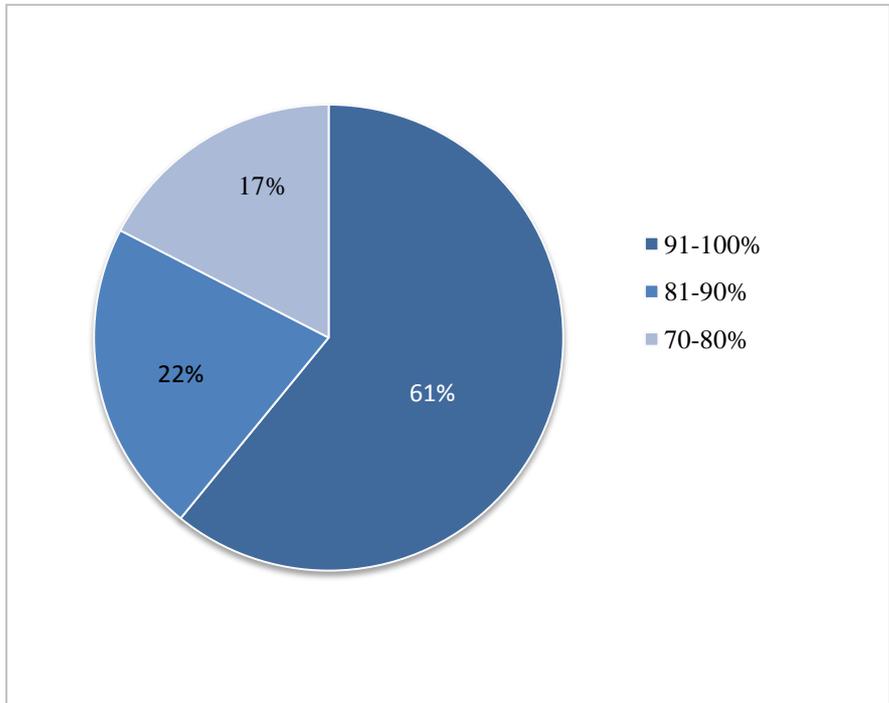


Figure 3.5 Intensity of identification

As is immediately evident, participants reported very high levels of identification with the group at the time of their participation. Sixty-one percent of participants indicated that during their group involvement their sense of self was merged 90–100% with the group. A further 22% rated their group identification between 81–90%, with the remaining 17% rating 70–80%. No participant rated themselves as below 70%, which is extraordinary in itself. The high ratings were consistent across all types of ideology groups.

3.5.4 Length of time in group

All of the participants were involved with their respective groups for more than 12 months, with the average being approximately seven years, but the most common duration being two years. The longest period of involvement was over 20 years and the shortest was one year. As can be seen in Figure 3.6, 32% of participants remained in their groups for one to two years, 16% for three to five years, 36% for six to ten years, and 16% for over ten years. These figures are slightly higher than usually cited in the literature, where there is often a higher turnover in the early years (Andersen, 2010; Bjorgo, 2009, 2013; Chowdhury & Hearne, 2008; Noricks, 2009a; Wright, 1987). This may be because the participants were not a random sample of all former extremists, but a

self-identified sample of those who have disengaged. In order for someone to identify as such, they are likely to have had some significant level of involvement, probably for some length of time. Conversely, the majority of people who come into contact with radical or extreme groups and do not participate in any extended way are unlikely to think of themselves as a former member of such a group. In any case, the significant duration of involvement is helpful for this research because disengagement is the core focus, and a person can only really be said to disengage if they have substantially engaged in the first instance.

There was no simple explanation as to why, in this sample, some stayed involved in their extremist group longer than others. Lena left her left-wing extremist group after two years to join another extremist group; so in some ways she did not disengage from violent extremism at that time, but rather shifted across to a different, equally extreme, cause. Freya and Rick stayed in their respective RWE groups for between five and ten years because their entire lives were entangled. Both made multiple attempts to leave before they actually did so successfully.

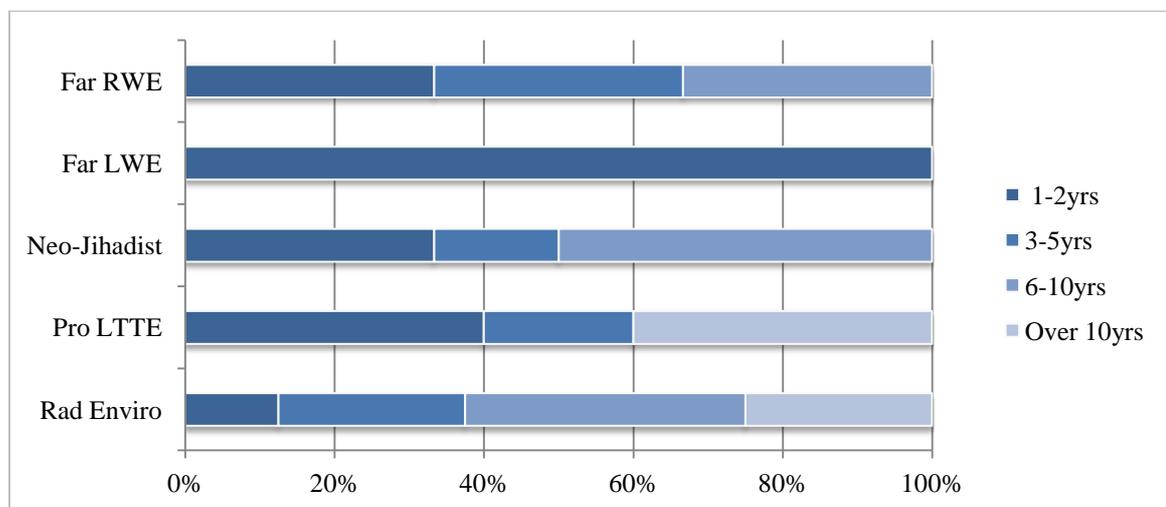


Figure 3.6 Length of involvement by ideology type

Those involved in actual combat in their pro-LTTE ideology groups, such as Oppila and Wasan, stayed a significantly shorter time than did non-fighters, Thennan and Bagyam, who were ideologically extreme and committed but whose involvement was non-combative (e.g. logistical, training or financial). Oli was not a militant but early in his involvement he worked directly with the militant cadres, and directly witnessed the

violence from the LTTE towards other Tamil resistance groups and Tamil civilians. He left after less than two years.

Kalim stayed in his neo-jihadist group for over ten years and still mourns his separation from the group. He was socially isolated before joining and remains so after leaving. The sense of belonging he gained from this group was immeasurable for him, and was definitely the reason why he stayed so long. Bilal married into his neo-jihadists group so he had a complicated network of family and friendship relationships to disentangle before he could leave, which took over five years to achieve. Bari also had other family members involved in his neo-jihadist group so this was a strong barrier to departure. Taqi joined a Salafi extremist group in prison for protection and because it justified his existing criminal activities, once he was out of prison he had less need for the group and recognised it was “*just another hustle*”. Bakar on the other hand thinks he would have stayed indefinitely and gone on to jihadi training if he had not had a breakdown after two years.

The former radical environmentalists varied in terms of how long they stayed involved in radical direct-action. Seven of the eight have remained actively involved in the mainstream environmental movement after leaving their more radical group. The eighth, Nadia, is disappointed in herself that she has not remained in the cause and recently resolved to get involved again (in mainstream activities). This was the most politicised ideology category — they all joined for political reasons, with or without additional motivations. So it is not surprising that they remain involved in the cause after leaving radical activism. Radical environmentalism is more episodic and campaign-like in nature than the other ideology categories. For example, a campaign might focus on a particular region or goal for a couple of months or even years. The groups form and reform around these campaigns rather than around a group *per se*, as is more the case for the LTTE, RWE and neo-jihadist activities. Therefore, it is easier for radical environmentalists to take a break without abandoning the cause. In some ways this may make it easier to sustain involvement over an extended period of time. If it is a cultural norm to move from campaign to campaign with different group compositions then in terms of group dynamics it makes it easier both to leave, and to return. This was certainly the case for Dean and Ed who participated in direct-action campaigns for more than a decade. Eric, Daphne and Barrie on the other hand had a more intense experience. These

three were each in pivotal leadership roles and completely immersed at the campaign level as well as building the movement in-between. They stayed for eight to nine years and all three burnt-out emotionally and physically. Sean and Nadia had a ‘rite of passage’ involvement that was transformative in their own lives but restricted by their exposure to the movement, which was moderated by their time at university. Both remain passionate about environmental issues but have moved onto mainstream careers and identities more than the other participants. Rob was a lot older when he got involved in radical environmentalism and lasted only a couple of years because of personality clashes with the leadership of the group.

The numbers are too small to draw firm conclusions but certainly those who had exposure to actual violence and its consequences disengaged sooner than those who did not. The other pattern was among those who were genuinely committed to the politics of their group (as opposed to adopting the ideology as a consequence of joining the group for other primary motivations). When some of the more ideologically motivated environmentalists and pro-LTTE participants became disillusioned with the groups, they left the extremist group to pursue a related cause utilising nonviolent and/or legal methods. As will be seen later in Chapter 6 it is also the case that those who stayed longer had more challenges in adjusting to ‘normal’ life after leaving.

3.5.5 Length of time since leaving

One’s perspective changes with time and so it is relevant to inquire about how much time has elapsed since the participants left their respective groups. If themes emerge despite a range of latency times, then this strengthens the validity of the themes. The briefest time since departure was one year, and the greatest was over 20 years. The average time lapse was 11 years and the most common was six years, evident in Figure 3.7.

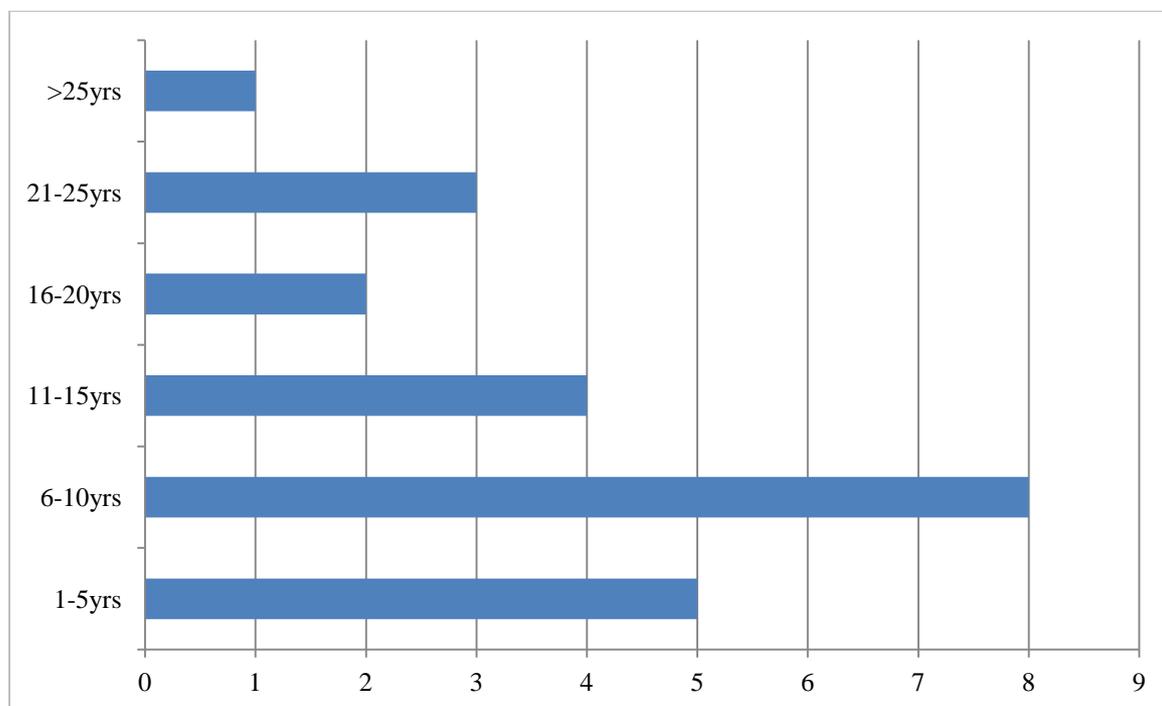


Figure 3.7 Year lapse between leaving and interview

3.6 Why people get involved

Asking a former extremist why they joined an extremist group is like asking a person why they fell in love. It might be one of the most important experiences of their life, and they certainly have agency in it, but there is rarely a simple, logical or singular answer. And whilst at the time it might feel ‘perfect’ relationship, sometimes looking back years later, a person cannot fathom how he or she made their choices. Becoming a member of an extremist group or movement is emotional, socially moderated and involves multiple complex motivations that reflect the unique combination of the individual and the particular group at a given point in time of their life.

Understanding why and how someone becomes involved does not lend itself to a checklist, and whilst a one-word motivation can be cited or imputed, it does not really capture the full explanation. In line with this, very few of the participants were able to give a clear response to the question of why they joined a violent or radical political group, preferring instead to reflect on their experience and give lengthy descriptions of what was going on in their life at the time. It also became evident that for most, the engagement, or radicalisation process, took place incrementally over a period of time, and was ultimately a sequence of smaller aggregate decisions that culminated in involvement.

To provide an overview summary the researcher constructed Figure 3.8 by allocating three points for each participant's primary reason¹⁷, two points for their secondary reason and one point for their tertiary reason, and then adjusted for the number of people in each ideology group to produce a weighted visual representation of participants' reasons for joining an extremist group.

Figure 3.8 makes it clear that there are multiple motivations for joining, within as well as between individuals, but also demonstrates a relatively small number of motivations overall, though this manifests in an almost infinite number of different pathways in real life. It is evident that ideas were particularly important for the former militant Tamil participants and for the former radical environmentalists. Ideas and ideology played a less significant role in attracting former neo-jihadist participants. On the other hand, belonging was highly motivating for the former neo-jihadist, former far-right and former far-left extremists. Adventure was a drawcard across all the extremist ideology groups, particularly for the former radical environmentalists and the far-left extremist, as well as for the far-right extremists, though to a lesser extent. Peers were cited as a motivating force for the former radical environmentalists and the neo-jihadists, highlighting the role that social relations can play in radicalisation. Only the former Tamil militants indicated that they joined as a reaction to oppression and violence, and only former neo-jihadist participants married into their extreme group.

¹⁷ Their reasons were derived from any direct answers as well as an IPA thematic extraction from the narrative accounts of how and why they joined their group.

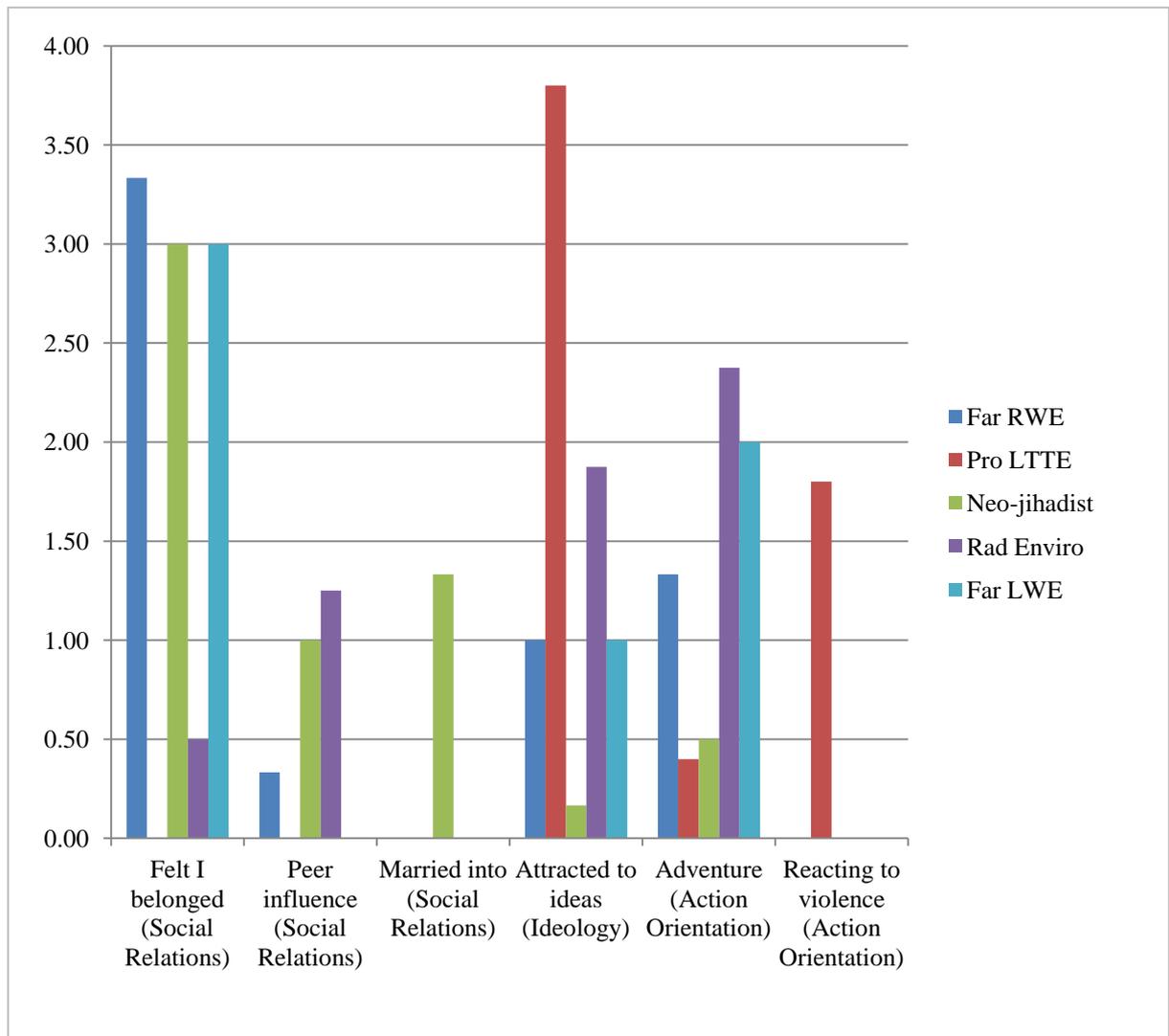


Figure 3.8 Reasons given for joining from participants

3.7 Summary

As is evident from the vignettes, the 22 participants are not homogeneous on any dimension apart from the fact that they share a reintegration experience in the context of living in a Western democracy after disengaging from extremism. As individuals they vary enormously across dimensions of ideological belief, level of commitment to those beliefs, age of joining, duration of involvement, and gender. Even those from within the same ideology type are not necessarily similar. They were in for a short period of time on average, but there are notable exceptions that skew the mean. Their levels of identification with the group and its beliefs, values and norms at the time were exceptionally high, but almost all had dropped their identification since leaving.

Although the research interest is in the phenomenon of disengagement, it was difficult, even disrespectful in some cases, to expect the participants to speak openly about their disengagement experience without first understanding the critical importance of the group, the cause, and the belief they had torn away from. In fact participants made a point of emphasising the importance of explaining their engagement experience as contextual backdrop to their disengagement story. For this reason an overview of what they had to say about radicalisation was included at the end of this chapter in order to lead directly into the Chapter 4 where IPA will be used to distil the constituent elements of disengagement. Chapter 5 will merge the findings with the extant literature and Chapter 6 will present a new model of disengagement.

Chapter 4: Analysis

This large chapter presents 22 perspectives on disengagement from radical and violent extremism. Collectively, the participants' accounts give rise to 15 distinct but interconnected disengagement themes, which cluster into five domains. The domains are: 'Social Relations', 'Coping', 'Identity', 'Ideology', and 'Action Orientation', and are listed with their themes in Table 4.1.

| Domain | Theme |
|--------------------|---|
| Social Relations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disillusionment with Group Members • Disillusionment with Leaders • Relations with 'Others' |
| Coping | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical and Psychological Issues • Social Support • Resilience, Skills and Coping |
| Identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in Group Identity • Emergence of Personal Identity • Alternate Social Identity |
| Ideology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disillusionment with Radical Ideas • Find Own Ideas • Acceptance of Difference |
| Action Orientation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disillusionment with Radical Methods • Stop or Reduce Radical Methods • Prosocial Engagement in Society |

Table 4.1 Domains and themes for leaving extremism and subsequent social integration

This chapter is devoted to discussing these domains and themes in detail. Before this however, some overarching comments on the complex issue of why people leave extremism will be made. Consistent with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, discussion of the wider literature and how the results compare with other research data will be presented in an integrated way in Chapter 5.

4.1 Why do people leave?

Despite the damage that extremist groups can do to the wider community and to their own members, such groups engage with a complex array of social and personal needs, including providing purpose and meaning. The more intense and enmeshed the relationship between the person and the group, the more intense the emotions involved in the separation are, and the bigger the hole afterwards. Although it was not the focus of this research, the interviews in this study support much of the existing literature on radicalisation and corroborate that from the perspective of the group member, being in an extremist group is very much about comrades and cause, belonging and purpose, battling injustice, and changing the world. It can also be about hatred and revenge, rejection and anger. It is often about power, threat, and being part of something righteous. Above all else, it is about identity. When you are in it, it can be powerful, deeply satisfying and, at times, intoxicating; which is precisely why it is not easy to leave. For those who cannot rekindle or create an alternate identity and role, life afterwards can seem empty, lonely and difficult. Which poses a compelling question: why do people leave?

As will be described in this chapter, there are a myriad of ways people leave radical groups. This reflects the complexity of motivations for involvement combined with the nature of the doubts that lead a person to realise their fit in the group is not so good any more. In the sample of 22 former extremist group members, there was enormous variation in how and why the participants left their respective groups. There were also enormous differences in the extent to which they remained disengaged over time, whether they changed their views as well as their behaviour, and whether they integrated positively into wider society. In almost every case there were multiple reasons given for leaving, reflecting the complexity of this major decision in a person's life. A weighted average for each reason was calculated across all participants¹⁸.

¹⁸ Three points were allocated for the primary reason, two points for secondary reasons and one point for tertiary reasons, per person.

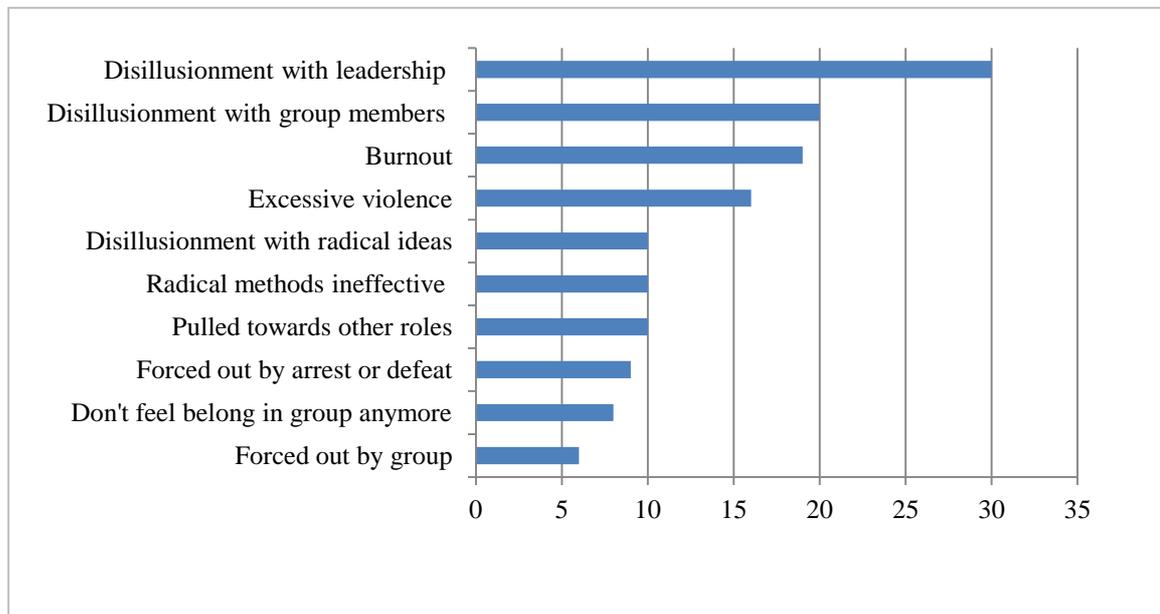


Figure 4.1 Reasons for leaving

Disillusionment with the behaviour of group leaders was the most commonly cited reason for leaving, followed closely by disillusionment with the behaviour of group members and then physical/psychological burnout. Closely related but separately referenced was the detrimental impact of using violence, labelled ‘excessive violence’ in Figure 4.1. This reflects the reality of actually using violence in the case of some former neo-jihadists, and the accumulated effect of violence in the case of former militant Tamil separatists and former Right-Wing Extremists. As distinct from the excessive violence, which has already been captured, other participants became frustrated with the ineffectiveness of radical methods in achieving their goals.

Once disillusioned by in-group behaviour, burnt-out, repelled by violence, or frustrated with the lack of impact from radical methods, other activities and roles became relevant and attractive. Examples include paid employment, returning to a career, having a relationship or family and/or pursuing other interests. Amongst the former neo-jihadists and the former RWEs, disappointment in the leadership and fellow group members led swiftly to a dismissal of the group narrative, and departure soon after. Given these participants largely joined for personal and social reasons, and not for political or ideological reasons, it is consistent that they became more attuned to social dimensions rather than ideological or methodological ones. Amongst the former radical environmentalists and the former militant Tamil separatists, the ineffectiveness of their methods ultimately prompted their exit. This can be understood in the context of the fact

that these two types of ideology group, more so than the others, had concretely defined goals and it would have been evident whether their methods were working or not. A number of the participants were arrested or pushed out of their group. Whilst this might mark the point at which they stopped contact with the group, it was not necessarily when they psychologically disengaged. In some cases there were multiple arrests and imprisonments before a sustained withdrawal from extremism occurred. The category of 'don't feel I belong in group anymore' captured those participants who felt they did not belong but could not attribute their dis-identification to any particular reason.

As mentioned already, there were multiple reasons provided by every participant indicating complex non-linear motivations, belying any simplistic 'reason' for leaving. In most cases there were major time delays between the dawning of an awareness that the fit was not so good anymore and their actual departure. In most cases there was significant distress after leaving, and a period of months to years of adjustment before finding a sustainable way of living in the non-radical world. At the time of these interviews, which varied from one to 23 years post exit, some participants still had not yet achieved this. The protracted, ongoing nature of disengagement from extremism supports Horgan's notion that it is a phase, a process, rather than an event. Certainly this was the overwhelming experience of the participants in this study.

The remainder of this chapter explores the complexities of this process of disengagement, from early doubts, to a desire to leave, to actually exiting and the difficult adjustment phase afterwards as the person re-enters society and attempts to locate a role and alternate social identity where they feel they are safe, they belong and can live with their beliefs. Every participant reported significant changes across each of the five domains, but the specific combination of themes varied significantly across individuals and across the ideology groups. In short, there is a wide spectrum of outcomes for former extremists. Outcomes range from those who speak out overtly against their previous beliefs and actions, to those who dwell on the fringes of society, no longer belonging to an extremist group but not belonging to mainstream society either. There is a myriad of possible outcomes between these polar positions, and indeed the outcomes are fluid, not static, so are not really permanent outcomes in any case.

In a paper outlining standards expected of IPA research, for a study of this size Smith recommends extracts from at least three participants for every theme as well as a

measure of prevalence of themes, or extracts from half the sample for every theme (Smith, 2011, p.17). The prevalence of each theme is noted here in Table 4.2, as well as in its relevant section in Chapter 4. Between three and six extracts are provided for each of the 15 themes, yielding between nine and twelve examples for each of the three domains, and well satisfying Smith’s criteria. A full matrix recording which specific participants reported which themes can be found in Appendix F, and a table noting which participants were referenced in this chapter in Appendix G.

| Themes | Number & percentage of participants reporting each theme | | Number of participants referenced for each theme |
|--|--|-------------|--|
| Social Relations | 22 | 100% | 10 (45%) |
| Disillusionment with Leaders | 12 | 55% | 3 |
| Disillusionment with Group Members | 14 | 64% | 3 |
| Relations with ‘Others’ | 14 | 64% | 4 |
| Coping | 22 | 100% | 12 (55%) |
| Physical and Psychological Issues | 19 | 86% | 3 |
| Social Support | 19 | 86% | 3 |
| Resilience, Skills and Coping | 20 | 91% | 6 |
| Identity | 22 | 100% | 9 (41%) |
| Reduction in Group Identity | 16 | 73% | 3 |
| Emergence of Personal Identity | 20 | 91% | 3 |
| Alternate Social Identity | 22 | 100% | 3 |
| Ideology | 22 | 100% | 12 (55%) |
| Disillusionment with Radical Ideas | 15 | 68% | 5 |
| Modify own Ideas | 22 | 100% | 4 |
| Plurality and Acceptance of Difference | 8 | 36% | 3 |
| Action Orientation | 22 | 100% | 11 (50%) |
| Disillusionment with Radical Methods | 14 | 64% | 4 |
| Stop or Reduce Radical Methods | 14 | 64% | 3 |
| Prosocial Engagement in Society | 19 | 86% | 4 |
| TOTAL | 11 | | 54 (49%) |
| | 0 | | |

Table 4.2 Prevalence of themes

These different combinations will now be discussed making extensive reference to the interview quotes, and as already mentioned, comparisons with other research will be made in the subsequent chapter.

4.2 Social Relations

The interviews with former extremists in this study indicate that in a tight-knit, underground, mission-oriented radical group, social relationships within the group and with out-group members are absolutely critical. They are critical not only to the formation and maintenance of the group as demonstrated by existing research, but as will be seen, in the motivation for disengagement. Further, social relations are at the heart of how a person renegotiates relationships with the rest of society, especially if they belonged to a separatist group or one that promoted hatred towards out-groups. The first two themes of the ‘Social Relations’ domain, ‘Disillusionment with Leaders’ and ‘Disillusionment with Group Members’ were two of the most commonly cited reasons for actually leaving. The third theme, ‘Relations with ‘Others’’, can be viewed as a partial proxy for deradicalisation in that having positive or neutral relations with previously hated others is an indication of pluralism, as well as desistance from radical methods.

4.2.1 Disillusionment with Leaders

It is to be expected in any group that some members will take issue with the leadership. Participants from each type of ideology group frequently cited poor leadership as a reason for leaving. Fifty-five percent of the participants raised disillusionment with group leaders as a theme. The absence of good leadership was mentioned in passing by all former RWEs. Most of the neo-jihadists were bitterly disappointed in their leaders’ behaviour and it strongly influenced their decision to leave. Therefore, examples from Bilal and Bari are presented in this section. Two of the pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam participants were child soldiers they both mentioned their disenchantment when they realised there was no real political or strategic leadership; Wasan’s example is presented here.

Bilal was deeply disenchanted by the disrespectful behaviour of the leaders of his neo-jihadist group, and this played a significant role in his eventual decision to leave. Within months of joining through his family members, Bilal was engaged to the leader’s daughter and placed in the security detail of the organisation. He soon realised this role was more about crime and spying on other group members than protecting Islam. When he finally raised the courage to question the leader about the Qur’anic justification, he

was sent to Pakistan purportedly to learn Arabic and study Islam. The leader's own wife, Bilal's mother-in-law, even warned him off:

She actually told me, "Look, you know, you got to settle down, you know, watch out my husband might lead you in a different way. Make up your own mind." She pulled me aside and she told me that, and I was like so confused after that.

Bilal was confused and scared, but as an 18 year old youth with his own family interstate, he complied with the leader, who was soon to be his father-in-law. The Pakistan trip was not for religious study but jihadi training before it was illegal in Australia to do so. On his return to Australia he felt even more trapped in the group by the marriage and social isolation from other supports, but was clearly disillusioned by the leader:

I just truly think it was nothing but a power trip, because Sheikh wasn't ever a person that has any fairness in him ... And that's what drives me crazy, like, you know, you're a person that commits, you know — you command people to commit murder, you command people to hurt other people.

He's not, he's not a commander of war, you know. If you're preaching, if you're a preacher of God, as you claim, God doesn't tell you to do any of that. And God says "I'm merciful, I'm the most merciful, forgive and forget", and he doesn't have any of that in him. He doesn't have any forgiveness or forgetfulness, you know what I mean. You hurt Sheikh, and he'll remember you for a long time, do you know what I mean? He's that type of person.

Bari had joined his group at the urging of his brother-in-law. As a convert he was seeking religious authenticity. Therefore, a large part of the reason Bari eventually left was because of the disrespectful and rude behaviour of the leader. He was a sheikh that they "all looked up to". Bari felt let down because his sheikh did not act with respect and integrity according to his own teachings:

We'd invite him over... but instead of just coming with him and whoever, he'd bring half the mosque, or half the association. So we were in this two bedroom flat and it's full and not only that, his characteristics – we all shrugged this off, because, "Oh it's him, it's him" and he'll clean up after. There'd be 20 men in my

house, in the lounge room, to [my wife's] surprise, she's there making tea. Throw everything we've got in our cupboards out there and you know, when they eat these seeds? They eat some of this, they were thrown all over the room and at the end of it the table is just covered in mess ... It's our home, show some respect! But again, we shrugged it off. Other little things like I lent him one of my cars. Right in front of me he has reversed it into a truck in the car park, got out and gave me the keys and didn't offer to fix it. Like, I wouldn't have made him pay for it, but just that's rude. Like, I really didn't like those things.

It was when Bari began to see the self-serving nature of the violence ordered by the sheikh that he really began to question how much he really fitted into the group. The sheikh he said, *"trains his boys up to be little soldiers and robots for him"*, and when someone disobeys him he *"tries to get something done about it, like a gangster like thing"* citing an example where he ordered someone's legs to be broken. Although he did not like the fact that in the group *"you're not allowed to use your own brain, just do what he says and don't question it"*, it was eventually the sheikh's pride, boastfulness and generally 'un-Islamic' character that broke the spell for Bari.

Wasan was a child soldier with the LTTE and in his interview he lamented the lack of structure, guidance and strategic direction within the leadership of the LTTE. He was disappointed to realise that the Tamil Tigers were not politically informed or strategic, and was particularly disappointed in the *"cult"* leader Villupillai Prabhakaran:

The way the LTTE operated themselves, it also didn't help the cause because it's like adventure. Once the adventure is over, it's nothing. There is no political picture, they don't teach you any politics, it's just that adventure and that's it.

It was just that way the organisation operated, because when I joined the movement I started reading about the other freedom struggles and we noticed that there was some sort of committee, there was a process for decision-making and everything but that's not there, this is like a one man band. It's like Prabhakaran and his movement and we thought, 'well this is not going to last long'...

He also pointed to the false confidence the diaspora drew from Prabhakaran, which translated into international support for the militants, which in Wasan's view prolonged the war unnecessarily for decades. He thought it was because he himself was

more highly educated than the average LTTE comrade that he had expectations beyond the excitement of battle, and why he was disappointed that the leader was not more strategic. He said:

Personally, I met him once and after that I lost all the confidence in him. I knew that he's hungry with the war and that's it. He had no political sense or anything else, so that is one thing ... He became a cult leader and the diaspora thought that he is invincible and he will win the war.

4.2.2 Disillusionment with Group Members

It was disappointment with the behaviour of fellow group members that contributed to a sense that many former extremists did not fit in their group so well. This theme was present in two-thirds (64%) of participants' disengagement accounts, and particularly evident in the stories of those who had joined for personal or social reasons. For this reason it was a dominant theme with the former neo-jihadists and the former RWEs who tended to join for personal rather than political reasons, and is evident in the experiences of Kalim, Bari, and Freya. Although in-fighting and conflict with other group members was not absent in the stories of former radical environmentalists or militant Tamil separatists, it was not on the same scale as the other groups, and none left primarily because of it.

Kalim had been tasked with carrying out a lethal attack on enemy targets in Australia. Although he carried out preliminary activities associated with the operation and was later charged with terrorism offences, he was adamant in his interview, and court testimony, that he never intended to carry out the plan. He was surprised by the change in attitude from other group members when he tried to withdraw from the operation. Most of all he wanted to remain in the group because it provided a sense of family, purpose, and happiness for the first time in his life. He was hurt when the group turned against him:

I just wasn't the same with them because they'd gotten quite nasty with me at various stages between my arrival back in Australia and finally sort of breaking up with them. There'd been some nasty moments between us ... Verbal and threatening, yeah. And I didn't expect that kind of behaviour... I didn't see that behaviour as being part of what I had been brought up within the group.

From his language it can be seen that Kalim clearly views the group very personally. He talks of being “*brought up*” in the group, a clear comparison to his own childhood with an abusive alcoholic father after his mother died when he was young. He also talks about “*breaking up*” with the group, a phrase usually reserved for relationships of emotional importance. Both of these linguistic patterns emphasise the emotional intensity of his separation from the group. He described leaving the group as follows:

It was very difficult for me to leave the group. I mean I'd been with that group for some time and to all intents and purposes they were like my family. I hadn't had that kind of closeness with people really before, or after. So that's quite difficult ... I really don't know of anything else that can fulfil me as much as that did, as much as being a member of that group did.

If he could somehow rejoin the group in its early state, Kalim would have done so “*absolutely*”. He still grieves the loss of the friendships and sense of belonging.

Already feeling let down by the behaviour of the group leader, Bari was disappointed by the lack of compassion of fellow group members. He had travelled to Saudi Arabia with some group members and taken his wife and elderly mother-in-law. His mother-in-law got lost in a crowded place and he was hurt, deeply disappointed and angered by his peers who mocked him when he became worried:

But I am more troubled with the way they deal with things and the way they react with things. I'll give you an example, and this is a silly example, but when we went to Saudi – we lost my mother-in-law amongst however many million people there. My mother-in-law has – like, she collapses a lot ... I've asked and looking and looking and looking and started freaking out. And [group member] laughed. He laughed, like he chuckled about it and probably didn't mean it the way I took it. But that's the last thing I want. “You're not worried about this woman? It's not a joke, you should take it seriously”. I take it seriously and I know myself, and that really pissed me off.

Bari was meant to travel onto Pakistan to do jihadi training with the rest of the group members but after this and other similar incidents he withdrew from the training and went elsewhere with his wife instead. The combination of disillusionment in the

leaders and disillusionment in members of his group precipitated the end of his involvement in the group.

Freya was sixteen when she joined a RWE group. Despite having a strong sense of being connected to the movement and its ideas overall, she said she “*never felt safe with anyone*” in the group because it “*could just change so fast*”. Like every other participant, she acknowledged that there were negative aspects of being in an extremist group. In particular, she highlighted the drama, immaturity and violence of a group filled with heavy-drinking troubled teenagers:

All the drama all of the time, because even – it’s not just that the group – that it’s a very disorganised movement, and there’s a lot of problem with who is the big boss and stuff like that. This also – it’s a movement that at least at that time was made up of teenagers ... and the backstabbing ... never really knowing if this is a good day or is it a bad day, and sort of it’s like high school times 100 ... Especially amongst us girls, I never really felt that uncomfortable around the guys but around the girls, because we were few, and you always had to sort of prove yourself, that you belonged and that you were worthy. So the drama amongst the girls in this group was just – there was certain days you just wanted to go home and pull your cover over your head ... It was constant, it never ended.

For Freya, not knowing whom to trust inside or outside the group led to chronic paranoia and alcohol abuse. She became exhausted from the vigilance required to cope in this kind of social environment. The unpredictability and violence was from within the group as much as from outside the group:

Being insecure about some people that you knew a month ago and you were great friends, then the next time you saw them you could get beaten up ... You have to be on your guard in regard to your friends, but you also have everybody outside the group that you get taught that you have to be on your guard against at least, and against left-wing extremists, and everybody is an enemy ... It was exhausting, you get paranoid.

She also became disillusioned because no one was living up to the actual values of the ideology:

Because it got hard not to see what was the – the talk and what we did was different from each other, and nobody lived by own rules and ... So you were a bit disillusioned by people kind of not being as – being inconsistent or being hypocritical in what they did.

It was once Freya realised that it was not just that they were not living up to the ideals, but they probably did not even believe in the principles at all, that her disillusionment peaked and she decided to leave:

At the beginning I probably thought they weren't representing it very well, but the ideas were still there ... Yeah and I got really upset when I actually realised that many of them didn't believe the ideas at all, they just didn't have anywhere else to go so they stayed put anyway. But then the lifestyle that we had, because it was a lot of partying, it was a lot of drama all of the time, and people fighting with each other and stuff like that, that also took its toll, and that's when I sort of decided that I had to leave, I couldn't stay there because my life would just go "poof" if I didn't ... I thought of it as to be well I had to go, I couldn't be around them, they were a bad influence on me, I didn't want to turn out to be an alcoholic, or start with drugs or something like that, you just had to break it off with them.

4.2.3 Relations with 'Others'

Leaving an extreme group, especially if the person has been involved in violent activities, involves more than leaving important but mainstream identity groups. Clearly there is far more to it than resignation letters, a different job, changing friendship circles or moving house. At a minimum, societal integration after leaving extremism involves changes in how a person relates to and interacts with other people. This was an important issue raised by two thirds (14) of the participants.

It was less of a problem for the former radical environmentalists because they generally did not have hostile or hateful attitudes towards 'out-groups' in society, and had few enemies *per se*. That said, they still had to adjust their approach to relationships when they disengaged from direct-action lifestyles, so the example of Sean is briefly discussed. A much greater shift in social relations with others is required of former neo-jihadists and former RWEs because their ideological narrative involves much more hatred and vitriol.

Kalim for example cannot relate to non-Salafists at all. The only way he can live in Australia “*is not to have any contact with the other side*”, meaning all non-fundamentalist and non-Muslims. Relations with previously hated others is also relevant in the case of former militant Tamil separatists, but moderated by the fact that all these participants recognise that the ‘enemy’ was the oppressive government and its military force, not the Sinhalese people. Nonetheless, tensions remain between pro- and anti-LTTE Tamils in diaspora populations and these relationships must be negotiated, as illustrated in a substantial extract from Oli’s interview. Freya is representative of the three RWEs who have all dramatically changed their views and their interactions with mainstream society, so an example from her experience is also used to illustrate this theme.

In the past Sean refused to spend time with people who did not share his far-left political views, yet now he can do so whilst respecting their different opinion, even if he still disagrees. He described his new way of relating to people who were previously classified as out-group as follows:

Lots of the guys I go kayaking with are into real estate and whatnot, it doesn't stop me from taking the piss out of them ... I would have in the past have been really against spending time with people who didn't really strongly share my political views. And I don't think that necessarily means I've compromised on my views. Yeah, but it's just for me, a recognition that well most of these people, if not all, share my values anyway and they're just kind of — you know, you're being, and this might sound a bit arrogant, but they're just a bit misled a bit in terms of their life really doesn't accord with what their values are but the society around them expects them to do something else. They're just going along with it.

This does not stop him from trying to change them. He admitted, “*well I do seek to try and change them but I don't invest too much energy*”, and he does not use radical methods like before.

Freya is working on how she relates to others since she has left the RWE group, and this is a work in progress for her. Individually she has a few friends and has reconciled to some extent with her family. In terms of relating to organisations and services of broader society that she previously rejected the legitimacy of, she explained:

I never really had gotten to trust back to society, to for example the police, or social services and stuff like that, never really returned even though I have had great help from them, and support from them, I never really came back — I'm still a sceptic ... Yeah suspicious of them, but more being critical and trying to enjoy what democracy actually is, the right to question what they do. So I feel I might not trust them in everything but when it comes to that I will let them do what they need to do.

Oli spoke about the social isolation he experienced because he was “*anti-LTTE*”. He thought that Sri Lankan Tamils living in Australia were more inclined to view him as a “*traitor*” than Tamils in Sri Lanka:

If you are against the LTTE you would become a traitor and you know, yes – very emotional because people had to - so, more pressure in here than even sometimes in Sri Lanka, but because the people come over here need friends, so if they've been isolated they can't stand that ... because I'm carrying this anti-LTTE campaign there's always among the Sinhalese community in here there was a bit - they have a respect kind of – they knew me and things like that, but my stock [was] very low in the Tamil community.

It has been easier for Oli to form relationships with Sinhalese Sri Lankans than with pro-LTTE Tamil Sri Lankans in Australia. He holds no grudge against Sinhalese people at all, even though it was an overwhelmingly Sinhalese government in Sri Lanka that severely oppressed the Tamil people and was at war with the militant Tamil separatists. He explained it as follows:

So then when I went to Sri Lanka ... that racial feeling towards the Sinhalese is disappeared, because I can see this is a government situation, government is doing it not the supporting – the Sinhalese aren't responsible, so I can be able to see – distinct, yeah. Then when I come to India, I could see India how the people can, so many different people can live together, well together. Then after coming to Australia, I mean it's – I mean I don't want, I mean okay, I speak Tamil, but I don't want to be, you know, I just can be anything here, I'm just basically my human thing – human.

Oli's previous conceptualisation of in-group and out-group has completely changed. Not only has this enabled him to form relations with members of the former enemy group, but to view all people as members of the same human identity group. To completely recalibrate one's social relations as Oli has done is quite remarkable. To do so requires an ability to deal with any mental or physical health issues, social support and a personal resilience that facilitates coping rather than non-coping responses. These aspects of disengagement and re-entry to society will now be discussed in the next section.

4.3 Coping

Being in an extremist group, of any form, is generally not good for a person's mental health in the long-term. Anxiety, depression, trauma, paranoia, burnout, psychotic breakdown and emotional breakdowns were reported by at least one member in each type of ideology group. It was more prevalent in groups that used coercion and violence for internal discipline, such as the RWE groups and some of the neo-jihadist groups. Former extremists who experienced physical hardship also reported a higher incidence of mental and physical issues, implicating former radical environmentalists and LTTE soldiers. A minority of participants reported that they joined their extreme or radical groups with existing problems. For these people, aggressive relations with out-groups, strong expectations of conformity, in combination with disconnection from external social supports frequently contributed to deterioration of existing issues.

The themes that make up the 'Coping' domain are 'Physical and Psychological Issues', 'Social Support', and 'Resilience, Skills and Coping'. These are closely related to the 'Social Relations' domain themes already presented, but sufficiently independent to warrant their own inclusion. Most people seek support from other people to deal with personal problems, and additionally, many problems arising within an extremist group are related to relationships with other members. Individuals come with their own particular combination of psychological and physical vulnerabilities, as well as with their own suite of existing social support. A similarly wide variation of resilience and coping skills means these elements combine in unique ways to assist or hinder disengagement and reintegration.

4.3.1 Physical and Psychological Issues

As mentioned already, personal issues tend to be amplified within an extremist context, and even the hardest individual has a coping limit. Eighty-two percent of the participants emphasised the impact of hitting one's breaking point under enormous pressure applied by the group internally, physical pressure, or the stress in reaction to conflict with wider society. Because Daphne was particularly articulate in recalling her physical and emotional exhaustion, her experience is presented here at length. Bakar describes a sudden severe psychological breakdown from which he says he has mostly recovered. Oppila discloses her post-traumatic reactions to violence and death many years after leaving the LTTE. All three former RWE members reported significant problems with depression, paranoia, trauma, and alcohol abuse.

Daphne became totally immersed in direct-action environmentalism. She stopped doing everything else, worked long hours unpaid, and literally lived in the forests for months at a time, often dealing with disease and malnourishment. She assumed a leadership role for various specific campaigns at the time. She paints a vivid picture of what it is like to work so hard and yet achieve so little in the face of hostility:

[The] local community's generally not on side, the media's not on side, then you basically get into this 'us versus them' mentality and that just can't last. And you see the forest that you're trying to save bulldozed ... So you leave completely depressed, and feeling – I guess, I see people leaving feeling like the work they did was not only unsuccessful, but it went unrecognised, invalidated, and actually was looked upon with derision.

Disempowering at every level, and groups would fall out, and a lot of drugs and alcohol — a lot of drugs and alcohol in most blockading scenes ... Yeah, so I've seen a lot of people leave, and it's usually with bitterness and a disempowered kind of taste in their mouth. Or, I see a lot of people who dip into it for a few years and then get to that point where I did.

After several years she became physically and emotionally exhausted:

There's a constant feeling of being on the edge and that adrenaline you feel ... Being hyper-vigilant, and then if you add to that the very real trauma, like getting injured or attacked or bashed, or the actual physical fighting.

I'd really burnt-out – I was told I was on the verge, brink of chronic fatigue syndrome. I was totally exhausted, now I look back at it. Physically, I'm still very much in recovery from it, I'm on this really strict no sugar, no nothing type diet because my guts haven't been the same since that campaign, just got completely out of whack. And emotionally I was really exhausted as well, but I didn't really recognise it, like I would now.

Totally depleted, Daphne eventually left direct-action environmentalism and accepted a paid job in a mainstream environmental activist organisation. Being a self-described overachiever, she wrote a book at the same time. In the busyness of her new position she did not take the time to address her physical or psychological problems, so these conditions deteriorated. In her new job Daphne felt bad for being paid, and bad for not working around the clock with the passion and commitment she previously invested. The sense of loss is also evident:

I just struggled with always feeling like I wasn't doing enough, like I wasn't good enough, even though the feedback I was getting was not that at all, it was basically I just was comparing it to the magic that we had in the earlier days.

Additionally, she reflected about the guilt that people feel when leaving:

People have a lot of guilt, deep guilt, kind of like religious guilt it seems, because environmentalism can often feel a bit like you're in a religion. There's a certain ethic and moral value system and set of norms ... It feels like they're abandoning their mates in the trench ... [There was] a huge sense of loss and grief when I left; [I had] was such fear around leaving, and guilt, around abandoning the movement.

Three years later, disappointed with herself and disillusioned with the leadership and co-workers in her organisation, she decided to leave. Daphne defines herself as leaving radical environmentalism when she finally addressed her health issues and found

a new path, not when she left the forest or the environmentalist job. Her new path will be discussed in later sections.

Bakar's extremist career was interrupted by an acute mental breakdown brought on by the pressure of maintaining a very tight ideological interpretation of the world. One day, when practicing the Qur'an, Bakar noticed, for the first time, "*an interpretation of contradiction in [a] sentence ... I got an idea that it contradicted what it said, and this was what developed a panic attack*". The panic attacks became additionally problematic because Bakar did not know from a religious perspective if they were sinful, or meant anything religiously. Looking back, Bakar interpreted the panic attacks as a crack in the previously impenetrable wall of radical Salafist doctrine.

It was a psychosomatic reaction on the pressure, it was definitely. It was not only the pressure of the religion, it was a lot of pressure from society. Being responsible for everything that you say and do at the same time as you are being accused for everything that is said or done in the name of Islam; at the same time as you're fighting your own natural needs. You see a fine woman, you hate yourself because you react. Attraction – you have attraction to her, like having dreams, even if the religion has aspects where it says you don't need to be hard on yourself, it should be easy, you still feel shameful. All these things together end up with a lot of pressure. And yeah, and the panic attacks, it was a reaction, the specific part that broke out the panic was a contradiction. My interpretation of this meaning was that it was contradictive error. [A] big argument in Islam against other religions is that the Qur'an never contradicts itself, while all the other religions [do].

He sought advice from the elders at the mosque. They said he was possessed by demons and recommended that he move to Kuwait for more intensive training. These responses did not make Bakar feel that he was being supported and as a result his mental state deteriorated even further. He developed additional psychological symptoms such as hallucinations and depression. The panic attacks became associated with religious rituals and were triggered each time he practiced:

I couldn't control it, and I was scared of – the thought that I might – that this experience might make me a doubter, start to doubt on my religion, scared the hell out of me ... and I was in fear of God's anger and punishment.

Neither Bakar nor his family had any history of mental illness, and he attributes this experience wholly to the pressure of the group doctrine and practice. He eventually left this group, sought respite in his family home, received psychiatric and psychological treatment and after three years was able to work and study again and make new friends.

After leaving the LTTE, Oppila was briefly reunited with her family before they sent her to a boarding school in India. She felt totally separate to the other girls and that she did not belong. She had had such a different teenage experience to them, and they did not know her background. She had nightmares and cried herself to sleep most nights. She has vivid memories of one death in particular: her best friend who was in the same militant unit:

I mean, yeah, she died in front – sudden ... It was one minute we were ready to cross the road, and she was just gone, you know. Yeah, it's not like you could go and stay and mourn over the body or whatever. Suddenly I'm yanked back in and I suddenly went into this complete – and all your thinking is what happened to the body, what happened to the body. And it was just – it was one of those things I don't think you ever, ever get over.

[Survivor guilt] kicked straight in. Like was I not worth – was I not good enough to die or was I not good enough to live with these people? I got angry at them, they all left me, how dare they – and it was just this whole thing and I sort of felt – I think, you know, when you're broken like that you sort of suddenly don't feel like the other people. You see, everybody else just got on [with life].

She spoke about suppressing doubts and making excuses for staying with the LTTE despite the death of her friend and other murders of group members for petty crimes:

Yes, and I think you can justify anything pretty much in your head, you know ... And a funny thing, because I guess, you know, like a battered wife, you know, you get beaten up by your husband and he says, "I love you, I really do love you", and

they're like, "Okay, I guess you do". And you sort of think, "What's the logic in this?" But you give yourself that justification I suppose ... Being mentally trapped and so you don't go ... It's funny how people can get mentally controlled.

This kind of rationalisation is well documented in the psychological literature where it is understood to be a mechanism that compels a person in an abusive relationship or difficult social setting to remain (Follingstad, Neckerman, & Vormbrock, 1988; Maikovich, 2005; Matz & Wood, 2005; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998; Walker, 2006). Once she left the Tigers Oppila felt very guilty about leaving her comrades behind, but international boarding school and then university in Australia placed physical and emotional distance between her and the group. Oppila's metaphor of a battered wife is pertinent, not just because of the psychological parallels with a group like the LTTE, but because her first husband was a very controlling man. Her own analysis is that she went from an over-controlled childhood where she could not speak out to her mother, to finding her voice in the LTTE, then back to a controlling marriage before finally working out how to have her say in a balanced way in a second, happy marriage. Despite this happy ending, decades after she left it all behind, she still has vivid nightmares, cannot play hide-and-seek with her children, over-reacts to loud noises in public and has intrusive thoughts on a daily basis about her children and husband dying.

4.3.2 Social Support

The role of social support in contemplating and then actually leaving an extremist group cannot be overestimated. This theme was present in 82% of the participant's stories. Whilst only three participants will be discussed, the overall pattern suggests that the presence or absence and quality of any social support is related to how a person copes with the transition into mainstream society, in spite of any psychological or physical health issues. Highlighting the importance of social support, former neo-jihadists Barrie and Kalim who are lacking in it, report difficulty coping with personal issues. Further, although both have left their respective radical movements, both have found it difficult to move on to anything else in their life in the absence of support. Bakar on the other hand, suffered a serious psychiatric breakdown during his extremist group involvement, but with the support of family and friends has made a significant recovery and is moving into a new phase in his life. Oppila credits her family for her survival and a new life path after leaving the LTTE at age 17, and Rick discusses the importance of family support in

leaving a RWE group. Extracts from these last three participants are presented to illustrate this theme.

Bakar received a significant amount of assistance when he left his extremist group. This was partly because he had a supportive family who activated pre-existing networks for him, and partly because he had not progressed to actual violence and thus the negative reaction of others towards him was not so great. Nonetheless, he talked about how hard it was to relearn the normal “*social rules [and] codes*”:

It wasn't easy to see new people, integrate with new people, but I was open [to be] helped in the long run. Even if there was pressure it was good to come out and see people ... But I still wasn't stable, I wasn't stable ... [People would think], “Is he stupid?”, because I had missed a lot of things, so many years. I could be very – simple stuff, you see, sit and have a coffee, I don't know. I'm not sure about what do you do when you sit, have a coffee and want to chill. Well you go there, buy the stuff, you bring it here, you sit, you chill. But I was like, “I'm not sure about it, am I doing this wrong?”

Overcoming panic attacks, depression, social anxiety or psychotic episodes is hard enough for many regular member of society, let alone for one who has returned from an extremist group teaching that society is wrong and evil. Bakar acknowledged the importance of professional treatment, but spoke at length about the centrality of family and friends:

I had my family and they supported me, and even if they weren't agreeing with all the things at the beginning they didn't – especially my father and my sister, they didn't push me – wouldn't use it against me, they were like opening their arms, like, “We are here”.

The whole family got shocked by my panic attacks because here's a grown man with a lot of beard that can sit down and cry whenever. Somebody that has been stubborn and knows what he talks about for three years, but now he's weak and begging for help, and can't even take care of himself emotionally. My mother, she reacted more with emotion ... She was, she got more scared by that time, but I could see afterwards, after a while that I'd left the group, others that went the

same way who didn't have their families, I've heard stories about them being not [supported].

Some friends – it was a couple of friends that did help a lot. And I'm very thankful because so few people can do so much sometimes and it means a lot. And I will forever be grateful for them accepting me in that state because there was a lot of people that I reached out to that got scared and left me.

Reflecting on what it takes to help a former extremist to reintegrate back into society, Bakar was adamant that information and education were critical:

Education is an important role. Life experience is an important role. Building trust and making them feel like there [are] places they can come and ask you questions without even feeling that you will question them. [These are] areas where I think [it is] important when you want to change people having [extreme experiences]. Sometimes you should wait for the change to come, you should be prepared and waiting for the change, for when it comes, then you can work on it instead of trying to make the change. I think information for families and working like my family played [an important role].

When she literally came out of the jungle and as arranged, met her mother on the path Oppila went into a period of emotional shutdown that was to persist for years. Her extended family all came to see her, and they attended to her health issues, and arranged for her to complete school far away from where she had been fighting as a child soldier. Her sister provided a much needed emotional salve:

All my relatives were there and they were like, "Oh my God, you're here". The only person who showed real emotion was my sister. She just came running and you know, she just said "I'm glad you're here", she was just overjoyed ... They decided to fix me physically, so they went "Oh, she's got head lice, let's treat that"; "Oh, she's got sores all over her body, take her to the doctors, don't tell the doctor where you've been". You know, that sort of thing ... And so physically I was really well taken care of but emotionally: not a word uttered. And the only person ... was with my sister and we used to go out for walks in the tea bushes and I would just keep talking to her, and she did nothing but just listen. And she just

was wonderful – because she was three years younger and she was just the – poor thing, I was unloading this stuff onto her but she didn't say much. But she had also gone through terrible trauma with the Army coming, and so she sort of said about that to me.

It is clear that Oppila wished that others in her family could be as emotionally demonstrative as her sister. She later explained that this was actually consistent with how they had been her whole life and that it was, in large measure, a product of cultural factors. Nevertheless, she pointed to the importance of her parents not rejecting her for her early choices, and not giving up on her:

One of the things I am really grateful to my parents for believing that I can still do it. I mean, they didn't know what happened to me. If they had known I don't know what they would have done. But at least they didn't care about that, they said "Past is past, go on" is the message that I got, in a way.

Another form of support that was invaluable to Oppila was the support and kindness she received from her deceased friend's family after she returned to the city:

One of the things that helped me also to recover, I think – [my friend's] family, because they are the most loveliest people. Because I had carried this guilt about not wanting to see them, so as soon as I left them I got to Kandy, to my grandmother's house, her mother and her sister knew about it somehow, I didn't even ask. They turned up. They just came to see me and see how I was.

Speaking with them about their daughter's death was difficult but therapeutic for both Oppila and her friend's family. She found it ironic that once she completed school and came to university in Australia she married a very controlling man. However, she describes how in an unexpected way, this provided structure, distraction and support until she was strong enough to leave that relationship:

And I think – I must say then [my first husband] became such a task. He was so high maintenance that he in a way helped me to a good – he was a good distraction because – and I had no way of reconnecting with the Tigers as well with him.

Rick recalls the combination of separation from his RWE co-offenders and the support of a chef in prison as influential in his decision to leave. The chef had been to see the film *American History X* (Kaye, 1998):

So the next day he came into the prison and I didn't know about that movie because I was in jail, and he didn't tell me that he had seen that movie. So he came into the jail and he was like talking to me, and talking to me about my parents, and family, and things like that because he knew they loved me because they came to visit me every weekend, and I toured the whole of Norway prison system, and they came every Saturday no matter where I was.

Then he asked, me like the Principal is asking Derrick [the protagonist] in the movie, "When you think about everything you've done what good has it done for yourself and your family?" And that was actually the first time I sat down and was thinking about things like that. I knew that my grandfather's truck company went bankrupt because of me and the name, the branding and all that, and I knew it was a lot of problems. And my sister, it wasn't easy for her to be my sister going to school and me being in the papers all the time, and wanted by the police and whatever.

Although Rick had a reputation as one of the most violent RWEs in Norway, his family did not know of his involvement for a long time, even after he had been to prison the first time. He had separated from them but they had never rejected him. This became incredibly important in his re-entry to society after nine years in a RWE group. On the day he was released his family were waiting for him. He said it was "so difficult to reintegrate back into society" but that his family played a critical role in helping him reconnect with old networks:

It was many things, and I was very lucky because the day I walked out the prison gate my mum, and my sister, and my father were waiting for me, and we drove home and I found everything that I had, like with Nazi things, and we just burnt it. My old friends from high school who were my friends before I became a neo-Nazi, they came to the door and wanted to help, and be a part of my returning to society. So I got a lot of help.

And support, yeah, and I think that was very important because my name was pretty branded bad so it wasn't easy to get a job, I tried many times but they knew who I was ... Yeah because people – you know you can be a former drug addict, and you can take urine tests, and you see that. Yeah you can't prove it, it's impossible, you can't take a urine test and all the little swastikas are gone, so it's not like they can check it out.

This family support became critical for Rick's younger brother a couple of years later when he too decided to leave the RWE movement.

4.3.3 Resilience, Skills and Coping

The final theme of the 'Coping' domain theme is 'Resilience, Skills and Coping'. This theme references a person's ability to bounce back and keep going after a challenging experience, and/or to access resources to help with this. In some cases it is about having existing personal or vocational skills to fall back onto. As with any other person, it is to be expected that a former extremist's resilience and capacity to cope with adversity will be greater if they have fewer problems and more social support. Taqi exhibits remarkable resilience across his story: he joined a neo-jihadist group in prison as a teenager to extricate himself from a gang lifestyle, and then eventually left the neo-jihadist group to become a successful entrepreneur. There is also considerable similarity in the ways in which some of the former militant Tamil separatists (for example Oli, Thennan, Bagyam, and Oppila) coped with adversity in disengaging. For this reason they will be discussed as a group. Finally, the two female RWE members, Lena and Freya, both told extraordinary stories of survival, and both have since been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, which brings with it a host of issues that compromise resilience and positive coping¹⁹. Despite these challenges, both have coped remarkably well. Some extracts from Lena are provided.

¹⁹ Borderline Personality Disorder is a pervasive personality style characterised by instability of emotions, behaviour, relationships and sense of self. It is often but not necessarily associated with complex childhood trauma, abuse or neglect. People with Borderline Personality Disorder frequently experience strong and overwhelming emotions which they have difficulty controlling. Strong feelings of anxiety, depression, or anger may be triggered by relatively minor life difficulties. Many people with this personality disorder also

Taqi was raised on the “*wrong side of town*” in London and was the leader of a street gang before converting to radical Islam in prison. He is an articulate and intelligent man, who views himself as the ultimate survivor. On release from prison he stayed clean of drugs and remained a Muslim, but relinquished his extremist ideas when he put himself through university and began studying the Marxist theories. He described “*a very lonely journey*” where most people do not “*get where you’ve just come from. It’s like you’re turning back from Vietnam... You don’t fit, although you’re there. You’re still traumatised*”. Despite feeling lonely and traumatised Taqi has educated himself and is involved in a range of social programs and businesses. He is not sure how or why he pulled through when so many of his counterparts are dead, addicted or in prison. He points to the ability to face the bad things you have done, and without making an explicit connection, goes on to talk about making a contribution to people who are in a position you were once in yourself:

I think one of the hardest things with all of this is to do a lot of badness and to discontinue. Because what happens is as soon as you start to become righteous or you start to become kind of good within yourself, all the bad tends to play on you a bit more ... It’s almost like you have to keep being bad to get rid of the — you know, like when they say, if you get drunk, chasing the next day with a chaser ... It happened to me, I was kind of traumatised for a little while. You know, you kind of think about some of the shit you’ve done because you’re around people who are not like that. But when I’m around people who are like that it’s easier to deal with.

I’ve got two Masters now, people say to me, “You must be a very intelligent guy” and I say, “No, I just know how to get things done”. It’s the way I do it ... I got involved, after doing the whole uni thing and I kind of worked for the government on what’s called a regeneration program where they put so much money for the community and I managed a [program] around engaging disenfranchised youth and trying to bring them back to the fold of mainstream.

experience intense feelings of loneliness or emptiness. Self-medication with alcohol or other substances, and self-harm, aggression and suicide attempts are common (APA, 2000, pp. 706-710).

Resilience comes in many forms, and although he feels an imposter in the corporate straight world, Taqi has gone beyond survival to success in the things that are important to him. He has extracted useful skills and knowledge from his extreme and harsh life events and now uses them to assist himself and others.

Oli, Thennan, Bagyam, and Oppila were all involved in different ways with the LTTE, and have all spoken about how guilty they felt leaving the cause, even if they hated the violence or thought it was hurting fellow Tamils. They each mentioned other former LTTE members who did not fare well after leaving. There is something in each of these participants: a grit, a determination, a resilience and a purpose that has enabled them to deal with trauma, disappointment and heartache. Oli reflected on the importance of education for him and thought that if he had not obtained the marks required for admission to university he would have been *“dead and buried”* alongside the boys in his village who did not get educated. He describes a feeling that even the ground he walked on was unstable: *“you know the step, behind you falling down?”* and considers himself lucky for every step that worked out. His metaphor of steps falling away behind him as he climbs out of danger gives a sense of how precarious he felt, along with the appreciation he feels that he did not go the way of his peers.

Thennan lost many friends to the war in Sri Lanka, and was threatened by the LTTE when he left. On settling in Australia he formed a Tamil humanitarian group and was pushed out by other members at one point. His response to this captures his ability to bounce back. He said he was angered by this, but *“that’s okay because I was, how shall I put it, I was a tough guy. I had gone through you know ... [a lot more]”*. He continued his work in spite of this rejection and continues to work for humanitarian groups today. Bagyam was succinct in describing of how he coped with the defeat of the LTTE. He was *“severely depressed”* for three months and then *“accepted it”* and got involved in rehabilitation and humanitarian programs. He asserted that: *“involvement is good because it gives you a sense of control over it rather than feeling powerless”*. Oppila thinks that *“everything’s going to be fine if you put the effort in”*. As someone who has survived as a child soldier in a war, educated herself to a tertiary level and is the primary breadwinner in her family, this is hard to argue with. One of the nuns at Oppila’s boarding school told her there must be a reason why she survived and her friends did not. This kept her going for years despite her survivor guilt. It was only after she left her first husband that she

“finally tried to be myself without anybody controlling me”. She has found purpose in her family, her professional life, and in contributing to Tamil rehabilitation and youth education initiatives.

For some months before she finally left the neo-Nazi group, Lena secretly spoke with an author of a book about neo-Nazis under the pretext of correcting his ideas. Her resilience comes in the fact that she recognised her pattern of needing to be special, and managed to achieve this in a far less destructive way than previously. These conversations provided immense support to Lena. She felt validated but also was encouraged to explore her ideas and future in a safe way:

I think I just wanted someone to talk to really, so I think I used him as like a therapist without thinking about it in that way ... And then again I felt like I was the centre of attention which made me feel good, but the difference was that this time he wasn't there to kind of judge me.

For many years after leaving violent extremism, Lena struggled to find meaning, stimulation and purpose in a ‘straight’ world. She described herself as an *“emotionally unstable disturbed person”* for months and months after she left. Seeking professional help was critical to her reintegration. She eventually sought nonviolent, non-political thrill-seeking in the form of travel, fantasy role play, and film-making. She is aware that she needs to be cautious of extreme groups and situations, but her ability to self-monitor and therefore her overall resilience has vastly improved:

Yeah, but I definitely feel like I have this addictive personality, like once I get obsessed over something, and even when I'm making a film it's like that's all I think about, I'm so obsessed, but then I lose interest after a while and then I just want to move on.

4.4 Identity

Identity is core to who we are, and this is no different for extremists; indeed, as already foreshadowed, disengagement from extremism and engagement with mainstream society can be viewed as the ultimate identity transformation. Chapter 3 presented data to show the participants identified at extremely high levels with their respective extremist groups

at the time of involvement, ranging from 70 to 100% and with 19 of the participants placing their identification 80% or greater. Just as the dominance of a single social identity over other social identities, and over a person's personal identity is characteristic of the radicalisation process, the experiences of these 22 participants makes it clear that a core aspect of disengagement is a realignment of personal and social identity as they reconnect with society. Most of the participants underwent some combination of three related identity processes: firstly, a reduction in the intensity of their connection to the extremist group; secondly, an emergence of their personal self; and finally, finding something else to do or identify with.

Some participants reported a critical incident that triggered the re-emergence of their personal views and values, following which they felt less connected and as though the extremist group fit was not so good any more. Others reported a reduction in group identification after being disillusioned by some aspect of the group's ideas, actions or leadership, and this led to separation which was followed by the gradual emergence of personal identity. In a small number of cases, involvement with outside people or activities led to a distancing from the extremist group and a parallel emergence of personal identity and a resultant reduction in identification with the extreme group. There was large variation in what people did after they left and whether they could find other activities, work or social places to spend their time. In most cases there were delays between noticing they did not belong in the extremist group anymore, and having options or resources to enable an exit. These experiences are captured in the three 'Identity' domain themes of 'Reduction in Group Identification', 'Emergence of Personal Identity' and 'Alternate Social Identity'.

4.4.1 Reduction in Group Identification

Strong identification and commitment generally requires face-to-face contact to maintain. When a person spends time with other people doing other things, it generally results in a reduction in identification with the extreme group, irrespective of why they separated in the first place. The pattern of reduction in overall group identification over time is starkly illustrated in Figure 4.2 where for the majority of participants there was dramatic decrease in percentage identification from the time of their involvement compared to their identification at the time of interview.

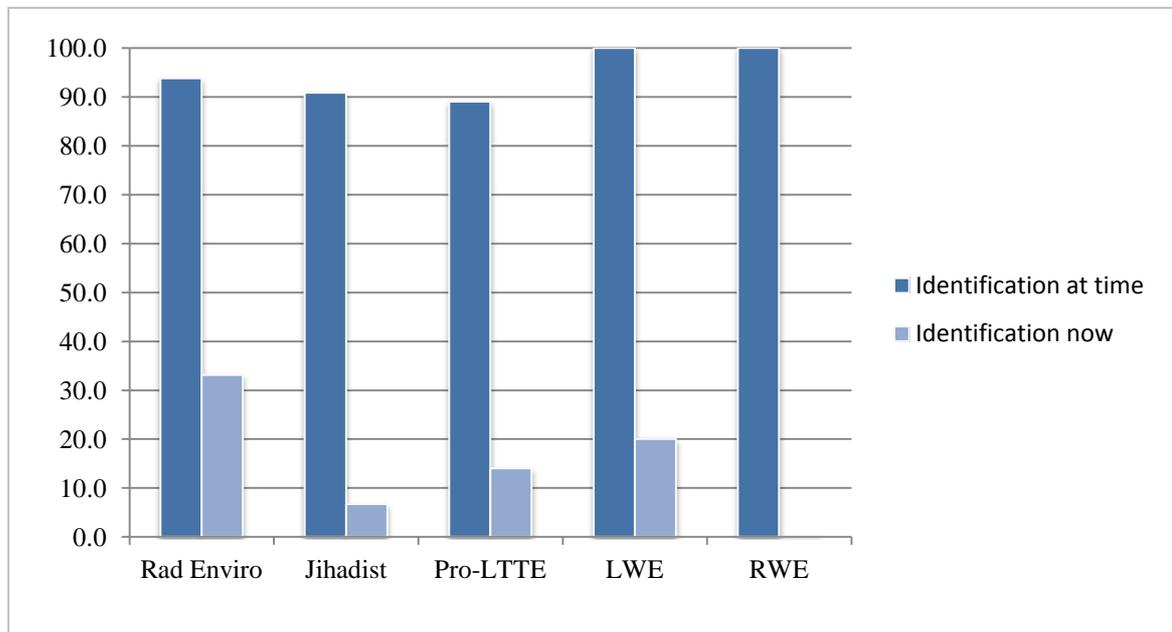


Figure 4.2 Reduction in identification with extremist group

Only four participants did not fit this trend of significant reduction in identification. Three of the four were former radical environmentalists, who are a special case in this study because whilst their ideology is just as extreme as the other types of ideology groups, it does not call for the use of violent methods against non-believers. Even though they took issue with their own groups' extreme but nonviolent methods just as frequently as their neo-jihadist, pro-LTTE and RWE counterparts, and modified their extreme beliefs, overall their reduction in identification with the radical group was not as great as the former extremists from other types of ideology groups. Rob, who went on to set up his own environmental activist group, continues to identify with the environmental cause, but not with the specific group that he had been involved with, so his commitment remained at 100%. Eric and Barrie, also former radical environmentalists reported a 50% reduction in identification with their extremist group, which in absolute terms is significant, but modest compared to the other participants in this study. Eric's entire identity was entwined with radical environmentalism and he has not yet decided where to move to next. Barrie immersed himself in radical environmentalism from the age of 14 to 25 before having a breakdown from which he is still recovering. Bagyam, the fourth participant who reported a 50% reduction in identification, only accepted that the militant Tamil struggle would not prevail when the LTTE were recently defeated in 2009. Across the remaining participants, the average reduction in their identification with the group was 84% from peak of involvement to time of interview. This is a remarkable decline in

identification for a sample that contains former LTTE child soldiers and former RWEs and neo-jihadists who spent time in prison for murder and terrorism charges.

It is not possible to share the stories of all participants here so Eric, Wasan, and Bakar have been chosen to illustrate this theme. Of all the participants Eric was the most eloquent about how he defined himself entirely by direct-action environmentalism. He rated his identification at the time to be 100% – “*everything, my whole life, it was all consuming*”. He went on to say, “*activism became my identity, it consumed my whole life and it became completely intertwined with my identity as a person*”. How does a person who identifies so wholly with a singular dominant social identity group – and one that happens to be extreme – come back to ‘normal’ society after a breakdown prevents him from continuing? In Eric’s case it was “*with a big crash*”. He explains how, once out, he slowly began to identify less with the extremist movement because he could not embody it anymore. Although he only identifies 50% now, he has not let go of the hope that he might recover enough to return to it one day:

I had an identity crisis because that is and was my identity and I stopped being an activist. I was recovering and so I was like, “Who am I?”

The fundamental changes have been the loss of that feeling, almost like a loss of that feeling that I’m on the planet to be — I’m living in order to be of service to the planet. I’ve got a much more selfish sort of, well I can just live to live, you know, is more my philosophy now.

I would say the major reasons around disengagement from radical, that sort of radical activity is that I lost the ability to play the role that I was playing and then subsequently haven’t been able to return to it because I don’t have the same level of emotional engagement or commitment. And then there’s having a true understanding of the costs and what can be achieved is much harder to decide to go back there. And I hope that I will at some point.

Yeah, so part of me is like, you know, I would ideally like to, but then I’m not actually sure I would because I don’t have that same sense of purpose. So the emotional connection is not there for me at the moment. For now it’s sort of – I have more of an intellectual commitment. So I guess one of the changes between

now and then is that through the process of burning out, I've lost that sense of purpose.

In the passages above and below Eric distinguishes between emotional and rational aspects of identification to the cause. He concludes that for himself, both are necessary for full commitment, but he is now aware of the cost of this. Stepping back to view his relationship with radical environmentalism, he makes a statement about disengaging from it further. He thinks he might become involved in a range of other personal interests:

I'm feeling quite strongly attracted to the idea of sort of saying I would like to disengage to a certain extent from the environment movement. So between now and like – I kind of feel like maybe I won't be able to do it, but I like the idea of sort of say now, until I'm 40 just going on a completely different journey and having a whole bunch of personal and work, career related experiences that's external to the environment movement. And then when I'm 40 making another, revisit it and sort of go, "Okay, you know, let's have another decision point around what I want. How do I want to contribute to my society?"

To do so would enable and require the two other identity processes mentioned above – the emergence of personal identity and identification with alternate social groups – which emerged as parallel themes that will be discussed presently.

Wasan estimated that at the height of his involvement his identity was 75% overlapped or immersed with the LTTE as a group. The government forces had killed his friends and like many, he thought the Tigers were the only hope for the Tamil people. He liked the adventure and action too, but mostly it was about fighting back for the Tamils. He summarised the change in his identification over time as follows: *"When I was with the Tigers I was like, my, I always feel I am a Tamil, I should fight for our rights, especially our rights and I am only thinking about my community and the community good"*.

Now he identifies zero percent with the LTTE and their militant fight for Tamil independence. His dis-identification began because of discomfort with his own group's use of violence. They used severe and sometimes lethal violence for internal discipline as

well as against Tamils who were civilians or members of other non-LTTE resistance groups. Wasan describes the time when he realised he no longer identified with the group and the idea of leaving crystallised in his mind:

I was in the hospital and then I was out at the camp, they were looking after the wounded people. The funny thing is that during that time [the LTTE] attacked another [Tamil resistance] group so they brought all those, you know and put them in our house as well. So I was put in charge of looking after them, even though I was injured. So, at that time also I had time to speak to those guys and they were, at one point they started to trust me that they can trust me and they started telling me a lot of things. And that really hurt me as well, you know what Tigers did to their families or their friends or even to them. They were beating them up and some of them, they took them and shot them and all kinds of things, awful things. So, actually during that time, to leave that movement was getting stronger and stronger. The idea of leaving that movement inside me was growing ... I was strongly feeling that I should leave. There was no point of me staying.

Bakar declined the sheikh's suggestion that he move to Kuwait to address his mental breakdown. This marked the end of his immersion with the group as Bakar turned outside the group for support in dealing with his psychiatric symptoms. The separation was difficult and slow. At first he told himself he could remain the same, just living and praying at home instead of at mosque. However, the combination of physical separation, alternate activities and family support meant that he progressively identified less and less with the extreme group:

[First] I was committed to the same kind [or religious ideas] but I was in the process of changing, so I just focussed on doing the duty stuff, just not to have too much to think about, and by that time I had shaved off my beard and I tried to integrate again into society ... I grew out of it, it wasn't – sometimes some circumstances maybe I could feel like in some way some parts I am connected to it, but today I'm totally not, even I have a lot of understanding for them, I can relate to them in understanding, and of thoughts, and maybe care for them, but not that I identify myself with them, not anymore, no.

The fact that Bakar withdrew from the group for health reasons ultimately allowed for the emergence of his personal identity. As was emphasised in the ‘Coping’ domain themes, this was achieved with the support of his family and professionals. At his most committed he identified 100% with the group and its beliefs, values and norms. At the time of interview he identified zero percent with the group, although he still had understanding and compassion for them. As will be explored more fully in the next section, his recovery also involved connection to alternate activities and social identities:

If I’m going to be real honest I think it took three and a half years or four years until I felt that I’m stable, and my confidence is in the right place, and that I’m getting a new personality. Today I can say, “Well alright I’m working with music, I’m working as a jail officer, I’ve had these experiences, I have this past history of my early years, I’ve got a personality”.

4.4.2 Emergence of Personal Identity

Personal identity is the part of us that is unique and personal, and a demanding social identity can take precedence and dominate over personal identity. This is often what people refer to when they talk about being ‘brainwashed’ or ‘not thinking for themselves’. Ninety-one percent of the participants referenced this theme in their interview. The restoration of this balance between personal identity and a healthy range of alternate social identities posed a challenge for several of the participants. It was a double challenge if they had not fully formed their personal identity before joining the extremist group. This is because they faced a dual task of dealing with the loss of the group identity, as well as crafting one’s own identity. Extracts from Dean, Oppila and Freya are detailed.

Dean’s peak identification of 85% reflected that he never totally let go of his personal identity when he became involved in radical environmentalism, which was strongly associated with music. He is a good example of someone whose disengagement was less dramatic and more incremental: “*I drifted from straight activism into the creative scene*”. Unlike others who required a pivotal incident or disillusionment to shock them out of their immersion, Dean’s personal identity remained at least somewhat salient throughout his involvement in radical environmentalism. He used his other interests as ways of furthering the environmentalist cause, as well as a way of maintaining identity

continuity. Here he is talking about when the group versus personal identity balance tipped enough in the direction of personal identity that he moved sideways into other activities:

I guess there's no one single moment but there was always occasionally times of despondency and stuff. Some of that feeling that you were hopeless and couldn't get anywhere was sometimes replaced by the fact that music was going to do a bit better for me and I realised it's actually quite a clever way of trying to get ideas out and it actually seemed to work and people seemed to come to the band and it was a little bit of a new scene.

I think I started fading out in my 20s from the frontline activism because of music and then sort of got back into it after the music started coming back, so, at a totally different level. So I was back around, I started uni again, I started having time to get back involved, so if you're not on tour. When you're on tour all the time, you're not around enough to be planning hard-core.

He uses gentle language, like “drift” and “fade” to describe his transition. Unlike Daphne, Barrie and Eric who felt they had “sold out”, Dean felt satisfied when he secured employment in a mainstream environmental organisation:

Moving to [a mainstream environmentalist organisation] in the late 90s was something that ... where an organisation that was already, you know, started to, so really increasingly encompassed a lot of what I was doing ... That sort of shifted a lot of my attention again, because again it's this new group that increasingly covered a lot of my beliefs.

For Dean and some other of the radical environmentalists it was a fairly seamless shift from using radical to mainstream activism methods. There was a large degree of continuity between his social and personal identity, so not much of a gap to be bridged, and few differences to be reconciled. In his case a well-enough developed personal identity meant it was readily accessible when the social identity associated with the extremist group subsided. A similar pattern emerged for many of the former LTTE members who joined as adults with fully formed personal identities and professional careers. When they left their respective LTTE groups they retained their beliefs regarding the need for Tamil rights, but changed their support for violent resistance. Oppila

however was a teenager when she joined the LTTE and had a more intense experience as an active fighter than some of the other former LTTE participants. It was harder for her to reconnect with her personal identity. She describes how she began thinking for herself not long after her best friend was killed:

Your friends are there, you know, you have doubts and you sort of put aside and you sort of talk, and you're always having fun with your friends, that's what kids do, you know? And I think at the moment of realising – it's like I think kids going on a joy ride at 17 years old, getting all their friends, never thinking about anything, having fun, suddenly a crash, a few of them die and then you're woken out of that 17 year old mentality into 47 or whatever, you know. And I think that's what happened, and I just think I was broken. I was emotionally completely broken at that point. And I think that's when I thought, "I don't know". I just suddenly went, "I don't know if the price is worth paying".

Like many other participants, once she reconnected with her personal self she found it harder and harder to dismiss the doubts and delay her exit any longer. It was when a fellow LTTE fighter was killed by the group for allegedly kissing a comrade that her personal identity emerged sufficiently for her to consider actually leaving²⁰:

Emotionally I think [I] just went, "I can't do this sort of thing". And I think as time went on ... Then you end up in the jungle, physical hardship, I got sick. And then I see this useless murder of this young man who got shot and killed. And I bet he didn't even kiss her, it's that sad. I went well, "What's this about?" And you suddenly realise ... You start to think, you have time to think. And everybody else was still laughing and carrying on and being cheerful. I mean, I wasn't totally, you know, just this miserable person, but yet you could see the difference and how everybody was thinking.

Secretly, Oppila stopped identifying with “*the whole Tigers group thing and [began] reconnecting back to the family*”. For months this meant thinking more and more

²⁰ Furthermore, and importantly for those in active combat organisations or groups that use a lot of violence internally, she waited until an opportunity presented when it was feasible to leave.

about her family and having imaginary conversations with her sister. Then she approached a particular senior cadre and sought permission to go home. She had seen others murdered for making this same request in the past. Oppila is still surprised today that she had the personal strength to ask. When he agreed she thought they would let her go and then kill her as she left, or that she would be captured, raped and killed by the government forces as she went through the jungle alone. Her recollection is dreamlike and she still cannot fully believe it worked out:

[It felt] just like sleep walking through this whole thing. Other people are in control of everything I do, kind of thing, despite the fact – that’s one of the things that again surprised me, that until I walked out of the Tigers and came out, made up my own mind at that point.

Freya joined a RWE group at 16 years of age, and by age 19 was convicted of “preparing a terrorist attack”. It was when she was in prison that she first began to think for herself:

[Prison] was sort of scary, but being – that’s the first time that I actually had doubts regarding what I was doing, and I was believing. That was in jail just because I was isolated and nobody could talk it out of me, I had to think for myself. But then I got out and returned to the same group, but I mean as soon as the cracks were there they sort of just stayed there, I wasn’t.

She had poor self-esteem at the time of joining, and in fact joined because she identified as “an outsider” in her community. Whilst in the group she totally lost all sense of self and made all her decisions based on group norms. This made it hard when she eventually did leave the group. Her “feeling that [she] could accomplish anything in the right way was just like [zero]”. It was only well after she had broken with the group and that she began to establish a definite personal identity for herself:

I don’t have to please anyone, I don’t have to change myself to fit in their – what they want me to be ... Before I was the one that always wanted to please, I was very conscious of making the people around me happy and being what they wanted me to be, and when I stepped in that sort of followed with me, that was something that was usable in that environment, the need to – that everybody had

to like me sort of. But I mean the experience of being there, and especially the experience of leaving it sort of made me quite the opposite today, I'm being told that I am stubborn, and I'm too opinionated, and I should pipe down sometimes.

I am more willing now to stand up for myself and my beliefs, and to question people and what they say, than I was before, and also that I am more confident with who I am, and what I believe, and I stand for, and not as easy to push over.

In Freya's story, the emergence of her personal identity took enormous effort, and was harder because of her Borderline Personality Disorder. Once she determined who she was, she was then able to engage with others without being automatically persuaded by them:

I've grown into my ideas, and my way of viewing the world, and now I'm not – I try to be as open minded as I possibly can just because I never was before. [I try] and give everyone a chance to show their potential, and what they are, and also try to give myself a chance to be influenced by others, but as soon as I think anything sounds a bit suspicious I sort of – I'm probably quite fast at closing the doors now than I was before. So I am not easily convinced but I try to give everyone a chance to convince me.

4.4.3 Alternate Social Identity

The theme of somewhere else to belong or identify, and something else to do, was important to every single participant in this study. Not all of them achieved it; those who did not report feeling isolated and unhappy. Those who had more fully formed personal identities before they joined their radical group found it easier, as did those who had fewer psychological or physical issues and greater social support and resilience. Alternate social identities after leaving extremism can come in the form of family, work or interest groups that existed before the period of radical activity. Or it can be created freshly on leaving, which is harder to achieve without significant support. In a small number of cases it occurs whilst the person is still in the group and they generate an 'identity alternative' before leaving. With the exception of Barrie, the former radical environmentalists and the former LTTE members all had alternate social identities in the form of professional careers, university training, family roles or other personal interests

before joining their respective groups. Additionally, they tended to modify their support for direct-action or violent activism but to keep working for the broader philosophical cause. For this reason it is instructive to consider examples from three participants who did not have alternate social identities at hand – Jari, Bari and Lena.

Once he had disclosed his group’s plans to an outside imam who commanded the group leaders to stop the operation, Jari voluntarily ceased all contact with the group and began thinking explicitly about where he might fit in better. It was still important to him as a convert that he find a genuine Muslim community with which to practice his faith:

I had stopped playing paintball and things like that. So, you know, it was time for a change and I was thinking maybe if I went to a Muslim country, my kids could learn Arabic and it would be better ... Searching for something that was a little bit better than what I had at the time.

His primary criterion was that it be a place where he and his family could be as Muslim as possible. He said he was “*missing was that sort of cultural fit with the language [and] the religion. I thought, you know, if my kids could learn Arabic and speak Arabic it would benefit them within the religion*”. It was clearly another Islamic identity group that he was searching for, so Jari and his family moved to a Muslim majority country for a year but this did not work out either. They moved again to a non-Islamic Western democracy where Jari found a conservative but non-radical mosque. He feels the fit is good for him and the family. He works in his professional field full-time and spends his spare time doing *da’wah* work with the mosque. He has found a place he belongs, feels he is contributing and helping, and a social group he identifies with:

It’s worked out really good, yeah ... because, you know, working with the mosque – I’m very active with that, so that takes up all the time now ... Everything’s really good here, yeah. If I left here, I think [the mosque] would just fall apart. So I think, you know ... I think I fit in both places [Australia and in his country of residence]. But I’m quite comfortable living here. I have it quite good here.

Bari eventually left his neo-jihadist group because he was disillusioned by the behaviours of the leaders and group members. He separated physically, took a while to recover psychologically, but sustained his conversion to Islam. On leaving he had to

rekindle old friendships and make new ones. It helped enormously that he had experience in management and an outside interests:

I reassociated with other people and I did come across some newer friends, more associated with the gym, but they were Muslims as well because I was actually managing [an Islamic community centre that was not associated with the extremist group] for a short period. That was positive and because I've got a fair bit of knowledge in the training and all that sort of stuff.

It gave me some motivation and a different sort of start in my agenda ... And that really woke me up a lot and then I stopped caring and I started to – I stopped caring about all the past problems and I just had a different direction, you know?

Being able to be in a physical environment with other Muslims who were not extreme was good for Bari. This was because it allowed him to discuss Islam and other topics without being controlled by the narrative or leaders. It also provided for distraction and alternate interests that build the foundations of alternate social identities:

You can touch on any topic without it being an argument, it was a productive conversation. The distraction of gym and all that kind of stuff all in one, so you can — you sort of feel like you're still yourself amongst your own people. They've got to get out and do something, for sure. You've got to change your direction, but do something.

Being a former left-wing, and a former right-wing extremist with Borderline Personality Disorder can make it hard for a person to make new friends. Despite this, and through new and old social contacts, Lena slowly managed to find her own identity and locate other social groups and activities where she could address her need for excitement without the accompanying violence or self-harm that she was previously drawn to:

I realised that I'd found different subcultures that interested me... these live-action role-playing games. So they explained to me, "What we do is we go into the woods, then we have these medieval – we pretend that we're in this medieval society, and there would be like vampires, and magic, and you'd dress up", and I was like, "Wow, that sounds really fun".

This was the first time in her life that Lena “*felt that I was forming friendships that was just because they liked me as a person*”. Along with psychological therapy for Borderline Personality Disorder, this gave her confidence to complete high school and go onto university. She travelled overseas and took time to develop her personal identity independent of an extremist group environment. She has developed a professional identity but remains wary of organised groups, especially political ones. Like Freya, Lena is acutely aware that she has an “*addictive personality*” and gets “*obsessed*” so can be drawn into group things easily. For this reason, she satisfies her drive for excitement by finding the excitement in documenting other people’s stories, which sits well with her professional skills.

4.5 Ideology

Participants in this study varied enormously in terms of how they perceive the legitimacy of the democratically elected government, and in social identity terms, who they see as worthy of reward or punishment based on any belief or ideology. The findings of this current study support the notion that even if a former extremist has stopped their involvement in violent or illegal activities to advance their political goals, they may or may not have moderated their views. The findings also result also support the importance of pluralism in re-engagement with society. It is possible for a person to moderate their own views without necessarily accepting that other people, especially those who disagree with them directly, have a legitimate right to hold their divergent beliefs and practices (such as Kalim). On the other hand, participants who were able to cultivate a pluralist attitude seem to have fared better in their re-engagement with society. The three ‘Ideology’ domain themes are ‘Disillusionment with Radical Ideas’, ‘Find Own Beliefs’ and ‘Acceptance of Difference’.

4.5.1 Disillusionment with Radical Ideas

Radical un-conversion is rare, and unlikely to be as satisfying or rewarding as the original conversion or radicalisation process. Whilst letting go of hateful or radical ideas might be a relief in the long run, most of the participants reported that it was a process imbued with bitterness and disappointment. Some who did not join their radical groups for political or ideological reasons found it easier to relinquish radical ideas afterwards. Several reported

that it took a long time to break cognitive habits, especially when the narrative involved blame and hurting out-group enemies. The research data also suggests the reverse can occur: that it is possible to leave an extremist group but not to change one's views at all, or to retain large components of the belief system. It is also possible to reject radical ideas but not find your own belief system.

Omar Ashour's modified definition of deradicalisation, introduced in Chapter 1, requires that a person: (i) has stopped using and no longer supports the use of violence; (ii) no longer holds radical ideas; and (iii) accepts that others can hold divergent views (2009, pp.5-6). According to these criteria, and as visible in Figure 4.3, whilst 100% of the participants are behaviourally disengaged, only 69% are deradicalised. Of the non-deradicalised 31%, 22% retained their radical views and/or were supportive of others using violent or non-democratic methods. The remaining nine percent can be classified as conditionally deradicalised, meaning that if the political situation deteriorated they would consider using radical methods again. This theme is illustrated below through brief extracts from Rob, Dean, and Kalim, with more detailed examples from Bilal and Rick.

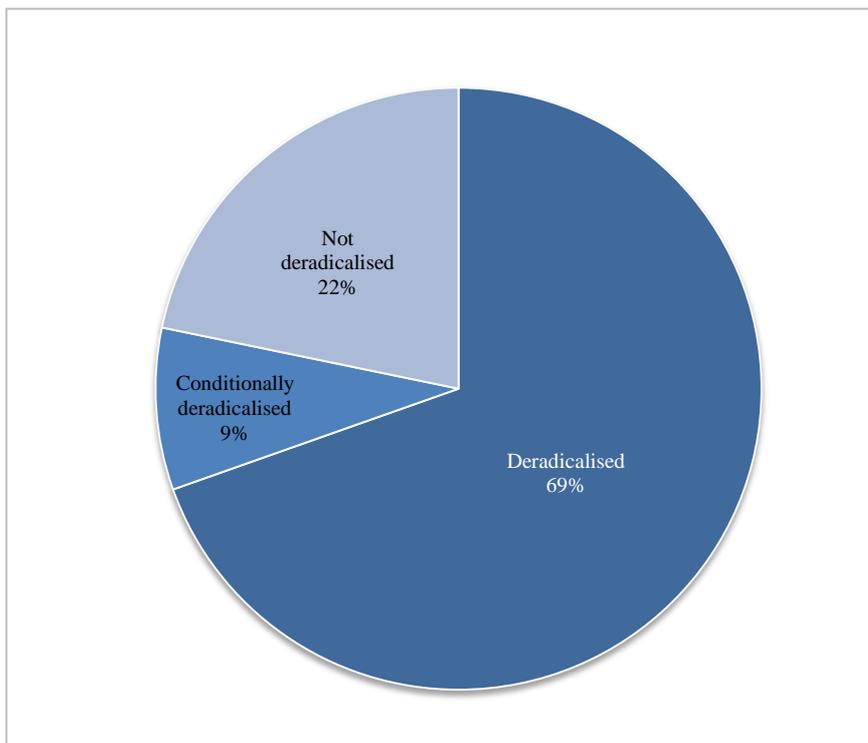


Figure 4.3 Deradicalisation 'status' of participants

The former radical environmentalists were unanimous in their view that they had not changed their mind about the fundamental tenets of radical environmentalism. They agreed that they and others had altered their tactical approach and methods, but not the underpinning principles. This is the distinction between disillusionment with ideas versus disillusionment with methods. Dean explains, “*I don’t really know too many people who have said ‘I no longer believe in this politics’*”. Rob agreed, stating that he could think of no one who had recanted their views after leaving the movement:

None that I can think of. I think there’s some where conservation doesn’t dominate their lives any more ... I know of a few where it no longer dominates their life; they go out and actually get a normal job, but I think if you ask them, you know, like – if you would go and watch them they’d still – they wouldn’t be buying plastic bags, and they tend to continue leading pretty green lives.

Kalim was very clear that his views have not changed since he left the neo-jihadist group:

I left the group, but my views that I held within the group at the time, actually haven’t really changed that much since I left the group. I left the group for really, personal reasons ... I couldn’t do what it was that they requested of me, I couldn’t do that. In myself I couldn’t do it. But my beliefs are still pretty much the same; they haven’t changed.

All the other former neo-jihadists, along with all the former LTTE members, have left their radical political beliefs far behind. When asked if he still adhered to any of the beliefs espoused by the sheikh of his previous group, Bilal was adamant that he did not:

No! I threw all that belief away, and you know, I don’t think it was like a belief anyway. I think it was a power trip, you know. In my belief, I come to understand it is just a power trip. It is a political move power trip. For all the activities now, like thank God that I still have a bit of brains to think of what happened, you know what I mean. I just truly think it was nothing but a power trip, because sheikh wasn’t ever a person that has any fairness in him.

He totally rejected the legitimacy of any narrative about Muslims being at war with the West:

You're not at war, you know what I mean? You're not at a place where, you know, it's not World War II or World War III, you know what I mean? You're not — you're playing someone's political game ... I truly don't believe anybody's at war with anybody.

Interpersonal experiences with out-group enemies dislocated Rick's expectations and undermined his ideological certainty. He travelled to South Africa and was not shot by a black man who robbed him at gunpoint. He would have shot the black man if their roles were reversed, so this confused him. Then he met some high profile far-right extremists and learnt that their ideas were different. They did not hold the same anti-Jewish conspiracy theories. He recounted a situation when he used hateful anti-Jewish rhetoric and had a gun pulled on a gun on him and *“even they refused to talk to me in English and they called me, ‘Outlander’ because I was a foreigner, and they treated me the same way I often treat the black people”*. The final straw for Rick's ideological disillusionment was when he ran out of money in South Africa. A black man lodging at the same hostel shared his meals with Rick for the week until his money came through. This incident made him realise he could no longer sustain his beliefs about how evil the enemy out-groups were, and indeed even who the enemy out-groups were, in the face of such contradictory evidence.

4.5.2 Find Own Beliefs

As alluded to above, rejecting radical or hateful ideas does not necessarily mean that a person will review and/or modify their beliefs. However, to develop and settle on a coherent set of beliefs, values or philosophical viewpoint about how the world works and one's role in it is a key element in moral and identity development (Meeus, 1996; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999; Moran, 2009). Moreover, it provides a person with a maturity and stability in life that makes them more resilient, which would be a strong asset for someone attempting to re-enter society after a time as an extremist. One-hundred percent of participants in this study referenced this theme in their interviews. It quickly became evident that this is a deeply personal and philosophical task, as the extracts from Daphne, Jari, Bakar and Oli presented here illustrate.

Daphne did not need to become disillusioned with radical environmentalism to develop her own beliefs, which she sees as an organic maturation of her earlier radical

beliefs. She revised her views because she was burnt-out. There is no doubt that it is also in her nature to be reflective. She explains here how her ideas began to develop from the early days of her direct-action involvement:

So I started to get interested in other things during those few years that I was campaigning. I started to lose passion for what I was doing, started to see it as firstly not very effective, we certainly weren't winning campaigns. It felt more and more like the resources weren't that well spent, that it wasn't that well planned, that it wasn't supported enough, that it was burning people out. And I started to do different study in courses outside, doing deep ecology work and then wilderness survival skills and kind of awareness work that, now I look back, it was all about me trying to find more of the ecological, the reason why there's an ecological crisis.

Unlike Kalim, who has been immovable in his beliefs, Jari's position on offensive jihad was clear enough to prompt his departure from the group. However, despite holding non-radical and pluralist beliefs now, Jari still romanticises the virtue of defensive jihad:

I think to die fighting is a good way to die. Fighting for your belief is a good way to die. I think I had the same belief then as now: that if you do fight, and it's for the right purpose – I don't think like strapping a bomb to yourself and blowing yourself off in the shopping mall or something like that, killing innocent people – I don't mean dying like that. I mean if you died on the battlefield you were up fighting for your religion, your belief, then that is a good way to die ... In that defensive way ... Not aggressive, attacking, killing innocent people.

Bakar was stripped of his beliefs, his personality and his social functioning when he had a breakdown, and is proud of building himself back up. I asked him what he now thought about creating an Islamic state in Sweden, and the obligation of jihad. He replied:

It has changed definitely, because now [my life, my beliefs are] not on the basis of Islamic principles, and it's not – my ideology of God is not determined or is not decided from religion ... I've changed so much in my values and way of seeing life, I wouldn't see any option of that at all.

All the former LTTE members were clear they strongly rejected the violent struggle for an independent Tamil state. Oli tracked the evolution of his political ideas:

I cannot, I cannot, I'm not going to, I will not advocate anything, violence or anybody for any of those things, yes, we evolved, we evolved – I mean, to be honest, even I was a –fairly a bit of a –I mean, the Marxist line, that is where my earlier days have come from ... Che Guevara was my ideal hero.

I basically now completely reject the Marxism ... knowing what comes of these people, Stalin and Mao in the name of the Communism, so they were killing many, many, many millions of people in their name. So it is all these ideologies, basically I'm – at the moment I'm very much against these ideologies because ideologies are basically trying to control the world and all the people.

4.5.3 Acceptance of Difference

The final theme in the Ideology domain relates to the acceptance of difference. This is difficult for some people to achieve, whatever their background and is perhaps why some are attracted to the certainty of fundamentalist narratives. Nonetheless, a hallmark feature of a liberal democracy is the tolerance, indeed the celebration of different ideas, beliefs and practices as long as they do not undermine the rights of others. It is not a requirement of citizenship that people are happy about pluralism, but it is not acceptable to discriminate or vilify anyone based on political, racial, religious, or other group characteristics. There is a wide space between not committing hate crimes and embracing multicultural or multifaith agenda. This extensive range of possible outcomes is illustrated by the participants. How accepting of difference they are seems directly related to their level of social inclusion and self-reported happiness. The following extracts from Kalim, Wasan and Freya illustrate this theme.

Kalim describes himself as unhappy, lonely, and reports that he feels he does not belong anywhere in Australian society. In an angry, partly self-pitying way he saw this as his “trial”. It was “the price” he had to pay to uphold his principles. Because he sees his views as incompatible with the principles of democracy, he feels oppressed by the society around him, “*I want to be who I am. But I find it difficult to be that person in this*

society”. This dynamic repeats over and over for him at the micro interpersonal level, and at the macro societal level:

You do have little interactions with people, but I find even those are – I mean I might say something and the other person will say something in turn and their reaction, you can see that it’s laced with a different, to me, a different culture, a different belief. And they’re just basically reiterating the way they live and I can’t, even that I find difficult to accept.

I think the governments that have their own agenda and promoting or maintaining, upholding Islam is not part of that agenda. It’s not democracy – all they’re interested in is perpetuating democracy which is totally against Islam ... It’s just not the way things work in Islam, you know?

Kalim cannot accept that others have different views to him, and does not want to live in a place where others do not agree with his views. His way of dealing with this intractable incompatibility is to withdraw and separate from society as much as possible:

Something that I also struggle with in terms of trying to define how I live in Australia because I think, well, hang on, you’re saying that what you’re doing is valid, I’m thinking it’s not. But you know, if I say what I’m doing is valid, you say, “No it’s not”. I think, “Well stuff you basically” ... I find that difficult. I was actually thinking that yesterday, because I really, I struggle with – I can’t maintain or even give credence to the beliefs of, well the majority of the people I see around me, you know? Yeah, I just can’t – it’s not what I believe and I don’t want to almost like be roped into inadvertently following that kind of belief system. So I, yeah stand-offish really, to avoid that.

At the other end of the spectrum is Wasan who, despite being a child soldier and having many friends killed by the Sinhalese majority government military, sees himself and all other people as part of the same overarching social identity group of humans. Implicit in this is pluralism, the fact that human identity comes before and above all other identity categories. He is quite eloquent in expressing this:

So when I came out of it I realised, no, a human being is a human being wherever you go. At the end of the day you speak one language, I speak another language but it's just a language that's different: we are all human beings.

As a former far-right extremist Freya has completely rejected the ethno-centrist superiority that dominated her group narrative. She has reviewed her own beliefs, and spoke in her interview about her thoughts on immigrants, a flashpoint issue in Norway where she lives, and a common trigger for RWE violence:

I changed my point of view from being sort of radical in my thinking to becoming very interested in social politics, but mainly because of where I work, where I used to work, because we have such focus on it, but also because many of my friends and some of my family live in this environment where they sort of have to conquer all these obstacles that come with living in certain parts of the city.

I think the immigration [is] such a huge part of the problem, and that's such a hard [thing] to manage the system that we have now, we have — it has to be more humane, that's the thing that I'm sort of concerned of, that they are not treating -- they sort of put human rights aside and sort of split up families and send back -- kids are stuck in one country and their parents are here and stuff like that, that's not okay. But I think the big part is the integration system that we have now, I mean people come here and they don't feel as if they are a part of our society, and then we get surprised that they react negatively to us.

This is really an extraordinary turnaround from a young woman who previously wanted all immigrants deported, participated in violent attacks on them, and was convicted of terrorism related charges to cleanse the city of immigrants. She acknowledges the immigration solution is complex, but is clear that it involves pluralist principles such as equal rights and humane treatment:

Yeah, so I think it seems it's not easy to solve it but the answers are really easy to come by, actually we need to change how integration happens, we need to change how they are treated in society, and we need to give them equal opportunities.

Finally, with considerable insight for her young age and previous ideology, Freya's view now is that the “core problem to everything [is that the immigrants] get

treated bad, so they behave badly because they don't feel like they belong, and when they behave badly then you get the far-right movement growing". She hypothesises a link between a society where immigrants react to being treated poorly and the rise of the RWE movement.

4.6 Action Orientation

A defining element of violent or radical extremism is the orientation towards action. A former extremist might no longer use violence or radical methods but this could be because they have been forced to desist by force of arrest, overt surveillance, incapacity, or expulsion from the group. It may be voluntary but reluctant, as in the case of someone who needs to earn money, or leave to keep family safe. Based on participant reports, and reflected in the three themes of this domain, a distinction can be drawn between no longer using radical methods, no longer endorsing or supporting the use of such methods, and actual prosocial engagement in the community. These three aspects overlap to some extent, but the examples provided in this section will illustrate the distinctions between them and how different combinations can result in vastly different outcomes for former extremists. The three 'Action Orientation' domain themes are titled 'Disillusionment with Radical Methods', 'Stop Using Radical Methods', and 'Prosocial Engagement in Society'.

4.6.1 Disillusionment with Radical Methods

A person's view and moral support of radical methods, particularly violence, may change over time as reflected in the fact that 'Disillusionment with Radical Methods' was a recurring theme for 64% of the participants. This disenchantment came in two forms. Some found violent methods themselves repugnant, whilst others assessed the radical method to be ineffective in achieving political goals. All of the former RWE and LTTE members reported that over time the violence associated with violent extremism was too much: either in terms of being victim to it themselves or in terms of the impact of violence on victims. Several of the former neo-jihadists found that when it came down to it they could not cope with perpetrating violence themselves. The former radical environmentalists on the other hand frequently reported that their methods were successful for short-term gain, but ineffective in the longer term. Interestingly, some of

them were clear that if actual violence had been effective they would consider using it, but their view was that they could make necessary gains using nonviolent methods. Nadia, Eric, Thennan and Jari provide rich examples of this theme.

The main reason Nadia left radical environmentalism was because she did not think the methods were effective enough. She “*decided that what we were doing wasn't actually having a great deal of effect*”. She was committed to the outcome, but in combination with the physical toll of forest living, she found the direct-action methods to be inefficient and ineffectual. Her journey from joyful hope to depressed inertia is evident:

When I first got down there, it was such a new and amazing experience to sort of do all this stuff with a group of people and make things happen out of nothing and create havoc and so forth. And then over a period of time, particularly I think through spending some time in the winter months down there where it's very cold and not much happens, they don't even do much logging because it's too wet. I think I kind of just got a bit exhausted and burnt-out and quite cynical that doing this kind of blockading was not actually achieving very much at all. I think I became a little depressed really, I mean it sort of it just all was a bit of struggle really and particularly when you were there. Like in summer it was great, because there were lots of people there and there were lots of uni students and stuff like that. But when you know sometimes you know. During the middle of '99, you know I was there living in the forest with ten people and so not enough people to do anything effective in terms of actually running an action, just kind of hanging around waiting for things to happen. Driving around looking for stuff that might be happening, but just a whole lot of sitting around to be honest and I kind of — yeah, after a while I just thought this is kind of a waste of my time in some ways. And what really needs to happen is stuff needs to happen in the city which people were trying to do in the city but it was not happening particularly well at that time. Later on it did, and so I gradually, over a period of months, I think, started to feel that it wasn't a very effective use of my time and that I couldn't, there had to be an end, an end had to come I wasn't going to stay there forever.

Although Eric himself was not disillusioned with radical methods at all, he described how this was a very common reason for others in the radical environmental

scene to leave. Specifically, he highlighted the lack of connection to a broader movement of social change:

[There would] be a cohort for a year or two and then after a year or two a whole bunch of them would leave because they didn't feel like they had achieved anything. They didn't feel like they would achieve anything and they had no narrative around what they were doing and fitted into a broader movement of social change and they just felt like they'd sacrificed all this stuff for no reason for no outcome.

Nadia also talked about how her radical environmental experience informed her thinking on the role of direct-action in a broader suite of activism strategies:

I think that direct-action is only, it's either a stop gap so it will temporarily hold something maybe, very temporarily. While you get all your other ducks in line and you know you can rely on people who have access to politicians, people who are doing perhaps kind of campaigning around kind of jobs and you know economic factors and so forth. I think it had to be kind of some multipronged campaign, I think by itself it doesn't do very much.

They do not know each other but as it happens, Nadia represents a good example of what Eric was talking about when he referred to the need for people to connect into a broader movement of social change. When Nadia left, she went on to work professionally in the field of social justice and human rights.

Unlike most of the other former LTTE participants, Thennan only relinquished his hope for military victory when the LTTE was defeated in 2009. At this point it became clear to him that the armed struggle was not going to work after all and he withdrew his support for it. He said:

And when we lost that armed struggle in May 2009, I just simply, and it's really hard to say, I just simply switched on, okay that's it, for my people. I felt guilty that I am also to be blamed for what has happened there. And, what the people are going through there because I think, not just myself but a lot of people out there. A lot of people out there are feeling the same. But they don't want to come

out of it and do something about it because they are too scared, fear — they can't go there.

As a self-described “adrenaline junkie” Islamic convert Jari was attracted to both the obligation of jihad and to the attendant adventure that went with fulfilling that obligation. Jari undertook jihadi training overseas before it was illegal for Australians to do so. Nonetheless, when he found out about his group’s violent plan in Australia he was against it:

It was a shock, because this was totally against, you know, what they had been talking about. You know, in my mind, this was terror. It was completely wrong and going off to a Muslim country that's totally different, to doing an attack like this, you know, in a country that, you know, where Muslims were free to practise their religion and we didn't have any problems. To start problems like that, you know, it was completely wrong.

When I went to [jihad training camp] this was more like preparing yourself to know these tactics to know these things in case you were ever sent or you were ever needed to defend a Muslim country. So you know, now when they were coming up with this to attack, was completely the opposite ... And that's when I decided to leave the group.

4.6.2 Stop using Radical Methods

One does not have to change one’s views on radical methods to stop using them. This theme was discussed by 14 of the participants. Several were forcibly prevented from participating in violent or illegal activities, whilst most stopped voluntarily. Others gradually desisted because of a change in role or circumstances. Setting aside legal definitions of violence and participation, what was clear from the participants’ stories was that even behavioural disengagement is not binary. If a person steps out of the movement and has no involvement for several years but then engages in an operation can they be said to have disengaged for the time between? Several participants had multiple ‘episodes’ of radical engagement. This was most characteristic of the radical environmentalists where the barriers to entry and exit are lower and the group boundaries more porous than other extremist groups. The RWE groups the participants belonged to

varied in how tightly bounded they were. They also varied in whether they adopted a ‘campaign’ approach where coalitions of activists rallied for a defined activity, or whether they were a closed group more like the former neo-jihadists’ groups. The fighting and logistical/medical groups of the LTTE based in Sri Lanka and India were tightly bounded and clandestine, but the administrative and financial arms run by diaspora in places like Australia and the UK were more fluid, though still underground. These factors all effect how a former extremist is likely to stop their involvement in radical or violent activities. Extracts are provided from Kalim, Jari and Freya.

Kalim joined his neo-jihadist group for personal and social reasons, was embraced into their personal networks, and in turn he embraced their radical ideology. He was tasked with an attack but says he had no intention of following through. He did however carry out a range of preliminary activities and was convicted of terrorism charges. In Kalim’s view the court did not take into account the emotional trauma he went through in leaving the group, *“I mean you have to take into account everything, not just so-called facts, you know, come on!”* He has behaviourally disengaged in that he did not ultimately carry out the attack, and has not participated in anything similar since. As to whether he would support the use of violence in Australia or other Western democracies, he defers to Islamic authority:

Well it appears there are going to be direct attacks upon Australian soil against Australians. I think there’s a trial in Melbourne at the moment ... it’s not clear Islamically yet, whether that is valid and until such time as it’s not clear, then you don’t want to take part in it.

For this reason, Kalim can be classified as conditionally disengaged with regard to using violent/radical methods. Under different circumstances he would condone jihadi violence, though he is quick to reassure that he has no intent to participant in any such activities himself:

I can see in certain situations killing is justifiable, I’m not one of these pacifists who say that it’s not, because if somebody is trying to kill you what do you, “Oh go on then, do it”. Come on get real, it’s not the way of the world. So I can see in certain situations that killing is viable, valid, I should say. But in this particular instance what I’d been tasked to do, even though possibly in another location in

the world it would have been erring towards valid, it certainly wouldn't have been valid in Australia.

It's not to say that in the future ... [laughs]. Well you know, things change – what can you say? Not that I would be ... I'm very anti any Western government but I'm not going to go out and throw stones or anything else, you know, or even say anything actually publicly.

When Jari found out what his group was planning to do he reached out to a highly respected external imam within the wider Islamic community. Jari's actions highlight the role of social relationships and community leaders in stopping violence, even once someone seems to be totally immersed in a radical group. He explains:

When I found out what they were planning to do, then, you know, it was wrong ... It was very clear that it was just completely wrong and I really didn't want to have any part of it whatsoever. So what I tried to do was to stop it the best way I could without exposing the whole thing and I knew that if I went to this imam they would listen to him ... I told him the story of what they were planning to do and you know, he got really upset ... and he said, "Look, you know, don't you realise that these people are going to destroy everything we have been working with, you know, through da'wah and things like that". So they called the brothers and we sat down and they had a meeting and they were told it has to stop, it can't go on ... They realised they had to put a stop to it because now they had been letting it out – it wasn't just within the group any more. It had gone further. It had gone – I had taken it out to somebody else.

In this case the wider community self-regulated to stop the actions of a radical element within. From the group's perspective Jari's actions represented a betrayal. From his perspective he was simply doing what he had to do. The plan was stopped and the group disbanded. Jari does not regret his choice, but it did take a long time to find a place to belong again.

Freya changed her mind whilst she was in prison, but returned to the RWE group for a time before building an exit pathway. She actually stopped all her violent activity when she finally left the group. Her perspective on violence is apparent in the advice she

gives to her boyfriend's younger brother. She convinced him not to act on his right-wing ideas and that the consequences of being actively involved in RWE are too high:

My boyfriend's little brother, he came to me and he's not very talkative otherwise but he had a couple of beers, and he knows my background. So he decided he would talk to me, and he told me that he had certain ideas surrounding Jews, and race, and stuff like that, and I – the only advice I really can give him – the first thing you can do is sort of ... give him recognition that I am listening, and that I'm not going to be angry with him, because that's the first reaction he's had from everybody else, from his siblings, from his brother, they get really frustrated with him because they had problems with this in their family as well. Since he is in his 20s I sort of had the – the only chance I had to say was you don't want to do what I did, and you don't want to know – because the first thing I've learnt is you never question the ideas that they have, you can't take that away, they have every right to believe these things, and the only advice I can give him is do not tell people, to not go out, do not get involved. You can sit at home in your basement pondering about these things, how you live your life, who you choose as your partner, your friends and stuff like that is entirely your choice, and you don't have to have friends from every country, or their friends, no. But as soon as you step out and start telling people that this is what you believe, as soon as you get to know people who are affiliated with these organisations you get a mark that is not easy to wash off, and you get isolated from the rest of society, and all of a sudden even though you didn't mean to you ended up there and you are stuck, and that's not a position that you want to be in. So that's the advice that I've given, the consequences are not worth it.

4.6.3 Prosocial Engagement in Society

It would be easy to mistake deradicalisation for disinterest in politics, or to assume that a former extremist no longer holds views about the cause they were previously committed to. In fact, what the data shows is that the opposite is the case. The majority of participants who consider themselves to have integrated well into wider society have retained some connection to their original cause, or have found a positive alternate role in society. Up to 23 years after leaving, 13 of 22 participants are engaged in non-radical

mainstream activism related to a non-radical aspect of their original cause, as illustrated in Figure 4.4. A further six participants are engaged in prosocial activities unrelated to their original extremist beliefs. Only three participants struggled to find a way to engage positively in mainstream society.

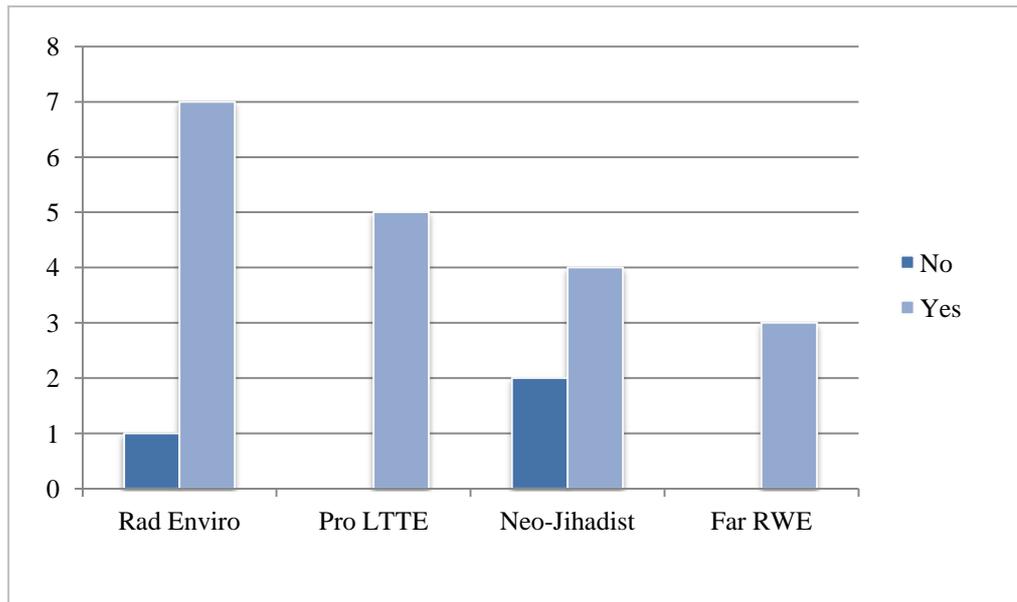


Figure 4.4 Active engagement in society

With the exception of Barrie who is still recovering from a physical and emotional breakdown, prosocial engagement in society was universal amongst the former radical environmentalists, the former pro-LTTE members and the former RWE. The former neo-jihadists were the most mixed in their integration experience. Jari is active in Islamic interfaith activities and Taqi is involved in counter-radicalisation initiatives. Bari and Bakar are focussed on their own lives, families and careers, and are contributing members of their respective societies. Bilal is focussed entirely on his family but is not really engaged otherwise, and Kalim, as we have heard, wants nothing to do with “normal” society at all. Extracts from Daphne, Rob, Taqi and Wasan demonstrate this theme.

Daphne has a strong sense of contributing to the world generally and to environmentalism specifically through her work. She has adopted elements of psychology, deep ecology and a desire to heal in her new direction:

I don't feel like anything's wrong anymore, or anything needs to be fixed. I just feel like – how to explain it? I guess I've come to a point where the work that we do to bring our best into the world, or our pure presence, or whatever it is, that's

the biggest gift that we can give to the world. Like, I think I would do more for the world if I went for a conscious walk down the street, feeling that peace with myself, feeling absolutely no judgment towards others or myself, and be consciously aware of those around me, and in a really good space. I would do more for the world doing that than letterboxing all day when I'm angry and burnt-out and doing harm to my body. It would be great if you could combine the two, but I guess I see the power of what's needed right now, is a spiritual transition, rather than a physical one ... What I naturally feel I want to give right now is to help people in their healing.

She does not feel guilty anymore about leaving the movement and holds a “firm belief and commitment” that her skills are “best used elsewhere”. What she can offer the world is “not about saving trees, it's about healing in general”. She sees her work now as “very much for a purpose beyond self, and it only works actually – you're only really doing the real work when you're not doing it for your own purposes”.

Rob's view corresponds with Daphne's. He described how most former direct-action activists stay connected with environmental issues:

Most of them do remain involved in conservation. I know – I think over 50% would go off – for example, there's the Black Fish, which is an organisation that kind of spawned out of people who got booted out of Sea Shepherd or got disillusioned with it ... I know another guy who went out and he's working with trying to save wolves up in Alaska. Another guy is working doing conservation work on buffalo. I'd say over half of them remain involved in conservation issues.

After he left his neo-jihadist group Taqi studied community development at university. He “just loved it. I just – it absolutely changed my life around”. He was inspired by studying Marx and Engels and began to run a mentoring program in a school. He “got them trained up by a training centre, put them in the school and it worked really fucking well”.

He has since established a number of programs for disenfranchised young people “trying to connect them and moving away from any radical kind of ideology”. In terms of

his own role in making society better, Taqi identifies with the character Oskar Schindler from the film Schindler's List (Spielberg, 1993):

So the reason why – what got me emotional about Schindler's List is I could see a lot of myself in Schindler because what Schindler was doing he was going against the odds and building a way for people to get out of the situation. If they didn't come through Schindler, a lot of them ended up dead ... And it's the same with the programs that we develop. We've tried to convince – you know, I've come onto things that have nothing and pretended like I had it all, and have got the people to buy in. And people bought into me, right? Just like they bought into Schindler, because remember, he was knocking people, he was saying — he set up this from nothing. He was close to the woman, one of the Jews, I have people who I'm very close to are part of this, yeah? They tell me what's going on, 'dah, dah, dah', yeah? It was sad at the end when he said 'I could have done more, I could have done more'. And it was really emotional – I don't know, it got me ... I identified with it – I could do more, I could do more.

Taqi has always had a confident self-image. The difference is that now he sees himself positively engaged in the betterment of society, rather than on the streets fighting society where he began 20 years ago:

You know what it is — you know what I am? I like to see myself almost a philosopher of inner city culture. Yeah? I'm the guy who gets it. Not a guy who just says, "It's about being black", "It's about being a Muslim". I get it. Yeah? I get it. And I'm almost like – I love anything to do with that kind of 1970 social commentary ... I see myself as almost like a freedom fighter for the people and a door buster for the people to open doors and say "Come on!"

When Wasan settled in the UK after leaving the LTTE he became involved in other groups fighting oppression and agitating for human rights. This led him to conclude that oppression often occurs in a dysfunctional system, and the real issue at hand was power differentials and human rights:

More like a human rights. If you take our community there is, then we started studying what sort of oppression our community is facing. It's not the people who

are in power that's oppressing, within our community there is a class system that is also oppressing. So the people and the women also are oppressed by the men, especially in our community in the name of the culture and other things. So these kinds of things were really an eye opener for me and that's why I started to come out of that.

He is still actively involved in Tamil rights and humanitarian activities, but he is also involved in a range of other local community and social justice issues. He summarised why he now feels it is important to contribute to the whole of society:

I would tell I am an international, I am a human being first and then, I am a British citizen now so, I wouldn't even count that. But I will say I am a human being first and the colour, the race, the language everything comes after that. That's how I see and if there is anyone on the road and they are struggling then I will go and help him but that's the basic thing now ... The human rights is the main thing.

4.7 Summary

This large chapter presented 15 themes within five domains, arising out of interviews with 22 former extremists about leaving and life after extremism. The analysis suggests more similarities than differences in the phenomenon of disengagement across a variety of ideology types. The most common reason for leaving was disillusionment, and there was often a delay between initial doubts and actual exit. Those who joined for political reasons tended to retain a modified version of their beliefs even after they stopped using radical methods. Those who had alternate pre-existing threads to their identity were able to make the transition back to mainstream society more successfully than those who did not.

Whilst some participants were forced out by their respective group, by the police or by burnout, most participants in this sample left voluntarily. At the time of interview all were disengaged from their former groups, but several had reengaged and disengaged multiple times. None were using violence but for some this was conditional. Some had changed their beliefs completely, whilst others had modified their views to preclude radical or violent methods but retained a fundamentally radical ideology. Several

achieved comprehensive and positive reintegration, whilst others were engaged in a more limited neutral way, and a small number were very isolated and kept themselves deliberately on the fringe of society feeling hostile or as though they did not belong.

Several participants negotiated a full transition from violent extremism to prosocial citizenship. The five domains and 15 themes give an indication of what was required to do so. These individuals forged new social relationships outside radical networks, and dramatically changed how they interacted with previous out-group enemies. They were the participants who managed to deal with their personal issues (ranging from mental health to physical health, from developing new vocational skills and reconciling with family). They modified their ideological or religious beliefs such that they were no longer hateful and aggressive towards others who did not share their views. Their re-engagement with society also involved a shift from a violent or non-democratic orientation to a civic focus where the fundamentals of a liberal democracy were accepted²¹. Finally, those who fully engaged with mainstream society again were able to develop a personal identity and new social identities. Ultimately, they each felt that they belonged, that they were once again, or in some cases for the first time, a member of society.

The five domains arising from this research represent areas of a person's life that appear to be important for integration into mainstream society. In order to reconnect to society, as opposed to simply disconnect from the extremist group, individuals must traverse five types of barriers that correspond to the domains as follows in Table 4.3.

²¹ Including that the government is legitimate, the laws apply be obeyed by all, respect for all people, freedom of belief and non-belief for all, influencing political outcomes and governance by legal means.

| Domain | Challenge to be overcome |
|--------------------|---|
| Social Relations | Establish wider social relationships |
| Coping | Address health issues and achieve an independent livelihood |
| Identity | Develop personal identity and alternate social identities |
| Ideology | Cultivate nonviolent, non-hateful beliefs |
| Action Orientation | Adopt democratic or civic techniques methods |

Table 4.3 Challenges to be overcome in integration

How engaged a former radical becomes with mainstream society seems dependant firstly on the magnitude of these barriers for them individually, and secondly on the resources they are able to garner to overcome them. There are different levels of community engagement; this is the case whether or not a person has been involved in violent extremism, as evidenced by the efforts of social policymakers to enhance social inclusion for all citizens in liberal democracies. It is also the case that any ‘outcome’ is only a snapshot of a point in time and is open to change across the rest of a person’s entire life.

In summary, the combined experience of the participants in this study suggests that prosocial reintegration after disengaging from extremism is a natural phenomenon that involves five main areas of change in their life. This correlates strongly with Horgan’s research findings. At the heart of Horgan’s ‘leaving’ phase lies the reshaping of identity as a person moves from being a member of a marginal or separatist group to finding a place inside society where they fit and can speak out for the things that are important to them. In short, disengagement is actually about engagement somewhere else.

The next chapter will integrate existing research and literature in the field with the research data to illuminate the contribution of this study. From this combined knowledge, a preliminary five-factor model of disengagement will be proposed. The intent will be to assist in understanding how people transition out of extremist groups, beyond

disengagement to integration. The five factors are: 'Social Relations', 'Coping', 'Identity', 'Ideology', and 'Action Orientation'. Not surprisingly, these five elements align closely with broader social cohesion and social inclusion concepts, which are valued precisely because they promote a healthy society and prevent radicalisation towards violent extremism or other anti-social outcomes.

Chapter 5: Integrating the literature

It is normal for people, over time, to engage with and subsequently disengage from a range of social groups, identities, roles and causes (Bankston et al., 1981; Ebaugh, 1988; Horgan, 2009b; Tanti, Stukas, Hallorana, & Foddy, 2011). All 22 participants in this study engaged with and then subsequently disengaged, at least behaviourally, from their extremist group. Most of them no longer endorse radical and violent methods, and at least half have profoundly modified their radical beliefs and goals. The most telling characteristic of this sample is that the great majority – 86% – are functioning well in society and making a positive contribution. None of them received any formal deradicalisation intervention or treatment, suggesting the process of quietly returning to society after involvement in extreme political activism, at least in a Western liberal social context, might be more natural than is assumed.

We do not know much about how or why individuals disengage from violent extremism, nor which factors or circumstances promote or hinder this likelihood. Although there is relatively little written directly on the topic, especially from an empirical basis, there are some cornerstone pieces of relevant theoretical literature and some illuminating research findings from parallel fields. This chapter will move beyond the text of participant interviews and place the emergent domains and themes from previous chapter into the wider context of extant literature. In overlaying the analysis onto the landscape of relevant literature, the meaning and contribution of this study's findings can be effectively tracked against existing knowledge. The findings will be contrasted with comparable research, illuminating and extending existing studies. It is to be expected that terrorism studies will be referenced, and will not be a surprise to the reader that gang, cult and offender rehabilitation literature is heavily sourced. Social psychology theories of social identity and self-categorisation emerge as a field of pivotal relevance, as does the disparate body of scholarly writing on wellbeing and social connectedness. This dialogue between the findings and this wide spread of existing literature sets the scene for the construction of a new model of disengagement, presented in the next chapter. Not only is this approach of consulting the literature after collecting and analysing one's own data consistent with the inductive approach of Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis but it will result in an up-to-date overview of disengagement from violent extremism in a Western democratic context.

5.1 Overview of disengagement literature

Unlike radicalisation, the phenomenon of disengagement has not yet been directly studied or extensively described in scholarly literature. There is a substantial amount written about prison-based deradicalisation programs, and innumerable policy and discussion papers about countering violent extremism, which makes assertions about both deradicalisation and disengagement but these program and policy initiatives have proceeded in the absence of an adequate knowledge base (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). In a 2011 review of deradicalisation literature since the 1960s, Schmid and Price identified only 175 titles on the topic (2011, p.338). Most solely discussed neo-jihadist extremism, and very few were empirically based. Adopting a broad focus with regard to ideology, albeit a relatively narrow focus in terms of socio-cultural context, Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013) conducted a literature review of voluntary individual disengagement in Western democracies since 1990. Sixteen empirically based publications and one documentary film were identified. Of these titles three were available only in Swedish or Danish, one not available in Australia, and one not appropriate for inclusion. The three non-English titles referenced comprise one Master's thesis, one book and one unknown publication type (T. Olsen, 2011; Rommelspacher, 2006; Unknown, Undated). The title not available in Australia is a book on skinhead street gangs (Christensen, 1994). The final excluded title is a peer reviewed conference paper presenting a preliminary analysis of this current study before all interviews had been completed (Barrelle, 2011). The film referred to in Dalgaard-Nielsen's review is about the Weather Underground, a left-wing revolutionary group in the USA (2003). Although it is an award winning documentary it is not research *per se*. In writing this thesis, two additional empirical studies were located and consequently were included, giving a total of 13 evidence-based publications in English on disengagement from violent extremism in a Western context. This is a slim but critical foundation for understanding disengagement.

Turning from data to conceptual models, there are no formal or developed models of disengagement that apply across different extreme ideologies in a Western democratic context. Based on scarce primary data, researchers in this area are starting to methodically

build up patterns and themes of disengagement, which of course differ across different socio-political contexts. In their individual and joint work John Horgan and Tore Bjorgo conceptualise 'leaving' as the final natural stage of the typical radicalisation life-cycle (Bjorgo, 2009; Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b; Horgan, 2009b). Of the ten models of radicalisation identified in Chapter 1, seven are solely preoccupied with neo-jihadist extremism (listed in Appendix A), whilst three have relevance across all forms of violent extremism. The three models, outlined in detail in Chapter 1 include Wright-Neville's (2006) social exclusion model of radicalisation which is ideologically non-specific and derived within a Western framework. Secondly, Reicher et al.'s social identity model of collective hatred is relevant across all forms of extremism and highly applicable to liberal democracies (Reicher et al., 2008). The third model, the Radicalisation Indicators Model, was developed in Australia. It outlines the three main areas of a person's life that change as he or she radicalises towards violent extremism of any ideology. It is specifically designed for use in Western democracies and takes the view that joining and leaving groups is a natural aspect of life, allowing natural scope for it to be extended to disengagement (Barrelle & Harris-Hogan, 2013). As it stands however, none of these three models extend to explicitly consider disengagement. Thus there are virtually no comprehensive conceptual or theoretical models of disengagement, and what little we have is extremely difficult to validate in the absence of data.

The distinction between disengagement and deradicalisation, as the terms most commonly used, has been established in Chapter 1. Prison programs generally aim to achieve both. The Middle East and South Asian prison programs tend to focus on ideological and theological aspects, whereas the European programs adopt a more practical approach to criminological issues, including psychological treatment, economic and vocational support, as well as mobilisation of social resources (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). Most intervention programs have been conducted without integrated evaluation processes so key mechanisms of change are unknown, though this is starting to be addressed (Hettiarachchi, 2013; Veldhuis, 2012). The most developed programs operate in Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka (Abuza, 2009; Boucek, 2008; Hannah, Clutterbuck, & Rubin, 2008; Hettiarachchi, 2013; RSIS, 2009, 2010; Veldhuis, 2012). Developing programs are in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Colombia, whilst programs in Egypt, Yemen and Libya have been discontinued (Hettiarachchi, 2013). There have been no published evaluation studies that share their program logic,

theoretical or empirical underpinnings, or enable validation of asserted outcomes (Horgan, 2008a; Veldhuis, 2012). Almost all the prison deradicalisation programs operate in socio-political contexts that are not directly comparable to Australia or other Western democracies, and none can be considered to be voluntary. Therefore, this literature is not explored further in this review. However, two programs that do have direct socio-political relevance for Australia, and will be integrated into the forthcoming discussion, are the voluntary Scandinavian EXIT program for right-wing extremists, and the Community Integration Support Program for convicted neo-jihadists currently being pioneered in the Australian state of Victoria.

Leaving violent extremism is a particular case of leaving an important identity group and is likely to have much in common with other significant life transitions. Once disengagement from violent extremism is viewed in these terms, the parallels between disengagement from a violent extremist group and a range of other separatist groups (including street gangs, cults, new age sects, non-violent radical groups and organised crime groups) become evident. Surprisingly, little systematic comparison between these fields has been conducted (Schmid & Price, 2011, p.339). Therefore this discussion considers disengagement from non-political forms of extreme behaviour which also introduces literature about offender rehabilitation and desistance. Desistance from crime can be defined as “the long-term abstinence from criminal behaviour among those for whom offending had become a pattern of behaviour” (IRISS, 2012, p.1). If disengagement from extremism is viewed as an identity transition then this invites reference to a rich vein of theoretical and experimental social psychology literature, as well as scholarly knowledge about social cohesion and wellbeing.

Relevant aspects of each of these areas of literature are incorporated into a discussion structured under each of the domain headings from the analysis of the previous chapter. Links will be made between the findings of this study and the material already published.

5.2 The role of Social Relations in disengagement

The disengagement literature is replete with examples of the three ‘Social Relations’ domain themes identified in the analysis chapter of this thesis. Social relationships are an integral part of being human and are central to groups. As a person disengages from

extremism their relationships undergo significant change. Internal group relationships change as do external relationships. Data from this current study confirms the now common finding that peers and group leaders of radical groups often do not live up to their followers' expectations. The group loses legitimacy in the eyes of the hurt and disappointed member, and alone or in conjunction with other factors this can lead to disengagement. Externally social relationships are important too, both whilst a member and once a person has left. The analysis of data in this study indicates that a participant's ability to rekindle old or negotiate new relationships with a wide network of outsiders once they have left is related to the extent of mainstream engagement and self-reported happiness afterwards. Among participants in this study, social relations strongly moderated both disengagement from the group and re-engagement with mainstream alternatives. Both the core and the parallel literature fully support this notion.

Most people join for social or personal reasons, and even if they are profoundly motivated by ideas and ideology, the process of joining and becoming radicalised is socially moderated (Bjorgo, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011; Reicher et al., 2008; Rogers et al., 2007). If a person joins a radical group for social reasons and identifies strongly with the group, then there is a good chance that they will be seriously disappointed when their relationships with the leaders and/or peers deteriorate. Building on earlier collaborative work with Horgan, Bjorgo looked at whether individuals' reasons for leaving were related to their motivation for joining, and concluded that whilst disengagement was not simply the reverse of radicalisation, the two were frequently thematically related, as depicted in Table 5.1 (Bjorgo, 2012; 2013, p.44).

| Reason for joining | Reason for disillusionment |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Search for friendship and community | The group does not live up to their expectations of friendship and loyalty, with backstabbing, feeling manipulated by group and it becomes easier/necessary to find an attachment to a new outside friend/group. |
| Political and ideological motivation | The cause is lost, or doing more harm than good, contradiction between the ends and the means, ethical dilemmas, fall in status. |
| Frustration and anger ²² | Involvement is more dangerous than they thought. |
| Search for action and excitement | Being a terrorist is boring much of the time. |

Table 5.1 Reasons for disillusionment by participant type

The majority of participants in this current study exhibited a similar pattern. For example the former pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the former radical environmentalists who tended to be politicised before joining also tended to leave for politically related reasons. The pro-LTTE participants felt the armed struggle was doing more harm than good to the Sri Lankan Tamils, whilst most of the radical environmentalists decided the methods were ineffective. All of the former Right-Wing Extremists joined for personal reasons and all of them found the group did not live up to their expectations, and when they found support or formed an external attachment they eventually left. Whilst half of the former neo-jihadists balked at carrying out a violent attack, all of them were deeply disillusioned by the behaviour of their leaders and fellow group members, destroying the brotherhood ideals they had been so strongly drawn to in joining.

²² According to Bjorgo, this type of person often comes from a dysfunctional family situation with trauma or violence in their background already, so they are good at violence and get recognition for it in the group (Bjorgo, 2012; 2013, p. 44).

The recent meta-analysis by Dalgaard-Neilsen also confirms this, though she organises the categories slightly differently. In her review three distinct clusters of factors are identified that lead to a person's departure. They are: (i) group and leadership failure, (ii) maturation and a pull towards other interests, and (iii) burnout and fatigue. Dalgaard-Neilsen's factors are all present in five domains presented in the previous analysis chapter, though aspects that correspond with the 'Social Relations' domain themes shall be considered now. Group and leadership failure refers to "disappointment and disillusionment with the internal dynamics of the militant group or with the group's leadership" (2013, p.104). In making this conclusion Dalgaard-Neilsen drew strongly on the influential empirical study of 21 extremists disengaging from a range of different ideology backgrounds in the Netherlands (Demant, Sloopman, Buijs, & Tillie, 2008a). Based on in-depth interviews with a range of former extremists, they distinguish between normative, affective and continuance factors that refer, respectively, to when the ideology, social/organisational and practical aspects are "no longer sufficiently appealing" (2008a, p.10). In the current study of a similar size, interviews with 22 former extremists generated similar themes of Disillusionment with Leaders' and 'Disillusionment with Group Members', along with a third theme that reflects the corresponding change in relations with out-group members – 'Relations with Others'.

Based on empirical research, other researchers also cite the mismatch between the reality and the fantasy as tipping many out of the group, such as lack of discipline, drinking, fighting, lack of loyalty, lack of strategic direction (Bjorgo, 2009, p.37; Horgan, 2009c, p.31; Arnstberg & Hallen, 2000, cited in Wahlstrom, 2001, p.18). In an absolutist environment with high personal sacrifice, doubt experienced in any of these areas can equate to a personal 'crisis' or type of cognitive opening for disengagement. Most people require an accumulation of doubts before they seriously question their commitment. In the current research sample all the former RWE participants became progressively more ready to leave with every betrayal, every drunken fight, every arrest and/or imprisonment; even if they did not acknowledge it until they were on the verge of exiting. Rob is another good example from the current study from a different type of ideology group. It was only after literally hundreds of disappointments, including "*being ditched*" by the leadership of his direct action environmentalist group whilst in prison, that he acted on his doubts and left the group.

Even though most cults do not meet the definition for terrorism on account of their apolitical and internal foci (Mayer, 2001), many of the same psychological and social processes feature in recruitment and control of members, and there are similarly strong parallels in disengagement (Bjorgo, 2009; Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b; Singer & Lalich, 1994). Well established features of cult disengagement include disillusionment with group members, contact with the outside world, forbidden personal relationships, lack of success in achieving social or political change, and disillusionment over behaviour of leaders (Lalich, 1988; Lalich & Tobias, 1994; Singer & Lalich, 1994; Wright, 1984, 1987, 1991). Parallel stages in leaving politically oriented extremist groups have been established (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b). Several participants from the current study explained how they had to relearn how to operate in society after immersion in their group came with such separation from mainstream society. Bakar had to practice how to order a cup of coffee at a cafe after leaving his neo-jihadist group. Taqi still speaks of being an imposter and chameleon pretending to fit into the mainstream community. Opplia said it was years after leaving the LTTE before she felt normal making decisions on her own, and Kalim says he cannot be himself in 'normal society'. Cult researcher Stuart Wright notes that most people spend a short time in a cult and then leave voluntarily (1991, p. 130). The data from this current study makes the same finding in relation to extremism, and supports Bjorgo and Horgan's consistent findings of the same.

Losing faith in comrades and leaders equates to a loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the person who has been disappointed. Trust and respect are important values that determine not only perceptions of the legitimacy of authorities, procedures and systems, but also the extent to which people are loyal and obedient to them. (Jost & Major, 2001, p.22). Horgan's Irish Republican Army (IRA) interviewees provided similar accounts to those in of the LTTE participants in this study regarding "creeping disillusionment with the image of the IRA and its activities that had formed the bedrock of the fantasies that shaped his initial involvement in the first place" (Horgan, 2009c, p.98). Oppila wrote and performed inspiring poetry for the fallen cadres, and when she could no longer hold her creeping doubts she was horrified at her self-deception. This is not just a feature of extremist group or cults, but a common finding in organisations of all forms:

People will be dissatisfied with an organization in which they experience their treatment by authorities to be rude and demeaning, even if they are not deprived of resources ...

satisfaction and views about the legitimacy of authorities develop from identity-based rather than resource-based needs or concerns. (Jost & Major, 2001, p.22)

However, loss of faith in the people of the group is only half the equation. The last emergent theme within the ‘Social Relations’ domain is ‘Relations with Others’. There is a reason why many extreme groups ban or discourage their members from spending time with outsiders. Change in viewpoint following contact with outsiders is a recurrent topic. This is well illustrated in Aho’s landmark research of several hundred RWEs in the USA. In discussing those who had voluntarily disaffiliated themselves, he identifies two factors: political-religious belief and social-communal relations. Aho concludes that the social-communal dimension is the most important because it is only after a RWE severs group bonds that the “plausibility structure supporting and validating his belief system crumbles” (1994, p.125). Olsen’s interviews found the same:

In the encounter with radically different people and environments, they are offered new ways to understand the world and a new framework that makes them doubt the things they have been taking for granted for a long time. (2009, p.52)

Aho synthesised this balance between push and pull factors into a matrix of likely outcomes based on in-group and out-group relations, reproduced in Table 5.2.

| Social relations in hate group | Social relations outside hate group | Likely career trajectory | Impact on hatred |
|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Non-rewarding | Rewarding | Leave group | Hatred diminishes |
| Non-rewarding | Non-rewarding | Stay in group | Hatred increases |
| Rewarding | Rewarding | Unstable membership | Unstable attitude |
| Rewarding | Non-rewarding | Stay in group | Hatred unchanged |

Table 5.2 Types of social relationships and their impacts on retaining hate group membership and on hatred towards out-groups

An enforced separation between in-group and out-group was experienced by former LTTE soldiers and direct support personnel in this current study, but less so in former pro-LTTE diaspora group members. Clear and hostile separation between the group and enemy outsiders was the case for former neo-jihadist group members but only intermittently so for former direct-action environmentalists, notably when they were in the midst of a campaign or under attack from loggers, police or Army personnel. There was greater variation with the former RWEs, based on how closely they physically lived to other group members – for example in shared houses with or without other individuals involved in the RWE movement. In reality, there is no hard separation between internal and external relationships, and it is the non-linear amalgam of both that points a person inwards or outwards. Aho captures this delicate interplay between in-group and out-group relations:

Voluntary exiting from hate groups thus entails both a social shove from and a being allured to certain social bonds. Once social links to hate groups have been cut, the plausibility structures undergirding hate dogma disappear, making reconversions to new, less hostile belief patterns possible. (Aho, 1994, p.128)

The significance of social connections and networks has been long recognised by criminologists and sociologists as extremely important in supporting a non-offender ‘citizen’ lifestyle (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008, p.356). Successful disengagement programs for right-wing extremists looking to voluntarily disengage have been run for decades in Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands (Bjorgo, 2009; Demant, Wagenaar, & van Donselaar, 2009a). The phases of the program are multi-faceted but the social relations elements are visible in every one of the five phases; see Appendix G for more details (Demant et al., 2009a). Essentially the program aims to assist the individual to peel away from the radical in-group, at the same time as growing new connections. This model has recently been expanded for application to criminal gangs, left-wing and neo-jihadist extremists (ISD, 2010; Örell, 2012).

The more attached and more identified a person is to a group and the fewer the alternative identities immediately available to them, the more acute the impact will be (Jetten, O'Brien, & Trindall, 2002, p.282). This was certainly true in the case of all participants in the current study. The former RWEs and neo-jihadists struggled the most in this regard, whereas the former radical environmentalists had let their ties to wider

society atrophy rather than be actively severed, so it was easier for them to reactivate them. Both the former radical environmentalists and the former LTTE members were, on average, better educated and had more developed identities going into their respective groups than the former RWEs or neo-jihadists, so their ability to form positive relationships with out-group members when they left was greater.

When an individual disengages from an extremist group their internal relationships change, often in the form of a highly distressing rupture. Social psychology research confirms that losing a meaningful identity impacts the individual significantly (Jetten et al., 2002, p.281). As far back as 1949 Lewin argued that one of the most fundamental aspects of “the ground on which an individual stands” is the social group they belong to, which is the primary reason why they are “extremely affected the moment this ground begins to give way”. (Lewin, 1948, p145, cited in Jetten et al., 2002, pp.281-282). This was evident in every single participant’s report from the current study, but was acutely felt by some more than others. In Lewin’s terms, the only ground Barrie has ever stood on as an adult is the social landscape of radical environmentalism since he joined when he was so young, and so almost 10 years after his breakdown he is still struggling to find himself and to find solid ground. Appreciating the importance of identity continuity, or at least an ability to develop alternate meaningful identities leads us to understand why, in disengagement from extremism, the individual’s ability to cope, to attend to health issues, to draw on support and to be resilient through a life-changing transition is so critical to their longer-term adjustment.

5.3 The role of Coping in disengagement

The second domain to emerge from this study’s analysis is ‘Coping’, with three component themes of ‘Physical and Psychological Issues’, ‘Social Support’ and ‘Resilience, Skills and Coping’. The first theme recognises that the intense and punishing lifestyle required of extremists takes a toll on even the most robust individual. Mental and physical exhaustion manifests in a variety of clinical and subclinical ways. If the person entered with health or emotional issues then these will almost certainly be exacerbated during their time in the group. Additionally, as when separating from any important relationship, separating from comrades within a cause driven group elicits significant emotional reactions. Often there are deeply meaningful personal and/or sexual

relationships with peers in the group, adding to the weight of the decision to leave, and the impact of doing so. These reactions range from guilt to anger, and grief to paranoia. The second theme, 'Social Support', recognises that central role of social support in assisting a person to deal with these issues, and its importance cannot be overstated. Former extremists who do not have a support network to fall back upon are at a severe disadvantage. The final theme captures the multiple personal skills, attributes and resources necessary to enable a person to manage the journey back to society.

Turning firstly to physical and psychological issues, there have been repeated findings that mental illness does not account for why people join radical political or religious groups (Beutler, Reyes, Franco, & Housley, 2007; Ruby, 2002a; Silke, 1998). However, below the threshold of diagnosable clinical disorders lies a wide array of 'normal' issues that many people commonly experience at some stage in their life - such as family conflict, relationship problems, physical illness, alcohol abuse, anger, low self-esteem, depression, existential or spiritual seeking, etc. Any problems or concerns a person has when they join an extremist group usually persist during their involvement, and indeed most personal issues tend to be exacerbated by the intensity of the emotional, social or physical stress of involvement in a radical group. It is well established in the field of psychology that people are differentially susceptible to environmental stressors and each individual has a unique limit to how much and what type of stress they can cope with before physical and mental cracks start to appear. Additionally, complex interactions with positive environmental influences, notably meaningful and supportive interpersonal relationships can moderate the severity and the impact of the negative stressors (Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Burns & Machin, 2013). Even though none of the participants in the current study reported suffering mental illness before joining, physical and psychological issues were important factors for 86% of them. Surprisingly then, the broader literature makes limited reference to the psychological issues a former extremist might experience (see Aho, 1994; Aly & Striegher, 2012; Bjorgo, 2009; Bjorgo & Carlsson, 2005; Demant et al., 2008a; Dwyer & Maruna, 2011; and Horgan, 2009c, for examples where psychological issues have been discussed). There has been more reference to physical hardship or breakdown. This apparent disparity might be on account of the fact that whilst there are indisputable psychological and physical health consequences of involvement in extremist groups, it is not causal and therefore has not received attention. It may also be a methodological artefact in that only in-depth interviews, and IPA particularly, offer the

ability to penetrate deeper into the experience from the participant's perspective. Bjorgo captures the burnout experiences of those he has interviewed:

A common feeling among many of the 'front-line' activists is that after a while they become exhausted and can no longer take the pressure. Life in a skinhead gang or a militant nationalist youth group can be very exciting. The struggle against various enemies — whether they be militant anti-racists, immigrant youth gangs or the police -- may entail violent clashes, clandestine activities and an almost constant feeling of high tension and uncertainty. The attraction of these adrenaline highs makes 'normal' life outside seem almost unbearably dull. However, few people can continue to live this kind of life year after year without becoming emotionally and physically burnt out. These negative aspects of being stigmatized, socially isolated, always exposed to violent attacks from opponents, and consumed by intense hatred for various enemies also tend to take their toll as time passes by. (Bjorgo, 2009, pp.38-39)

Similarly, in summarising the empirical literature on individual disengagement from violent extremism in a Western context, Dalgaard-Nielson's third cluster clearly identified burnout and fatigue as a significant issue. The consequences of psychological problems are more explicitly identified as both a barrier to exit and a vulnerability factor for recidivism in the gang desistance literature. Among other similarities in engagement with and defection from organised crime groups, cults, terrorist groups and youth gangs, Bovenkerk notes that former members of all these groups "exhibit a number of clinical symptoms that deserve attention from a public health perspective" such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, loneliness, anger, a sense of guilt (2011, pp.273-274). Similar severe, serious and complex mental health problems were reported in a large recent study of over 100 gang members in the UK (Coid et al., 2013). Leaving an extreme or violent group, whilst arguably positive in terms of life decisions, is nonetheless a highly stressful activity, and can be expected to trigger and/or aggravate any latent or existing issues.

In the sample from the current study, former RWEs Karyn and Freya struggled with emotional issues from a young age. Even though they joined to feel empowered and like they belonged, their emotional and physical well-being deteriorated dramatically in an alcohol-saturated RWE environment, where there was violence and resultant paranoia both inside and outside the group. Bilal says he wishes his family had loved him more and given him more guidance, because he received the wrong kind of guidance from the

criminally oriented neo-jihadist group he joined. He still has residual mental and physical health issues many years after leaving. With the exception of a few, participants in this current study did not join their group because of or with significant issues, but the majority definitely departed their group with major emotional, psychological and physical health issues. Oppila reports that she still has post-traumatic reactions related to her time as a child soldier with the LTTE. Eric and Daphne are still recovering from their emotional and physical breakdowns from their time in their respective direct-action environmentalist groups.

‘Social Support’ is the second major theme emerging from the Social Relations domain in the current study. It has also been identified as a consistent theme in other empirical studies, and is starting to be recognised as a key aspect of intervention or prevention programs. Having interviewed many former extremists from a range of ideology backgrounds, Bjorgo concludes that on leaving the group a former extremist usually experiences an intense social vacuum. This places them at high risk of social rejection from the mainstream community which in turn places them at high risk of seeking social shelter with antisocial or counter-cultural fringe groups, or even returning to the old radical group (Bjorgo, 2009, 1995). This was also the case for Ilardi’s Canadian sample, highlighting that it is not just those who have committed violence who need help coming back into society. Society is, by definition a social place. It is of and for people. Therefore, it makes complete sense that social relations and social support will moderate the entire process, facilitating or impeding the progress of other aspects depending on the quantity and whether it is antisocial or prosocial in nature. From his interviews Ilardi concluded that “just as personal relationships proved instrumental in these men’s radicalization, so too were they in helping individuals reassess and recalibrate the theological and practical implications of engaging in jihad” (Ilardi, 2013, p. 735).

This is certainly the experience of almost all participants in the current study. Analysis of their interviews in the previous chapter reveals that it is the quality of social relationships, and an ability to identify with others that means any assistance is perceived as supportive rather than punitive or controlling. Kalim’s rejection of any support or interaction from anyone who is not a fundamentalist Muslim illustrates the extreme version of this. On the other hand, Bakar describes a circular and symbiotic relationship

between his sense of being supported by more and more people after leaving as he slowly expanded his social world and began to identify with others outside his Islamist group.

The most obvious source of social support comes from family members who have not been involved in extremism themselves. This theme abounded in the participant interviews from the current study, specifically Bakar, Nadia, Daphne, Bilal, Oppila and Wasan, whose family were concerned, expressed displeasure at their involvement but did not cut ties, and were available afterwards when each participant eventually left. This has been noted in other studies of former extremists (Bjorgo, 2009; Weine et al., 2009; Wright & Piper, 1986). This same theme has been investigated in much more detail in the cult and gang research. In researching exit from cult groups Wright and Piper found that parental disapproval of their adult child's involvement was the most important variable in explaining disaffiliation, and it was particularly so for those individuals who had positive relationships with their family before joining. The following explanation, albeit about cult involvement, resonates for many of the participants in the current study:

Cult involvement is neither a cause nor a symptom of family disorganization. Affiliation appears to be unrelated to family experiences and, as such, cannot be symptomatic of the declining family. More importantly, however, parents and family are shown to have a significant effect upon the young member's choice to remain or disaffiliate. (Wright & Piper, 1986, pp.22-23)

On the other hand, a significant barrier to leaving, independent of any feared admonishment from the group, is the difficulty faced when former extremists step outside the group and into the 'real' world in terms of personal, family and institutional rejection. This is acutely the case for individuals who do not have good relations with their family, or whose family might be involved in antisocial or extreme activities themselves. Former gang members "experience the worst of both worlds" (Greene & Pranis, 2007, p.51). The parallels are strongly evident across all the ideology groups in the current study, but particularly so for the former RWEs and former neo-jihadists.

The third theme in the 'Coping' domain is 'Resilience, Skills and Coping'. This theme is implied in much of the existing disengagement research but rarely made explicit. It was a strong theme in this research project with over 90% of the participants identifying it as significant to them in their transition from being an extremist to being a member of mainstream society again. The reason for its importance in this study could

simply be that the focus of this study was on leaving and life afterwards, taking a long-term life-cycle perspective of radicalisation, with less emphasis than found in other studies on causal factors *per se*. This theme is well captured by The Australian Government's term 'social inclusion' which denotes that a person has the resources, opportunities and capabilities needed to learn, work, engage and have a voice in their community. In this context, to engage with society wholly means to "connect with people, use services and participate in local, cultural, civic and recreational activities" and to have a voice means a person is "able to influence decisions that affect them" (APS, 2009, p.22). Perhaps the fullest expression of this comes close to what policymakers have in mind when they hope for deradicalisation of former extremists. In the early stages of disengagement, in practical terms, this simply means being able to access basic civic services such as housing, health care, and training and employment support. Gang exit programs do this well:

The program also helps support the mental health and/or substance abuse needs of re-entry youth, and encourages these youth to live independently and function socially. The program engages both families and community providers during pre-release activities, while the youth is in the facility. Aftercare specialists are employed to engage these families and/or support systems by visiting their homes, participating in youth and family meetings, and helping identify services for the youth and their families. Families and community providers are part of developing each youth's aftercare service plan. (Emanuel, 2012, p.35)

As foreshadowed above, whilst social psychologists agree that social support is critical, they caution that channels by which it is delivered – who the social support is received from, and with what intent – are absolutely critical to whether it actually constitutes social support. It is most likely to be effective social support when "those who provide and receive that support perceive themselves to share a relevant social identity" (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2012, p.15). Jetten and her colleagues go on to conclude that "in the absence of a shared social identity, social support and interaction can have negative consequences" (2012, p.15). As already mentioned, Kalim's story provides an acute example of this wherein he perceives any interaction, even a greeting, from a non-Muslim to be abrasive. A positive example of the same point is evident in Bari's recovery after leaving his neo-jihadist group where he spent all his spare time with mainstream Muslim community programs, clearly seeking support from people with whom he

identified. Another positive example of this comes from a self-help program run by former political prisoners in Ireland where they provide support to other prisoners as they return to the community (Dwyer & Maruna, 2011, p.306).

A large variance of physical and mental health is accounted for by the presence of supportive social relationships. In research about the role of social identity in managing health issues it was found that “the stronger our ties with family, work colleagues, community or other groups, then the better our health, irrespective of whether this is assessed in terms of mortality, chronic illness, mood, pain or life satisfaction” (Jetten et al., 2012, p.12). This helps explain the reports of former extremists that so much depends upon the level and source of social support.

Most people in wider society need assistance to learn the full suite of social and emotional skills to equip them for life. Typically these skills are acquired in the normal course of life development and sourced from all the people in the full social network such as parents, friends, teachers, community or professionals. Obtaining new social and emotional skills also decreases return to a familiar but anti-social group or lifestyle:

Social-emotional skills are what allow people to navigate social situations, manage emotions and relationships, and control our own behavior. Youth who have strong social-emotional skills are able to handle conflicts and anger without resorting to violence. (Emanuel, 2012, p.25)

When a person’s social world is reduced to that of a singular demanding group, and then that tightly bounded reality is totally dislocated and removed, many individuals are unprepared. These are difficult conditions under which to activate or learn new skills for coping and self-care. Individuals living with stigmatised and pejorative labels usually experience a multitude of challenges and frequent rejection: it is difficult to secure housing, find suitable vocational training or employment, let alone make new friends and put down roots in a new community. This is especially the case for former extremists, commonly referred to in the media as ‘terrorists’; which does not make for a warm or even neutral reception from the host community. Some participants in the current study such as Bakar and Barrie needed assistance with even basic independent living skills when they left, because they had joined their respective groups so young, and had been cut off from the mainstream world. Drawing back to the bigger picture, it should now be evident that disengagement from extremism is really a process of identity transition that

builds its foundations on social relationships and is enhanced by an ability to cope with residual issues. Only then can a person move forward and begin to identify with the mainstream society in some way.

5.4 The role of Identity in disengagement

If social relations are the vehicle by which a person moves in and out of groups, identification with the group is the glue that makes it hard to leave, and simultaneously, the glue that makes it possible to connect into a new community (van Vugt & Hart, 2004). It is argued here that identity is key to understanding disengagement as a phenomenon. In-group identification is a determinant of group commitment and subsequent behaviour with respect to all types of groups (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997, p.624). There is natural variation in how identified or committed group members are to their group and it is self-evident that there are high and low identifiers within the membership ranks of every group, even elite or extreme groups. As an aside, disengagement is a term already used in SIT literature to mean “distancing oneself from the group” (Packer, 2008, p.50).

Identity was a dominant motif in this current study of disengagement from extremism. Almost three quarters of the participants spoke at length about how their identification with the group decreased, and this represents the first theme, ‘Reduction in Group Identity’ within the ‘Identity’ domain. As the earlier section about the ‘Social Relations’ domain demonstrated, disappointment with leaders and peers can lead to delegitimisation of the group and subsequently, as this and other research suggests, to reduced identification with the radical group. The second theme is ‘Emergence of Personal Identity’, a task that is much harder for some people than others. This theme was significant for 91% of participants in the current study, and evident in the wider literature. Finally, locating and developing an alternate social identity, preferably several, seems to be key for those who navigated the transition from a radical outsider identity to civic identity as someone who belongs somewhere in mainstream society. Whether or not they achieved an alternative social identity, every single participant in the sample discussed this theme.

In a compelling study of 185 personal narratives of significant identity change, Ebaugh identified four central themes as common across a wide range of normal and

extreme role changes, including leaving marriages, jobs, groups, gangs, prostitution, religious groups, ideology groups, and criminal lifestyles (1988). These themes are present in former IRA, RWE and neo-jihadist group members (Bjorgo, 2009, 1995, 2005; Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b; Horgan, 2008a, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Horgan & Braddock, 2010). There is also a remarkable similarity to direct accounts provided by former cult members (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b; Lalich, 1988; Lalich & Tobias, 1994; Singer & Lalich, 1994). Ebaugh's four themes are: a sense of dissatisfaction with the current identity; seeking or being open to an alternative identity/role; the presence of certain factors or incidents to trigger a decision or action to leave or change; and finally, the opportunity to create a new identity. Hassan (1988, pp.148-167) lists seven important factors for overcoming cult ideology, three of which involve shifting aspects of social identity. For example, there is an emphasis placed on getting in touch with the person's pre-cult identity, understanding their cult identity along with various ideological manipulations and emotional/social pressures to conform to group norms.

Ebaugh's findings strongly suggest that disengagement from extremism is also a process of self and social identity change. Far from just changing one's method of political/religious activism, or even disavowing a radical ideology, leaving extremism and engaging with mainstream society is a profound process of identity renegotiation, something which Bjorgo also acknowledges:

To join a racist group will for a young person in most cases involve a dramatic transformation of social status and identity. However, leaving the group for some may involve even more dramatic breaches and transformations. (2009, p.47)

Further, if someone who is highly identified or fused²³ with the group identity is irrevocably rejected by the group, then this can actually increase "endorsement of

²³ An alternate way of viewing strong commitment to a group has been put forward by proponents of identity fusion and self-validation theory (Swann, Jetten, Gomez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012). Whilst both SIT and self-validation theory schools consider extreme actions on behalf of a group to be the product of the interaction between personal and social identities, the difference is "in how personal and social identities are thought to interact when people align themselves with a group" (Swann, Gomez, Huici, Morales, & Hixon, 2010, p. 824). Instead of subjugating personal identity to social identity as in SIT, a functional merging of personal with social identity is hypothesised to occur for some group members resulting in heightened commitment. Identity fusion is defined as "a visceral feeling of oneness with the group ... associated with unusually porous, highly permeable borders between the personal and social self.

extreme pro-group actions” such as fighting and dying for the in-group (Gomez, Morales, Hart, Vázquez, & Swann, 2011, p.1574). This is clearly evident with Kalim, who was a highly fused/identified neo-jihadist who was rejected by his group. If anything his loyalty to a pan-Islamist state and the romanticised memory of his group has intensified since his exit. Though he states he will never participate in anything illegal because the personal cost is too high, he continues to endorse extreme pro-group actions. Bilal on the other hand never merged his identity fully with his group, though he was as much a part of the inner circle as is possible by virtue of kinship and marriage arrangements. When he was rejected irrevocably by the group he held no residual desire to act on behalf of the group in any way, extreme or otherwise.

Even highly educated, vocationally skilled, emotionally stable, socially connected former extremists who enjoy positive family relationships testified how hard it is to leave everything behind. Daphne said she felt lost and “*completely at sea*” until she found where to land next. “It is not easy to leave behind everything one once proclaimed, and forge a new destiny” was how Aho summed up the collective experience of his American neo-Nazis (Aho, 1994, p.134). The process of disaffiliating, of letting go of one’s conjoined identity with an extremist group is not easy. It is also not an invisible or a theoretical process, it is very real to those going through it and this is apparent in interviews with former extremists (Aho, 1994; Bjorgo & Carlsson, 2005; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013; Demant et al., 2008a; Horgan, 2009c; Vidino, 2011). Social psychologists have been aware of this for some time:

Identities do not operate in a temporal vacuum; people have a clear sense of whether they have lost group memberships that were important in the past, whether they have acquired new identities, and may also have an awareness of the future viability of those identities. (C. Haslam, Jetten, & Haslam, 2012, p.325)

Just because a person begins to identify less with the group, it does not mean the cause or the ideas are no longer important to them, though in some cases this is exactly what happens. What is clear from decades of social psychology research is that the more one identifies with the group, the more importance this social identity carries for the self,

These porous borders encourage people to channel their personal agency into group behaviour, raising the possibility that the personal and social self will combine synergistically to motivate pro-group behaviour” (Swann et al., 2012, p. 441).

and the more it impacts when this identity is lost or significantly revised (Jetten et al., 2002, p.282). Several of the participants in the current study, such as Eric, spoke of an “*identity crisis*” when their identification with the group waned and they did not have solid personal or alternate social identities to fall back onto. Psychologists agree this is an “emotionally wrenching” task as an individual substantially restructures their “self concept, [their] relation to others, and even the very meaning of [their] actions” (Swann et al., 2012, p.450). Quite accurately, writing from a theoretical perspective, some SIT researchers have predicted that:

De-fusion may also occur when relational ties with group members are shattered. For example, if one group member betrays another group member in a manner that is unforgivable (e.g. causing a group member’s death), ejection from the group and de-fusion may follow. Finally, people may choose to de-fuse from the group if they conclude that it has changed in a way that contradicts its core values and beliefs. (Swann et al., 2012, p.450)

As hard as it is to let go of an important identity group, even if it is better to go than to stay, this tends to provide the opportunity for emergence of personal identity, the second theme in the ‘Identity’ domain. Dalgaard-Nielsen’s third cluster is precisely this – the pull towards normal interests that often accompanies maturation:

Growing older appears to be an important disengagement factor. The case studies contain examples of how front line activism begins to feel unnatural and awkward to a number of individuals as they enter their thirties and start thinking more seriously about getting a job, starting a career, having a family and a decent place to live. (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013, p.105)

Apparent in almost every study on leaving RWE groups is that a main reason for leaving is maturity. Young people who have “devoted years to Nazism, sooner or later take a good look around them and no longer like their political kinsmen” (Arnstberg & Hallen, 2000, cited in Wahlstrom, 2001, p.18). Olsen found the same with his interviews of former extremists from a wider range of ideology backgrounds including left-wing, right-wing, eco-groups, animal rights groups, and even hooligans who mix their football with politics (2009, p.53). Changing and conflicting personal priorities such as getting married, having children, growing older featured in Horgan’s interviews with a range of former extremists (Horgan, 2009c, p.31). Along with several others of the former direct-

action environmentalists in the current study, Ed spoke about “*growing out of it*”. Similarly, several of them, Ed and Dean particularly, talked of making way for the younger generation.

The formation of a stable identity has been long accepted as the single most important developmental task facing young people as they develop a “stable set of norms, values and commitments as a frame of reference to guide them in their day-to-day activities” (Klimstra et al., 2010, p.191). If these developmental tasks happen to have occurred whilst in an intense and socially compressed environment (such as in a radical group) then distortions can be expected. It also means that any unfinished development needs to occur when they leave the group, but this will co-occur with other challenges as discussed earlier in the section on ‘Coping’. Central to many classical personality theories is the notion that a healthy stable identity requires integration of positive and negative aspects of past identity, and that this in turn enables self-awareness and learning how to respond to future situations better than in the past (Weinstein, Deci, & Ryan, 2011, pp.527-528). The formation of a stable personal identity was highly relevant to 20 out of 22 participants in the current study. For differing reasons, Eric, Barrie, Kalim, Bakar, Oppila, Freya and Lena found this a most difficult task. Others, such as Nadia, Daphne, Rob, Jari, Taqi, Oli, Thenan and Rick had identity threads more readily available to fall back onto. The formation of personal identity is also impacted by all three of the ‘Coping’ domain themes.

Identity change is “natural but complex” and social relationships are “central and necessary” to this process (Jetten et al., 2012, p.17). This brings us to the third theme in the ‘Identity’ domain – ‘Alternate Social Identity’, and links it to the themes in the ‘Social Relations’ domain. Leaving an extremist group in any sustained way requires engagement elsewhere. There is no guarantee where this will be, and the new group the person identifies with may or may not be neutral or prosocial. Finding somewhere to belong is fundamental to the well-being of all people. Put simply, a person stops being outside society when they come back inside. Research has demonstrated that social identity variables are “more important than economic differences when explaining life-satisfaction differences” (Sani, 2012, p.66). Summarising the social psychology research on social capital and individual health, Putnam concludes that, “as a rough rule of thumb,

if you belong to no groups but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying in the next year in half” (2000, p.331). But social identities “take time to grow” (Sani, 2012, p.68).

According to social psychologists, one of the most dangerous assumptions we could make is to think that social identities are easy to develop and sustain. Most young people, or people with compromised social resources need help to do so, and especially during classic social identity change phases such as when leaving home, starting a new job, having a baby, moving house, retiring, having a serious accident, or becoming ill. Finding an ‘Alternate Social Identity’ was an important theme for every single participant in the current study. Those that had established multiple social identities before they joined their extremist group, such as Dean, Sean, Nadia, Jari, Oli, Thenan, and Bagyam found it easier to reactivate them. Others like Barrie, Bilal, Bakar, Oppila, Rick, Freya and Lena essentially grew up in their respective extremist group and so had to work a lot harder and draw on much more support to establish alternate social identities afterwards. As is the case with developing a stable personal identity, the formation of alternative social identities is affected by the other domains, particularly ‘Social Relations’ and ‘Coping’. These findings resonate with Haslam et al.’s explanation:

It is during these periods that we are most vulnerable – emotionally, physically and psychologically – due largely to the uncertainty each transition brings. Some people manage these transitions well ... there is evidence that prior experience with social groups, and particularly multiple social groups, is a critical factor in building new relationships in times of change. However, some people require help in managing transitions. When this is the case, care should be taken to ensure that interventions are appropriately targeted. (C. Haslam et al., 2012, p.327)

As discussed in the section on social support, shared social identification is key to whether the support given actually translates into support received. Attending a social group is not necessarily the same as identifying with a meaningful shared social identity, and social contact does not always equate to social support. Belonging and identifying at the community level is “highly dependent on other local variables especially neighbourhood trust, social connections with family and friends, and length of time spent in the neighbourhood” (Sani, 2012, p.68). However, contact with a range of individuals and social groups is a precondition for achieving both social identity and social support. To reiterate, social identification only occurs when there is meaningful alignment with a

particular group based on the perception of common interest, fate, motivations and aspirations, beliefs, or values (Drury, 2012). In short, social identities represent social capital for the individual and for the community:

Social identities are not simply aspects of the self-concept that researchers need to understand, but... they are tangible resources from which people can draw strength when undergoing potentially stressful life changes. As resources they offer a buffer against the negative consequences of change, illness, and stress. (C. Haslam et al., 2012, p.323).

Leaving an important identity group is difficult. Whilst it is entirely normal to join and to leave groups over a lifetime, people usually have multiple salient identity groups at any one time, providing a smoother transition if one thread of social identity peels away. A person who is torn, pushed or even ejects themselves out of a radical group typically has few proximate alternative identity groups to fall back upon. Further, if they have not undergone the important developmental task of basic personal identity formation then this is even harder, and attending to this primary task will enhance their ability to find social groups that truly meet their needs. Unless this happens then they will be at risk of prematurely adopting or not being able to critically analyse ideas and narratives that are placed in front of them.

5.5 The role of Ideology in disengagement

Ideologies are whole-of-life philosophies that “impose a pattern, structure and interpretation on how we read (or misread) political facts, events, occurrences and actions” (Freedon, 2003, pp.2-4). In the context of radicalisation, ideology refers to the significant shift in the way a person views the world and their role in it such that the person increasingly embraces ideas, beliefs and narratives that are substantially divergent from the cultural mainstream of their community. In the context of disengagement, there is a corresponding shift away from the radical ideology that is typically accompanied by a large set of social, personal, identity, and behavioural changes. As discussed in Chapter 1, the ideological aspect of disengagement is usually referred to as ‘psychological disengagement’, ‘cognitive disengagement’ or ‘deradicalisation’.

The concept of deradicalisation is “deeply problematic and carries with it equally troubling expectations” (Horgan, 2009c, p.17). It is well accepted that not only is there distinction to be made between radical ideas and radical actions but also that leaving an

extremist group “does not always result in the group member’s abandoning his radical beliefs” (Jacobson, 2010, p.1). According to social psychologists who research legitimacy, the “primary function of ideological thought in general, is to legitimise ideas and actions that might otherwise be objectionable” (Jost & Major, 2001, p.6). In the context of extremist groups that seek to use violence to challenge the dominant social or political order, this includes legitimising the use of violence for the benefit of the in-group at the cost of out-group members, which sometimes literally includes the rest of the world.

The ‘Ideology’ domain manifests differently for different participants. The first theme, ‘Disillusionment with Radical Ideology’, occurred for some but not all, and is independent of whether a person stops their use of violence or involvement in extremism. The second theme is about finding one’s own beliefs, and although this is rarely discussed in the literature, it was relevant to every single one of the participants. Finally, the third theme is ‘Acceptance of Difference’, which refers to accepting others’ beliefs and ways of life as legitimate, even if they diverge from one’s own.

Firstly, losing faith in an extremist or militant ideology is as emotional as it is logical, and there are numerous ways a person can become disillusioned with the ideas and narrative of the group. Because an absolutist ideology is absolute, doubt can potentially emerge when there is any deviation from the doctrine by leaders or followers. This was particularly the case for the former neo-jihadists in the current study. Bakar’s breakdown was triggered by the idea that the Qu’ran contradicted itself. He says he did not have any doubts prior to this, but the existence of a contradiction in the holy text violated the absolute nature of the fundamentalist teachings he had subscribed to. This constituted a monumental crisis for him.

More commonly, members of extremist groups tend to suppress early doubts and convince themselves things are fine for a period of time, sometimes up to years. It often takes several different cracks in the absolutist beliefs, values and norms to move a person to consciously acknowledge their concerns, by which time doubts have become disillusionment. This was the case for Oppila who had doubts about the Tamil Tigers before she even joined them. They had killed her cousin but she reasoned they were still the only hope for the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. More disappointments accumulated whilst she was a member but it was when nobody in the group seemed to notice or care

that her best friend had been shot dead as they ran through the jungle that she could not hold back the doubts any longer. Whatever the origin of this disillusionment, the individual comes to a point where the narrative is no longer convincing, as also noted by several other researchers. Dalgaard-Nielsen's overview of the empirical research concluded that "once an exiter is able to step outside the narrative and realize how self-referential and self-sustaining it is, he or she might feel disillusioned, even cheated" (2013, p.105).

Disillusionment with radical ideas was a recurring theme in Horgan's interviews where he notes that disillusionment arises from "internal strategic, political or ideological differences" (Horgan, 2009c, p.31). It is also strongly evident in the Dutch work of Demant and her colleagues who interviewed former extremists from a wide range of ideology backgrounds (2008a). As a former member of the Greek left-wing extremist group '17 November' called Sotiris Kondylis quipped, "guns need hands but they also need ideas. If the ideas are not there, the guns won't work" (Kassimeris, 2011, p.569). In another study it was former leaders rather than rank and file members of neo-jihadist groups who cited an inaccurate interpretation of Islam as the major factor in their defection (Jacobson, 2010, p.1). Ordinary members tended to report their disappointment with the reality of an extremist lifestyle as well as disillusionment in how they were treated by the group, echoing 'Social Relations' themes already discussed. Jacobson's findings correspond to the accounts provided by the former extremist group members in the current study. Bari felt greatly let down by both his leaders and group peers when they behaved in rude, disrespectful and selfish ways that were "*wholly un-Islamic*". The link between dishonourable group behaviour and/or leadership failure, and the delegitimisation of ideas is clear in the words of a former neo-jihadist interviewed by Vidino. The participant explains how, abandoned by his peers, he "felt betrayed and then I spiritually left the group" (2010, p.411). This highlights the interplay between the social, emotional and ideological aspects of identity and commitment.

A number of studies have pointed to the importance of time away as a way of enabling the person time and space to review their ideas without the constant pressure from the radical group/milieu (Arnstberg & Hallen, 2000, cited in Wahlstrom, 2001, p.19). Sometimes time away leads directly to a departure from the group, in other cases individuals return but cannot shake their doubts and eventually leave when they have the

opportunity and/or personal resources to do so. In the current study this was the case for Freya, who was isolated from her RWE peers for the first time whilst serving prison time for terrorism convictions, and revised her views considerably in this time, but still took some months once she was released to actually extricate from the group. Typically, attitudes change after a person has broken social ties with the group, as the belief system is no longer supported and validated by a community of significant others. Thus, changes in political beliefs often follow changes in group membership rather than necessarily preceding and causing these changes (Bjorgo, 2009, p.47; Bjorgo & Carlsson, 2005, p.40; Schmid & Price, 2011, p.338; Arnstberg & Hallen, 2000, cited in Wahlstrom, 2001, p.18). This is particularly common in former RWEs and members of groups that are very controlling or cult-like. Lena, a former RWE from the current study talks about how even though she did not join or leave for political reasons, it still took some years for hateful thoughts to stop automatically occurring when she saw Jewish or immigrant people. Albeit not the case for the RWE participants in this current study, other studies report that many RWEs retain racist and ethnocentric views after leaving, highlighting the independence of the ‘Action Orientation’ and ‘Ideology’ domains (Bjorgo, 2009, p.43; Wahlstrom, 2001).

Some people profess conversion to a religious or ideological worldview without a true reorientation of world perspective. These changes can be described as “situational adjustments” (Bankston et al., 1981, p.284). This is especially the case if they have become involved for personal or social reasons without any particular interest in or consideration of the doctrine or ideology, a noted feature of radicalisation in Australia (Aly & Striegher, 2012; Harris-Hogan, 2012; Koschade, 2006; Lentini, 2008a; Michaelsen, 2010; Neighbour, 2009). Based on extensive interviews with former extremists, Bjorgo cautions against counter-narrative campaigns with “a focus on ideology and values” as not being likely to have much effect in terms of preventing youths from joining extremist groups or inducing them to quit. He advises that measures addressing social factors are vital and may be more effective (Bjorgo, 2009, p.48). Borum echoes these sentiments in his observation that many who use violence in the name of a political or religious ideology “are not ideologues or deep believers in a nuanced, extremist doctrine. Some only have a cursory knowledge or, or commitment to, the radical ideology” (2011, p.9). In their recent work, McCauley and Moskalenko argue that ideology is not even necessarily a prime factor in radicalisation, and that it is more often

an excuse for violence than a root cause (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011). This was the case for all of the RWEs and most of the neo-jihadists in the current study, wherein they adopted the extreme narratives as a transient belief system for the duration of their membership, and relinquished it without too much angst or effort once they left.

Mindful of Neumann's overview of Anglo-Saxon versus European approaches to cognitive versus behavioural radicalisation, Borum's caution against a narrow focus on ideological radicalisation seems prudent. To do otherwise implies that "radical beliefs are a proxy – or at least a necessary precursor – for terrorism, though we know this not to be true" (2011, p.7). This is relevant particularly in non-conflict environments such as Australia where people often join for personal or social reasons, and subsequently adopt the ideological aspects. This is not to imply that they do not support these ideas, nor share the political goals of the group, but to recognise that in many cases, ideological radicalisation may be secondary to a social process. In some cases, revolutionary ideology also provides a noble rationalisation for an existing orientation towards violence and/or other illegal activities. This was evident in Bilal's story where involvement in a hard-line Islamist group was a disciplinary response by his family to his juvenile delinquency, and his petty crime skills were enhanced as he was tasked to carry out other higher-order violent activities.

The second theme, 'Find Own Beliefs', was a feature for every participant interviewed for this research, but has not been identified as a unique factor in the existing literature. There are several possible reasons for this. If a former extremist modifies their ideology then it can fall under the broad umbrella of ideological disillusionment and/or be categorised as evidence of 'deradicalisation'. If a former extremist lets go of radical ideas and reverts to mainstream ideas then this may be viewed as a success but no longer worthy of investigation. If an individual casts aside radical ideas and becomes apolitical, it may be that they have become 'gun shy' of politics and activism, but it is also possible they simply are not engaging with big philosophical questions. This may or may not be related to incomplete personal identity development as discussed in the Identity section above. In different ways, finding their own beliefs was important to all the former extremists in this study - some like Barrie are still searching, others such as Bakar want to believe in God again but vow to always retain some doubt, whilst others such as Jari and Rob are quite clear about their beliefs and path now. Some have thoroughly revised their

ideas and formed quite different ones to when they were involved in their extremist group – such as all three former RWEs and several of the former pro-LTTE members.

In two of the case studies presented in Horgan's 2009 book, participants Omar and Bakri, were deeply interested in Islamist ideology in its own right (2009c, pp.63-76, 118-138). In contrast, all but two of the former neo-jihadist participants in this current study were apolitical before, during and after their involvement. At a surface level they adopted the radical narrative promoted by their respective group leaders. By comparison, they were positively mute in comparison with the pages and pages of transcript dedicated to politics of Islam and the failings of democracy for Muslim people in Western countries offered by Horgan's participants. Even the two exceptions, Jari and Kalim, who reported that they were interested in nonviolent political Islam since leaving their respective neo-jihadist groups, did not speak at all of their political interests. On the other hand, every single former pro-LTTE member and every single former direct-action environmentalist in the current study spoke at length about their current political views. A study of former members of an al-Qaeda affiliated network noted that thousands of pages of interview transcript were "virtually devoid of any reference to political grievances or religious motives" (Vidino, 2010, p.405). Similarly, Ilardi, who interviewed Canadian Muslim radicals, concluded that the role played by political grievance, marginalisation or personal revenge was "negligible" (2013, p.735). This was the case for all three of the former RWEs in the current study; they did not offer any lucid commentary beyond stereotypical hate rhetoric regarding their social and political beliefs whilst in the group. Interestingly, all three were quite articulate about their current views on democracy and society, which were without exception, liberal and pluralist.

This is not to say that ideology is irrelevant, but that it is perhaps a proxy for other factors. In a study of former Australian neo-jihadist Jack Roche, it was found that ideology played a far lesser role in his radicalisation towards violent extremism than Silber and Bhatt's four-phase model would contend. In this case, the role of religion in Roche's radicalisation was as "a vehicle for group bonding, a moral template for constructing ingroup/outgroup boundaries, a legitimising ideology that is used to authorize the use of violence and the narrative basis for collective victim identity" (Aly & Striegher, 2012, p.859).

Others do remain deeply committed to their group's ideology, despite separation from the group and discontinued involvement in any form of radical activity. For those who left because of burnout or fatigue, Dalgaard-Nielsen notes that "quitting, in many of these instances, becomes more a pragmatic choice than something prompted by an ideological change of heart. A number of exiters explicitly state that though they behave differently they think the same" (2013, p.107). This was strongly apparent for several participants in the current study, particularly former radical environmentalists Eric, Barrie and Daphne who were forced out by a personal breakdown and not because they changed their beliefs. Similarly, in analysing interviews with 35 former Basque ethno-nationalist extremist members of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna²⁴, Reinares concluded that it was "unsurprising that "individual disengagement from [Euskadi Ta Askatasuna] means neither necessarily repudiating violence nor impugning the terrorist organisation" (2011, p.781). Even so, other extremists report that even when their exit had nothing to do with ideological doubt, their ideas "gradually changed as they stopped spending time with their extremist peers" (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013, p.107).

'Acceptance of Difference' is the final theme in the 'Action Orientation' domain. Accepting and embracing difference is the ideal in a liberal democracy, but in reality this is rarely the case. Tolerance is the minimum required to stem discrimination and identity based violence. For example, according to one key study, 40% of the general Australian population are ambivalent about cultural diversity, and an additional ten percent hold racist attitudes (Markus, 2009). Further, almost 15% of Australian residents are against multiculturalism (UWS, 2014) and 33% believe there are some cultural groups who do not belong in Australia (ATN, 2014). This is mainstream Australia. So if the goal of deradicalisation for former extremists is to return to mainstream ideas and values this allows for an extremely wide variance in attitudes towards tolerating difference. Indeed, "being against extremist violence and encouraging tolerance of non-Muslims do not equate to being positive towards or assimilating Western values" (Prentice, Taylor, Rayson, & Giebels, 2012, p302). This said, a remarkable number of former extremists

²⁴ Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, commonly known as 'ETA' is an armed Basque nationalist and separatist organisation.

from all three ideology types in the current study did in fact develop highly humanistic and pluralist beliefs over time, for example Daphne, Bakar, Wasan and Rick. There are similar exceptional cases scattered through other research. Aho reported some complete reversals in his RWE sample, as did Kassimeris (2011) and Horgan (2009c) describing the liberal humanistic views of a former Greek leftist and an Irish nationalist extremist, respectively.

Irrespective of the person's ideas, one of the principles in a Western democracy such as Australia is freedom of thought and speech. However, behaving in a way that hurts others is not acceptable under law or cultural norms, which brings us to the final domain, which is about the type of action a person is oriented towards.

5.6 The role of Action Orientation in disengagement

To meet either definition of behavioural disengagement or psychological disengagement it is necessary for a person to stop using violence in pursuit of their political or religious goals (Horgan, 2009b; Horgan & Braddock, 2010). As discussed in Chapter 1, the Anglo-Saxon view holds that "it is still far more important to change violent behaviour than change radical attitudes" (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b, p.3), as compared to the European view that considers radical attitudes to be just as worthy of prohibition and rehabilitation (Neumann, 2013). Given the minimum goal is to stop the use of violence, it is surprising how little discussion there is in the disengagement literature regarding action orientation.

Through in-depth interviews in this study it was possible to see that some participants did question and in some cases reject the use of radical methods, generating the theme 'Disillusionment with Radical Methods'. As well established by now, it is not necessary to reject the idea of violence in order to stop using violence, giving rise to the second theme 'Stop Using Radical Methods'. Once a person no longer uses violent or radical methods there are a host of possible outcomes. A small number will return to violent extremism (though this did not apply to any of the participants in this study). The rest find a place somewhere in wider society. Some move to a nonviolent radical lifestyle. Some will not join any new group and choose, albeit unhappily, to stay on the periphery, whereas others will yearn for the heroism of righteous battle but slowly put down roots in the mainstream world. Most become actively engaged in the normal pursuits of family, work and hobbies, and may or may not retain elements of their radical beliefs in their

current ideas. Given their extreme starting point, a surprising number become involved in prosocial, altruistic activities that benefit all of society. The final theme represents all of these possible outcomes, but takes its title from the unexpected positive extreme, ‘Prosocial Engagement in Society’.

Firstly, disillusionment with radical methods is frequent amongst extremists. In her meta-analysis of all empirical research on disengagement Dalgaard-Neilsen found that the “feeling of burnout appears to be a particularly powerful push toward exit if it coincides with a notion that the extremist group is not making any progress toward its social and political goals” (2013, p.105). This was precisely the case for several of the participants in the current study who became fatigued physically and then became mentally disheartened with the ineffectiveness of the radical methods. This tended to occur more when individuals were fully engaged with the politics of their cause than when it was primarily social needs that were being met by group membership. Dean, Eric, Ed, Nadia and Daphne were former radical environmentalists who exemplify this well, as were former pro-LTTE group members Thennan, Bagyam, Wasan and Oppila. From his interviews Horgan identified “disillusionment arising from internal disagreement over tactical issues” as a major factor that pushed extremists out of the group (2009c, p.31).

It is also relatively common for individuals to become disillusioned with the impact of violence on them and their victims. Sometimes this refers to in-group violence, where harsh methods are used for internal discipline, as former LTTE child soldiers Oppila and Wasan found. Sometimes it refers to the reality of personally executing violence, as was the case for Kalim and Jari in their respective neo-jihadist groups. Sometimes it refers to the excessive violence used by the group against out-group enemies. This was reported by former neo-jihadists Bilal and Bari, former pro-LTTE adherents Thennan, Bagyam, and all three of the RWEs, Rick, Freya and Lena. All these variations are well supported in the wider literature (Aho, 1994; Bjorgo, 2009; Bjorgo & Carlsson, 2005; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013; Demant et al., 2008a; Horgan, 2009c; Ilardi, 2013; J. Olsen, 2009). Several of Ilardi’s Canadian radicals did not follow through with violence because “of the impact they believed it would have on family”, highlighting the importance of social relationships, even when they appear to be distanced. Others pointed to the calming effect of time and distance away from a radical environment, such as when travelling or when attending a different mosque (Ilardi, 2013, pp.731-732). Contrary to

the dominant view that prison is a radicalising environment, Horgan cites at least one case of prison time assisting in the disengagement decision, and the participant sample of this study contains three similar cases (Horgan, 2009c, pp.40-49; for an extended discussion on how prisons can aide in disengagement see C. R. Jones, 2014). Gang literature also points to the impact of violence as the primary reason for members to leave:

A single factor dominated the responses of former gang members who were asked why they gave up the gang life: ‘All twenty-one individuals who answered this question told us, flat out, that their experience with violence had been the primary motivation for leaving the gang’. (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996, cited in Greene & Pranis, 2007, p.49)

Though they may have stopped using it themselves, not everyone leaving extremism thinks there is a problem with using violence against the enemy. Bjorgo writes about interviewees who broke up with their group without rejecting its violent ideas (2009, p.43). This connects to the second theme, ‘Stop Using Radical Methods’. The notion that it may be “sufficient and more realistic” to discourage violence than try and change people’s beliefs “by using counternarrative techniques” is not new (Bovenkerk, 2011, p.261). Indeed, offender rehabilitation in Australia has always been strongly behavioural and focused on breaking the offending cycle, not changing beliefs. This is for a range of reasons, including practical ones such as the difficulty of changing the attitude of someone who does not want to change their views. Rights-based reasons not to mandate a change in beliefs include freedom of belief and freedom of speech. Some serious crimes do implicate the offender’s belief systems, as in the case of sex offenders and domestic violence perpetrators. Even the rehabilitation of these offenders features a focus on behavioural restraint, though cognitive-behavioural approaches attempt to modify thinking patterns associated with the offending behaviours (Butler, Chapman, Forman , & Beck, 2006; Dolan, 2009; Fisher, Gardner, & Montgomery, 2008; Smedslund, Dalsbø, Steiro, Winsvold, & Clench-Aas, 2007).

Traditionally these interventions have fallen within the predominant Risk-Needs-Responsivity model, which focuses on behaviour modification and management of acute and dynamic risk factors (Ward & Maruna, 2007, p.75). Given the limited success of the this model, there has been a recent movement towards more holistic humanistic and strengths-based approaches to offender rehabilitation called the Good Lives Model. In this model an offender’s narrative identity is seen as central to their offender lifestyle and

therefore central to their potential non-offending lifestyle (Ward & Brown, 2004). There is a similar view developing among those thinking about the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders convicted of violent gang- and terrorism-related charges:

In situations where violence has already occurred, we believe that it is not too late to keep it from reoccurring. Young people who have been involved with violence – whether as offenders, victims, or merely bystanders – are at the most acute risk of becoming involved with violence again. By providing support to both victims of trauma as well as to past offenders, we can help our most at-risk young people regain healthy lives unafflicted by violence. (Emanuel, 2012, p.30)

Although it is a prison program and therefore cannot be considered truly voluntary even for the non-mandated participants, there is one program currently being pioneered in the state of Victoria in Australia to support the reintegration into society of convicted neo-jihadists²⁵ (Buttler, 2010; Farouque, 2012). The Community Integration Program is run by the Islamic Council of Victoria²⁶. This program involves intensive religious and welfare counselling, and uses respected, qualified imams within the Muslim community to deliver lectures and provide one-on-one spiritual mentoring to the men with a view to challenging their violent jihadi ideas. The senior sheikh reported that the knowledge of mainstream Islam shown by the offenders was “very, very limited” (Farouque, 2012). There is a strong welfare component of the program to assist participants secure post-release jobs, housing and psychological counselling. Reportedly, seven out of eleven of their participants have reintegrated into society. Like other disengagement and deradicalisation programs around the world, detailed evaluation data is not publically available, but the emphasis on dealing with personal issues, activating community social support and accessing vital services is consistent with the research on the topic to date (Buttler, 2010; Farouque, 2012).

²⁵ Whilst there are no publically available documents on the program, two newspaper articles describe the program and quote the Islamic Council of Victoria and Victoria Police as confirming the existence of the program (Buttler, 2010; Farouque, 2012).

²⁶ The Islamic Council of Victoria is the peak community body for Muslims in the state of Victoria, Australia.

The Swedish EXIT program is community based but does involve a range of individuals and agencies, including government services and police as needed (Bjorgo, 2009; Bjorgo & Carlsson, 2005; Demant et al., 2009a). The various stages of the program are listed in Appendix I. This program is specifically for former RWEs but is being investigated for its capacity to extend to left-wing extremism and neo-jihadi extremism (Örell, 2012). The strength of this program is that it is holistic, and primarily attends to the practical and social support aspects of disengagement. Former RWEs lead the support team, and they attempt to link in family, previous friends, education and vocational development whilst facilitating access to clinical and health support as needed. Political or theological debate can be incorporated but it tends to be further down the priority list. This program maps relatively well onto the Pro-Integration Model domains.

One of the challenges identified by several scholars but highlighted particularly by those who have actually talked at length with former extremists is identifying when an extremist can be considered a former extremist. Is it when they are no longer physically engaged in an explicit violent activity, such as shooting or bombing? Is it when they no longer spend time helping such activities? Is it when they no longer give logistical or administrative support? How much time has to pass before it can be said they have stopped, or does the clock start at the completion of the latest activity, in which case they are an 'ex' from the moment they complete an extremist operation. Then there are issues of what constitutes violence (Horgan, 2009c, p.17). This is a key problem in offender recidivism research. When looking at desistance, that is the cessation of offending or antisocial behaviour, there is a definitional issue of permanence. Put simply, "permanence is not black and white" (Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003, p.132). Like disengagement, desistance is a process, not an outcome (Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, & Mazerolle, 2001; Bushway et al., 2003). A distinction has been made between primary and secondary desistance. The former refers to an episode of time during which the person does not re-offend. The latter refers to a more lasting shift that involves "identifiable and measurable changes at the level of personal identity", and is similar to the Good Lives Model that incorporates the person's identity narrative into their rehabilitation program (Maruna & Farrall, 2004, cited in Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b, p.157). Linking back to identity change and reinforcing that overall, sustained disengagement is about sustained engagement, requiring a fundamental identity shift.

Not using violence does not necessarily equate to becoming a model citizen. Research into legitimacy has established that, to the extent they accept it as legitimate, citizens will obey the reigning authority (Passini, 2011, p.258). Several participants in this current and others' research were clear that they only conditionally accepted the 'system' as legitimate. To go beyond minimal engagement to active participation in society requires something more than just discarding narratives that designate the system to be illegitimate. To engage and be encouraged towards a prosocial stance, people need to feel they belong and can identify with society. This happens more than one might expect. All of the participants in this study except Barrie and Kalim were now engaged in normal societal activities such as raising families, holding down jobs, enjoying friendships and hobbies. Most former extremists learn, adjust and move in a positive direction after their experiences (Aho, 1994; Bjorgo, 2009; Dwyer & Maruna, 2011; Horgan, 2009c; Kassimeris, 2011; Siegel, 2003). Speaking about cult defectors, Wright described the way an extreme experience can be constructively integrated:

Responses of voluntary defectors indicate that most assimilate their experiences in a constructive way and learn from them. In much the same way that individuals learn from any major social and psychological transition (such as a career change, a divorce, or leaving the Armed services to re-enter civilian life) one can use these past experiences, events, and perceptions to build or guide future actions, to set different goals, and to establish new convictions. (Wright, 1984, p.181)

The final theme in the 'Action Orientation' domain is 'Prosocial Engagement in Society', depicting the full range of active, constructive engagement from living a private but meaningful life through to living a life of public service and prosocial civic engagement. In summarising the research on prosocial behaviour Pavey et al. highlight that when the fundamental human need to belong is not satisfied, violence and aggression prevail, whilst cooperation and prosocial behaviour diminish. The reverse is also true. Prosocial behaviour both requires and generates a sense of community connectedness (Pavey, Greitemeyer, & Sparks, 2011; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007, p.905). Social identity has been invoked as an explanation for why people participate in helping or voluntary activities that might not bring direct gain to them personally, but do benefit their social identity group. Horgan's Irish militants frequently became "re-involved" in a nonviolent way. One of Horgan's participants, Alan, ran a non-government program to support former militant prisoners reintegrate into their

communities (Horgan, 2009c, p.59). Over half of the participants in this current study (including Dean, Sean, Eric, Jari, Bari, Taqi, Oli, Thennan, Oppila, Rick, Freya, and Lena) volunteered their time in social change activities related to their beliefs and values, for example.

The majority of generous albeit self-interested social identifiers can be contrasted with altruists who do not discriminate in whom they help (Fowler & Kam, 2007, p.816). Wassan, a former LTTE child soldier, and Daphne, a former direct-action radical environmentalist, went beyond living nonviolent personal lives and voluntary involvement with an interest group, and dedicated themselves to improving things for all people. Kassimeris studied former left-wing Greek extremist George Tselentis, who said “I knew where I was, who I was and what I needed to do”. After leaving years of violent extremism, this man married, found employment and resumed “a normal life”, and tried to become a “model citizen, trying to help to the degree I was able to all the people around me who could do with my help” (Kassimeris, 2011, p.562). It is argued here that altruists, whether former extremists or not, have raised their level of social identification to the ‘human’ level and include all people — the ultimate in feeling connected to society. When this occurs in a former extremist it represents an extremely significant change in the construction of his or her social identity hierarchy.

Not surprisingly, prosocial engagement is linked to identity formation and belonging, linking this ‘Action Orientation’ domain with the ‘Identity’ and ‘Social Relations’ domains. Crocetti, Jahromi and Meeus found adolescents with well-formed identities were more involved in volunteer activities, felt higher civic efficacy, and had stronger aspirations to contribute to their communities than those with poorly constructed identities. They concluded that any intervention aimed at increasing civic engagement in adolescents should “attend to identity development and promote in-depth exploration characterized by reflective thinking and mindfulness” (Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012, p.531). Given that personal identity formation, alternate social identity formation, and the development of one’s own views emerged as three independent themes in this current study, this seems to be an example of Crocetti et al.’s findings.

For any individual who once believed the established system in society to be illegitimate, such a turn-around to embrace pluralism requires an enormous shift in thinking and a dramatic change of in-group and out-group categorisation of themselves

and others. The Radicalisation Awareness Network recently issued a communication in which deradicalisation was operationally defined as requiring “an increase in confidence in the system, a desire to once more be a part of society, and the rejection of non-democratic means” (RAN, 2014). In some ways the extent to which a former extremist engages with mainstream society is a better indicator of deradicalisation than their beliefs which cannot easily or accurately be gauged. The preconditions for prosocial engagement are almost identical to the definition of deradicalisation from a SIT perspective. It should be reiterated however, that expecting greater levels of prosocial behaviour from former extremists than from average citizens is not reasonable.

In summary, most individuals move on from their extremist career sooner or later, voluntarily, in different ways and for different reasons (Bjorgo, 2013, pp.86-89). Horgan’s interviews support this diversity and he concludes that disengagement is as “complex a process as becoming involved in the first place” and that for the individual “terrorism can have as many different potential endings as it can have potential beginnings” (Horgan, 2009c, p.139). Demant and her colleagues eloquently point to the importance of the way a former extremist views society when they state that this “often has to do with the realisation that a person is a part of society and perceives this connection to be important. One does no longer wish to view this society as an enemy” (2008a, p.155).

5.7 Summary

Using the domains and themes emerging from the analysis of this study, this chapter related the current findings to the landscape of existing empirical and theoretical knowledge on individual disengagement from extremism in a Western context. The new data fits well into the wider literature and strengthens as well as adds to the understanding of disengagement. It confirms that just as there are many radicalisation pathways, trajectories out of violent extremism vary with each individual and their circumstances (Bjorgo, 2009; Demant et al., 2008a; Horgan, 2009c; Ilardi, 2013; Jacobson, 2010; Kassimeris, 2011; Reinares, 2011; Vidino, 2011; Wahlstrom, 2001). It also confirms that psychological aspects usually precede physical departure and extend well after, and that separating fully from extremism is an identity transformation that takes time and is rarely linear or easily achieved (Aho, 1994; Ebaugh, 1988; J. Olsen, 2009). The results of this

current study lend weight to other findings that there is a relatively high level of natural or spontaneous defection and disaffiliation from extremist groups.

Whilst policymakers and program managers are understandably concerned about the bottom line of ‘disengagement and/or deradicalisation’, it is clear from this and from other research that these concepts are not easily defined or operationalised. This is because they are complex multidimensional processes, not discrete outcomes with convenient metrics (Andersen, 2010; Bjorgo, 2012; Demant, Wagenaar, & van Donselaar, 2009b; Horgan, 2008a; Neumann, 2013; Noricks, 2009a; Veldhuis, 2012). Every one of the empirically-based studies on the topic has found multiple factors or elements to disengagement. On this there was a significant convergence between the new and the existing data, with some detail emerging from this study regarding the coping and identity resources necessary to integrate into society afterwards. Established research varies in how factors are clustered in the final analysis; Demant and colleagues settle on three clusters (2008a; 2008b) as does Dalgaard-Neilsen (2013), whereas Aho offers two (1994). Neither Horgan nor Bjorgo tend to aggregate their factors but leave them loose to emphasise the variation and endless possible combinations.

The study associated with this dissertation adds weight to much of what has been identified already, but is unique in that it focuses explicitly on reintegration in a Western democratic society after voluntary disengagement from extremism, using primarily Australian participants. The analysis yielded support for the ‘Social Relations’, ‘Ideology’ and ‘Action Orientation’ domains, and contributed layers of further understanding in the ‘Identity’ and ‘Coping’ domains. These additional domains and their themes illuminate the resources necessary for individuals to move beyond exit to engagement in wider society.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Ashour (2009) defines deradicalisation to be a process by which a person reverses their extremist ideology, rejects violent methods and becomes more accepting of pluralist society. This requires significant change in in-group and out-group social relationships, as evident in the ‘Social Relations’ domain themes. To operate in society independently requires good enough psychological and physical health, and as we have seen, former extremists are likely to have more issues than the average person, even if they entered the group in a healthy state. To address these issues usually requires personal resilience, life skills and possibly professional support. None of this is possible

without significant social support, which has typically been discarded by former extremists. These map onto the themes within the ‘Coping’ domain. A reversal of extremist ideology requires letting go of radical ideas if they were ever tightly held, and is as much an emotional process as any other aspect of disengagement. Those who were true believers may go through the solemn process of carefully revising their beliefs, but many took on the extreme narrative as a kind of membership requirement, so letting go is easier once they have physically separated from the group or have been disappointed by the behaviour of leaders and peers. Either way they may revert to beliefs and attitudes held before joining, if they were developed to start with. It is not uncommon for people who joined for social reasons to return to the state of political or philosophical apathy they experienced before their radicalisation. In some cases people become far more aware and engaged with social justice issues once they realise they were misled in the extremist group. These are all captured in the themes of the Ideology domain. Clearly, a base criterion of deradicalisation is the cessation of violence. Putting aside questions of how to determine when someone can be classified as nonviolent, Ashour requires that the individual’s methodological approach be reoriented towards nonviolence.

To achieve Ashour’s final requirement of pluralism, a person must view themselves as part of society. This is actually about identity, and the domain of ‘Identity’ seems to be the psychological anchor of the entire process of disengagement. Identity is core to all people and extremists are no different. This requires a reduction in identification with the beliefs, values and norms of the extremist group and an emergence of their own personal identity before a person can find meaningful alternate social groups to identify with. Once the person finds themselves a member of wider society they are much more likely to develop more tolerance and acceptance of difference, but as demonstrated by national statistics on racism and tolerance in Australia, a large minority of non-extremist citizens are not excited about pluralism, so it would be unreasonable to expect this of former extremists.

Disengagement is not an event but a journey, and disconcertingly for those with an interest in the outcome, the destination is unknown. Led by an increasing number of empirical studies of disengagement and reintegration, this elusive phenomenon is just beginning to be understood. It seems that quite natural processes that underpin the joining and leaving of important identity groups are at play when individuals leave extremism

and join another group. In some cases these organic mechanisms are sufficient, but for many who joined young or have other challenges to overcome, the right kind of support goes a long way in facilitating this process. A preliminary model of disengagement based on the existing field of knowledge is offered in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: The Pro-Integration Model

This chapter properly introduces the Pro-Integration Model, which is a new conceptualisation of disengagement from violent extremism and reintegration into society combining the relevant empirical and theoretical literature with the five emergent domains from this study. PIM draws directly from the empirical research reported in the previous chapters, and is a preliminary attempt to construct a holistic framework of disengagement and reintegration after violent extremism in a Western democratic environment. The model recognises that genuine engagement in mainstream society after leaving is the key to enabling individuals to move on with their lives and/or progress their goals and beliefs in a nonviolent way. Ultimately, disengagement is viewed as an identity transition from being an outsider to belonging. This transition is predicated on change across five areas of an individual's life that correspond to the emergent domains. In one form or another the themes of PIM have been noted in other research, but the limited, disparate and dispersed nature of the literature has made it difficult to make sense of it all. This study deliberately focussed on individual disengagement in a Western context. By delving deeply into the phenomenon through 22 interviews with former extremists, and building on the foundation of existing empirical work, we gain greater insight into understanding disengagement, and how it might be facilitated.

Specifically then, based on examples from this current as well as wider empirical research studies, this chapter will advance the use of the term 'pro-integration' to refer to movement of a former extremist towards a positive, meaningful engagement with society. The five domains of PIM, directly emergent from this study and well supported in the wider literature, are combined with three levels of engagement. Then detailed examples are provided from the in-depth interviews of former extremists from the current study to illustrate each domain at each level of PIM. Each empirical example is followed by a general statement of how the different domains manifest at the different levels. Finally some brief comments on the utility of PIM are made.

6.1 The model

As is evident from the stories of the 22 former extremists from this current study, along with 216 others that comprise the full set of published in-depth disengagement

interviews²⁷ at the time of writing this thesis, social integration after leaving extremism involves nothing short of a personal revolution. Nevertheless, a large proportion of those interviewed actually achieved this. Former extremists who report feeling the most connected in mainstream society are those who have made significant changes in each of the five domains: ‘Social Relations’, ‘Coping’, ‘Identity’, ‘Ideology’, and ‘Action Orientation’. In many cases development within these domains occurs naturally over a period of years.

The term ‘pro-integration’ is used to capture the full potential of societal engagement across these five domains. Proactive self-development across the domains moves a person towards a state of connectedness and wellbeing as indicated by the presence of: a range of supportive and meaningful relationships in the community; psychological and physical health; the personal/social resources to participate in life; a stable sense of self; a range of social identities; a coherent set of ideas and beliefs that enable peaceful cohabitation; and nonviolent action orientation such that the individual can participate in their own life, or wider community life to the full extent that they wish without hurting others. Actual departure from an extremist group is just the beginning of the next phase in a person’s life.

For conceptual clarity the model posits three levels of societal engagement, though in reality there are infinite possible gradations within each domain, as evidenced by the variation across former extremists in real life. PIM is neither linear nor staged. It is not intended to prescribe a pathway or an outcome, merely to map out the full range of pathways and possible outcomes for those reconnecting into society after disengaging from a radical political or religious group. Each person has a different starting and a different finishing point, and any given individual is not expected to be at the same level across all domains. In fact, it appears normal to have differences in levels across different domains. There is a clear parallel regarding achievement of personal wellbeing and social

²⁷ There were 216 interviews in total across the studies identified by Dalgaard-Neilsen, plus an additional eight in the two studies identified in the literature review conducted for this current study, plus 22 from this current study, less eight from this current study that were included in the Dalgaard-Neilsen original count but that have been included in this current thesis. This gives 238 unique interviews.

engagement for all people. The five domains and the three levels result in a multi-level multi-domain model, illustrated in Figure 6.1.

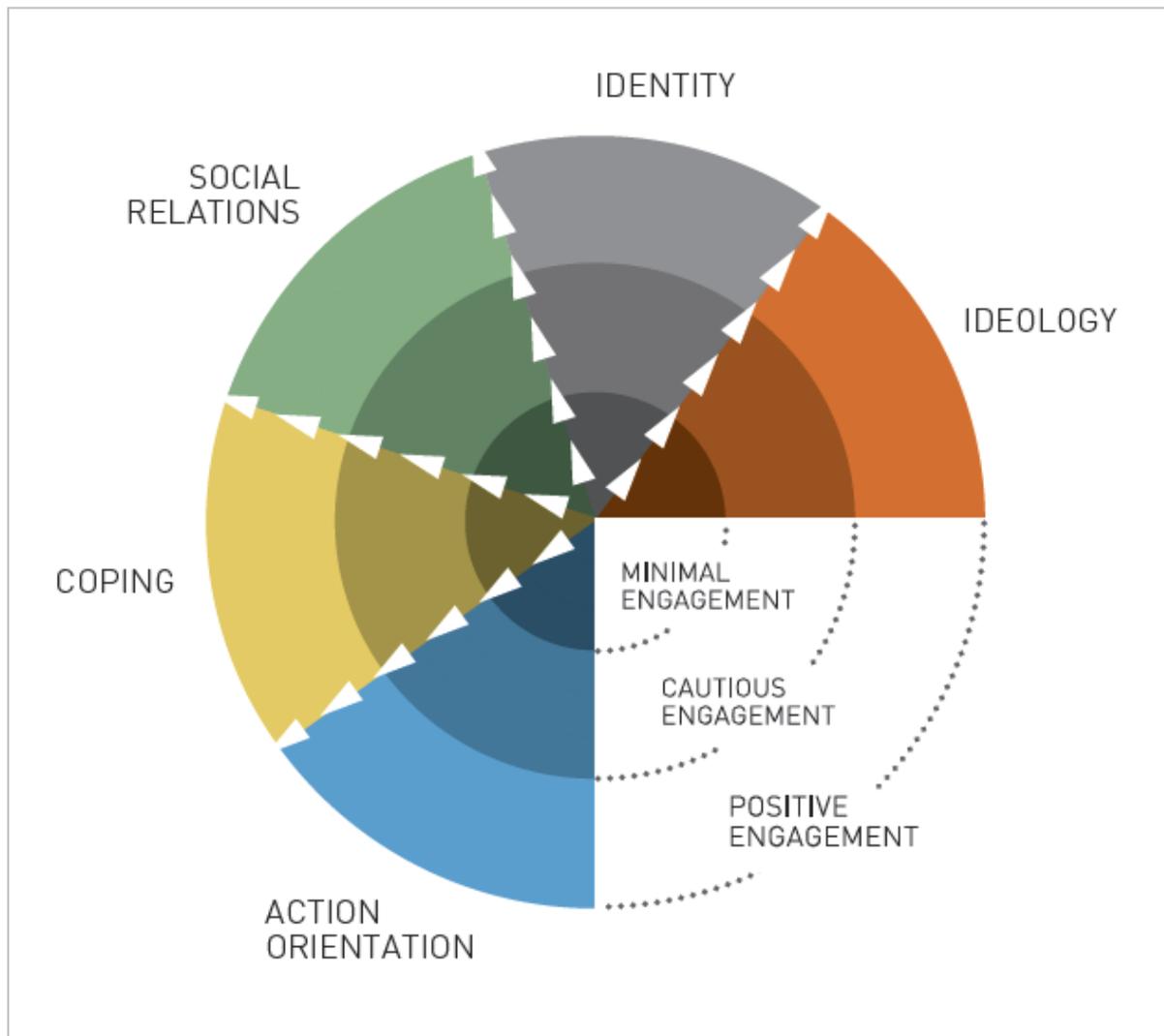


Figure 6.1 The Pro-Integration Model (PIM)

Much has been written about each of the domains in preceding chapters, so an extremely brief statement about each domain is provided in Table 6.1 before turning to the levels. There are three levels of engagement within PIM: ‘Minimal’, ‘Cautious’, and ‘Positive’. Examples from the current study will be used to illustrate each domain at each level, followed by a more general description of the emergent pattern. A series of questions relevant to each domain is provided in Appendix J.

| Domain | Description |
|--------------------|--|
| Social Relations | Gradual or sudden reduction in identification with radical group and ideas, and accompanying change in relationships and behaviour. This changes the individual's relationships with in-group radical leaders and members. Change also occurs in the quality and quantity of out-group relationships with former enemies, as well as with members of wider society who may or may not share their beliefs and practices. |
| Coping | An ability to address personal health issues, both psychological and physical. This includes developing and/or accessing a suitable social support network to assist. Falling back on or developing vocational and life skills in order to work, study or engage in other meaningful activities. Possessing necessary resilience and social resources to participate satisfactorily in their community. |
| Identity | The stability and cohesiveness of the individual's personal and social identity and the nature of any continued identification with the extremist group. This also refers to the emergence and/or development of personal identity as well as self-categorised membership of multiple meaningful social identity groups that in combination give a sense of belonging in the community. |
| Ideology | Change in ideology such that the individual no longer holds radical revolutionary views, or if they do, it is modified such that violent methods are no longer justified. This also refers to the individual's ability to form their own philosophical/religious views independent of the radical group. Tolerating or accepting that other people hold different beliefs and belong to different identity groups. |
| Action Orientation | Change in behaviour so they no longer use violence. This may include a disillusionment with violence, or not. Even if they were forced to stop using violence initially, it must eventually become a voluntary personal decision not to do so. An acceptance of the legitimacy of the system is reflected in nonviolent engagement in their immediate and wider community. Active participation in family, work, community or prosocial activities each exemplify different manifestations of a nonviolent action orientation. |

Table 6.1 Brief description of domains

6.2 Minimal level of societal engagement

Some people simply do not wish to engage with mainstream society, even if they have stopped using violence or other radical methods. As mentioned already, it is rare for a person to be consistently at the same level across all five domains. Kalim from the current study, is an exception and by his own account is minimally engaged in all five domains. His full example is briefly presented here before discussing how each of the domains manifest at the minimal level.

Apart from his wife, Kalim reports negative interactions with most people. He is deliberately isolated and hostile towards society. He feels he does not belong, and does not want to, but this makes him lonely and unhappy, placing him at the ‘Minimal’ level of engagement for the ‘Social Relations’ domain. He has not dealt with his multiple psychological and physical health issues. These impede his quality of life and are a barrier to work, study and activity, also placing him in the ‘Minimal’ level for the ‘Coping’ domain. He has not really developed his personal identity beyond no longer being alcoholic and now being a committed Muslim, and does not identify with any other social groups in his local or wider community. He wishes to turn back the clock and return to a time before he *“broke up with the group”*. By his own description Kalim’s level of engagement in the ‘Identity’ domain is ‘Minimal’. He continues to subscribe to a radical Salafist ideology but has modified his views to reject the legitimacy of offensive jihad in Australia. He is not interested in pluralism at all. He finds the mere existence of others with different beliefs to be a personal affront, and thinks that democracy is incompatible with Islam. The lack of changes in the ‘Identity’ domain themes means he is at the ‘Minimal’ level. Kalim is not involved in any violent activities and says he has no intention of undertaking any, but if there were a religious ruling that it was acceptable he would support others doing so. Kalim falls at the ‘Minimal’ for ‘Action Orientation’ as well. What ‘Minimal’ engagement looks like within each domain will now be discussed using a range of other examples from the current study.

Social Relations

An example of the ‘Social Relations’ domain at the ‘Minimal’ level of engagement is provided by Barrie, who almost a decade after leaving radical environmentalism reports extremely limited social relationships. He still has contact with a handful of his former group members but has not made many new relationships externally. His family relationships were fractured when he joined the direct-action radical environmentalist group at age 14, and they are not much improved 20 years later. He feels he does not have roots in either world.

The green segment in Figure 6.1 represents the ‘Social Relations’ domain of PIM. A person who has pulled away from extremism but has not yet re-engaged with any aspect of mainstream society is said to be minimally engaged. Such a person would have

negative interactions with most people. They may report feeling ‘stuck’ between being outside the group but not accepted by society.

Coping

Barrie is at the ‘Minimal’ level for ‘Coping’. He reported numerous physical and emotional health issues that he is in receipt of disability benefits for. Almost a decade after leaving his direct-action environmentalist group he has not been able to deal with these issues sufficiently to be able to complete his high school education or attend vocational training. His social support network solely comprised his sympathetic housemates, who respect his preference to live a reclusive lifestyle in the hinterland outside a small town.

The yellow segment in Figure 6.1 represents the ‘Coping’ domain in PIM. Many people leaving extremist groups have mental or physical health issues to deal with. If they do not have sufficient social support or personal resources to deal with these issues, they can become a barrier to wellbeing and integration. A lack of basic life skills and/or limited personal resilience make it harder also.

Identity

From the current study, Bakar spoke of not knowing who he was when he left his neo-jihadist group because of a psychiatric breakdown. It took him three years to find himself again, and he is just beginning to have a sense of who he is personally, and what groups in society he might identify with. In the first three years after leaving his group Bakar would have fallen in the ‘Minimal’ level for the ‘Identity’ domain.

The grey segment in Figure 6.1 represents the ‘Identity’ domain in PIM. Those in the minimally engaged level may have not let go of their previous group identity, or are unable to develop other social identifications. The social identity of people at this level may still be strongly associated with the radical group in which case they are unlikely to feel a strong fit in mainstream society at all. If they no longer identify with the extremist group they may feel lost. They feel even more destabilised in the absence of a stable personal identity, and have trouble feeling connected to any other meaningful identity groups.

Ideology

When he realised that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam had been defeated militarily, Bagyam acknowledged that armed struggle for an independent Tamil homeland was not a realistic goal and for the first time questioned this separatist ideology. He has let go of the idea of violent struggle and is letting go of the idea of a separate homeland. Even though it was pragmatism that brought him to this conclusion, he is changing his ideological position. He does not think the ruling government will be legitimate until they respect Tamil rights. He falls into the 'Minimum' level for the 'Ideology' domain.

The orange segment of PIM in Figure 6.1 represents the 'Ideology' domain. At the 'Minimal' level an individual may still hold radical ideas and remain hostile in attitude towards society. Nevertheless, he or she will have modified their view to exclude violence as an option for themselves. Intolerance of different or dissenting beliefs is common at this level.

Action Orientation

A former direct-action environmentalist, Ed, drifted away from direct-action radical environmentalism to find paid employment to support his family, but he still holds strongly to the ideology and is tacitly supportive of the younger generation continuing the cause. His civic action orientation is rated minimal because it is provisional and fluid. Since leaving his group he has strategically re-engaged with certain direct-action campaigns and broken the law, and does not totally rule out similar activity in the future.

The blue segment in Figure 6.1 represents the 'Action Orientation' domain in PIM. An individual at the 'Minimal' level of this domain is no longer using violence, but this may be conditional or provisional. A person at this level is probably still supportive of others using violence in support of the radical goals. They probably still reject the system and society as illegitimate and consequently do not think that mainstream laws and social norms ought to apply to them, though they may grudgingly comply.

6.3 Cautious level of societal engagement

Cautious engagement with society after exiting extremism means a person is engaged in a limited or hesitant manner. By their own and any objective assessment they are not reaching their full potential for happiness or wellbeing.

Social Relations

Bakar feels extremely lucky that his family welcomed him back after he had a breakdown and left his extremist Islamist group, even though they disagreed vehemently with his original involvement. He also referred to a small group of friends who made an enormous difference in helping his “*re-entry*” to society. He is cautious and tentative but hopeful in his interactions and this places him at the ‘Cautious’ level of the ‘Social Relations’ domain.

There may be restraint in the social relations of an individual at this level. This may be because of difficulties overcoming health obstacles, or because there are residual issues with interacting with members of previously hated groups. If a person has cut ties with family or previous friendship circles then it can be a slow journey to build new relationships.

Coping

Bari falls at the ‘Cautious’ level of the ‘Coping’ domain. Since leaving his neo-jihadist group Bari has struggled with depression and anxiety. With the support of his family and Islamic community services he has stopped self-medicating with alcohol and other substances, and stabilised his emotional health considerably. It takes all his coping resources to stay involved with his family, hold down his job and go to the gym occasionally. He has no energy to spare for getting involved in anything else in the community at the moment.

At the ‘Cautious’ level of the ‘Coping’ domain a person can be said to be surviving but not thriving with respect to personal issues. Usually this is because of a lack of social support, and once they connect to suitable support services considerable gains are often made. Much depends on pre-existing resilience and skills as to how fast they gain traction in their new life.

Identity

Eric joined his direct-action environmentalist group as a teenager and he described his identity transformation into a direct-action activist as “*totally religious*”. He suffered a serious existential identity crisis when he burnt out and had to leave his leadership role in the movement. Eight years on, he has lost the passion but not the belief for direct-action environmentalism, and says he has finally “*found himself*” again. He is now starting to explore other identity groups.

A person at the ‘Cautious’ level of the ‘Identity’ domain in PIM may have reduced their identification with a radical group but may not yet feel they belong fully in the mainstream community. He or she is likely to have started spending time with other identity groups and beginning to explore a personal sense of self. This can be difficult if the individual was immersed in a separatist radical group for a long time, especially if he or she joined as a teenager.

Ideology

Even though he left his neo-jihadist group because he did not think violence was legitimate in Australia, Jari from this current study actively reviewed his beliefs and is now a committed nonviolent but fundamentalist Muslim. He allows for the possibility of defensive jihad under certain conditions in other countries. However, he sees his role as being to carry out *da'wah*, calling Muslims to a deeper understanding of, and commitment to, their faith, and does a large amount of positive community and interfaith work with his mosque.

A cautiously engaged individual has probably modified their ideological beliefs and rejected violence. He or she may have searched for and settled on a belief system or may be disinterested in formal ideology or faith traditions. An individual at this level in the ‘Ideology’ domain may start to increase his or her tolerance for difference through wider social interactions and exposure.

Action Orientation

Bakar, a former neo-jihadist from the current study, currently sits at the ‘Cautious’ level of the ‘Action Orientation’ domain. He rejects violence as a way of making social

change, but his own involvement in the world is still tentative. He is starting to engage in study and social activities, but is not really active beyond this. He hopes to eventually work in the social services sector and “*make a positive difference*”, but recognises that he needs to move slowly so that he does not relapse into poor psychological health.

An individual at the ‘Cautious’ level of the ‘Action Orientation’ domain does not use violence at all and probably rejects it as a legitimate method for achieving goals. This person may still think the system is broken but can accept a slower pace of change, and is willing to approach the problem in nonviolent ways. He or she is active in their own life, but health and identity issues dominate so it is hard to become engaged in the wider community.

6.4 Positive level of societal engagement

Positive engagement and full integration occurs when a person enjoys healthy and functional relationships with people around them, irrespective of their group categorisations. Alongside Kalim, Wassan was the other person who reported consistent levels across all five PIM domains, in his case at the ‘Positive’ level of engagement. His story is used here to illustrate one example of what the full potential of pro-integration might look like. Wassan reported positive relations with his own family, his local community and wider society. He dealt with serious physical injuries after leaving the LTTE and although he did not engage in professional counselling, he drew heavily on his intact social support network of family and friends who helped him emotionally and practically. He now identifies as first a human being, then father and family man, then as a British \ Tamil who is interested in addressing social injustice in all its forms. He feels connected to humanity and holds no animosity towards either the LTTE or the Sri Lankan military, both of whom tried to kill him at different times. He has a firm and clear personal identity. He is committed to working towards a united Sri Lanka where Tamil rights are fully protected and represented, but eschews violence of any form. This is consistent with the rest of his worldview, which is pluralist and focussed on human rights for all people. He is committed to peaceful democratic methods for all social change and is actively engaged in other prosocial voluntary activities that are not connected to his own ethnic background. Examples will now be given to illustrate what ‘Positive’ engagement looks like in each domain of PIM.

Social Relations

Despite feeling depressed, disillusioned and malnourished during her time in the direct-action forest campaigns, Nadia, a former direct-action environmentalist was able to leave with a boyfriend at the time, and then form new relationships with other people outside of the environmental movement to help in her transition. Although her family never understood her “*dropping out to help the trees*”, they nevertheless provided critical support when she re-emerged. Additionally she was able to draw on pre-existing university and other friendship networks for support. She pursued a satisfying professional career and is now married with a young child. She has occasional but warm contact with a few people who used to be involved in direct-action environmentalism, but is immersed in a wide range of satisfying relationships in her personal and professional communities. Nadia is operating at the ‘Positive’ level in the ‘Social Relations’ domain.

Someone at the ‘Positive’ level of the ‘Social Relations’ domain enjoys positive relationships with family and with others in their immediate community. Such a person accesses services as needed and has neutral or friendly interactions with people who used to be the ‘enemy’. His or her relationships reflect a sense of connectedness in the community.

Coping

Daphne is a good example of a former radical who can be rated at the ‘Positive’ level of the ‘Coping’ domain. She burnt-out and suffered depression as a result of her involvement in direct-action environmentalism and took some years to fully recover. Daphne was able to care for herself through a series of self-directed activities demonstrating considerable resilience, whilst also drawing on professional counselling and medical treatment as needed. She has now undertaken advanced professional training in her field, is looking after her health, and is confident that her current path is one that is good for her and the environment.

A person at this level within the ‘Coping’ domain of the PIM has the capacity to address health and psychological issues. He or she is able to draw on suitable social support networks to do so. They can function in society with independence and dignity,

and have enough resilience and vocational skills to work, study, or undertake family duties or other meaningful activities.

Identity

Lena and Freya, both former Right-Wing Extremists from the current study, had more identity challenges than most participants in the current study since both were eventually diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, a condition in which unstable identity is a feature. They each have completely let go of their extremist identity, and worked hard on personal identity development utilising professional support. Over time they developed alternate meaningful social identities. They are both quite liberal in their personal politics, but neither will join any organised political group for fear of being drawn back in. They are now both actively engaged in human rights and social justice activities²⁸.

Individuals at the ‘Positive’ level of the ‘Identity’ domain, such as Lena and Freya will almost certainly have stopped identifying strongly with their former extremist group. They will have a stable and clear sense of personal identity. They are likely to identify with several different meaningful social groups, for example: family, ethnic, religious, gender, work/professional, sporting, political, etc. They no longer view others solely in terms of in- and out-groups, and consider all people worthy of respect and human rights.

Ideology

Wasan is an example from the current study of someone at the ‘Positive’ level of the PIM ‘Ideology’ domain. He has rejected any notion of creating an independent Tamil homeland by force, and is working with the Sri Lankan government to achieve a system that respects the rights of all people in the country. He is pluralistic in regard to political, religious and cultural beliefs.

²⁸ As an aside, despite all these similarities, Lena and Freya were not involved in the same group and did not know each other at all during their RWE careers.

At the ‘Positive’ level of societal engagement a person is unlikely to hold radical views. They will have modified their beliefs such that violence is no longer acceptable, and the level of hostility towards society has reduced significantly, if present at all. They will tolerate, if not respect others’ beliefs and practices. They accept the legitimacy of society and the democratic government system. They interact with people on an interpersonal, not an intergroup basis, and can disagree without hatred or violence.

Action Orientation

Rick says he has “*thrown out*” all the RWE ideas he ever held and his actions demonstrate this persuasively. He went back to university and studied social work, and is working in social justice areas as well as providing advice to young men who are attracted to RWE ideas. He is deeply involved with his own family, and actively involved with own family of origin and the surrounding community. He feels he can make a positive difference in the world now. These changes in the ‘Action Orientation’ domain place him at the ‘Positive’ level of PIM.

The action orientation of a positively engaged person means that by choice they no longer use violent, illegal or anti-social methods, and they do not endorse others doing so either. They are actively involved in their immediate environment in areas such as family, work and study. They may participate in mainstream social change for their group and possibly in altruistic prosocial activities.

6.5 Utility of the Pro-Integration Model

Populating each level of each domain generates the matrix presented in Table 6.2, which provides an overview of the differences between each level of each domain. When PIM is viewed like this it is possible to see the relationships between the domains and this engenders a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of disengagement. This is the primary purpose and goal of PIM. The model will be considered a success if it enables or guides further research to validate, modify and improve on this preliminary effort. As earlier noted, it is normal for former extremists, indeed for people in general, to report different levels of functionality and satisfaction across different domains of their life. This is demonstrated in Table 6.3 using Bilal as an example.

| Domain | Minimal societal engagement | Cautious societal engagement | Positive societal engagement |
|--------------------|--|---|--|
| Social Relations | Negative interactions with most people and no wider societal engagement unless necessary. May still be in contact with radical group members, or else feel in a social vacuum — out of the group but mistrusting of, and/or mistrusted by society. | Caution or restraint in relationships is typical. This may be because of health obstacles, or because they are not comfortable interacting with previously hated groups. If a person has cut ties with family or previous friendship circles then it can be a slow journey to build new relationships. | Positive relationships with family and others in the immediate community. Can access services and have neutral or friendly interactions with people who used to be the ‘enemy’. Their relationships reflect their sense of connectedness in the community. |
| Coping | Many people leaving extremist groups have mental or physical personal health issues to deal with. In the absence of sufficient personal or social support resources, these issues remain a barrier to wellbeing and societal integration. | Surviving but not thriving with respect to personal issues because of a lack of social support. Once connected to suitable support services gains are often made. Much depends on pre-existing resilience and skills as to how fast they gain traction in their new life. | Able to address personal issues. Able to draw on suitable social support networks. Function in society with independence and dignity, and have sufficient resilience and vocational skills to work, study, or undertake family duties or other meaningful activities. |
| Identity | Identity may still be fused with the radical group, or the person feels lost without this group identity. They feel even more “at sea” in the absence of a stable personal identity, and may have trouble feeling connected to any other meaningful identity groups. | Do not feel they belong fully in society, but have reduced identification with radical group and spend time with others. Beginning to explore personal sense of self. This can be difficult if they were immersed in a separatist radical group for a long time, especially if they joined as a teenager. | Probably have stopped identifying with the former extremist group. Stable and clear sense of personal identity. Likely to identify with several meaningful social groups. No longer view others solely in terms of in- and out-group, and consider all people worthy of respect and human rights. |
| Ideology | May still hold radical ideas and remain hostile in attitude towards society. May have modified views to exclude violence as an option for themselves anymore. Intolerance of different or dissenting beliefs. | Have probably modified their ideological beliefs and rejected violence. They may have searched for and settled on a belief system or they may be disinterested in formal ideology or faith traditions. They may start to increase tolerance for difference because of wider social interactions and exposure. | Unlikely to hold radical views, though this is possible. If so, the ideology will be nonviolent. Level of hostility towards society is reduced significantly, if present at all. Tolerate or respect others’ beliefs and practices. Accept society and the system as legitimate. Able to disagree with someone politically without aggression or hatred. |
| Action Orientation | No longer using violence but this may be involuntary or conditional. Probably supportive of others using violence. Reject system and society as illegitimate so do not think mainstream laws and social norms should apply to them. May grudgingly comply. | Do not use violence at all. Probably reject it as a legitimate method for achieving goals. May still think the system is broken but accept a slower pace of change. Active in their own life, but health and identity issues dominate so it is hard to get engaged in wider community activities. | Do not consider violent, illegal or anti-social methods legitimate for anyone. Actively involved in their own life and probably their immediate community to some degree. May participate in mainstream social change for their group, and possibly in altruistic prosocial activities. |

Table 6.2 Comparison of minimally engaged and positively engaged former extremists

| Domain | Bilal | The Pro-Integration Model for Bilal B |
|--|---|--|
| Social Relations (Minimal level) | Bilal still has negative relationships with the radical group; he has been stabbed and shot in retribution for leaving. He is extremely cautious about relationships with new people because he is afraid of “being burnt” again. He spends his time with his new family, as well as with his mother and sisters. He has no hostility towards people in his local or wider community, but he is not ready to trust yet. | |
| Coping (Cautious level) | He has significant physical and mental health issues that cause distress and create barriers to work and societal engagement. With the help of his wife and community services Bilal is slowly dealing with these issues. In the meantime, he is fully engaged with his children and derives much satisfaction from this. | |
| Identity (Cautious level) | Bilal does not identify with the radical group and has no loyalty to them. It took him a long time to feel stable in his identity, partly because joining the group interrupted his adolescent development. He identifies as a father, husband and son, and as a “normal person” meaning he belongs inside not outside society. | |
| Ideology (Positive level) | Bilal rejected the radical neo-jihadist ideology long before he left the group and has not retained any of it. He has deliberately adopted a non-observant slightly agnostic Muslim view of the world. He fully accepts the legitimacy of the system, is quite pluralistic in his views, and thinks that as long as it is not hurting anyone, everyone should be allowed to hold their own beliefs. | |
| Action Orientation (Cautious/Positive level) | Not only has Bilal deliberately moved away from a violent radical group but he condemns the use of violence by anyone for political, religious or personal gain. He is actively involved in his family life and hopes for a time when he can be involved in his local community more actively but realises he needs to attend to personal health issues first. | |

Table 6.3 Typical ‘mixed level’ example of the Pro-Integration Model - Bilal

With further research, validation and development it is hoped that PIM could be used to guide a strengths-based assessment with a disengaged person with the aim of jointly identifying areas in which they would benefit from additional resources or assistance. A tool such as this could be utilised by the individual themselves in a self-directed manner, or to enable family or community workers to better assist a person in their disengagement and reconnection to society.

6.6 Summary

This chapter introduced PIM, a five domain, three level, holistic framework developed during this study and intended to model disengagement and reintegration after violent extremism in a Western democratic environment. The five domains are well supported in the literature and empirical research and were abundantly evident in the 22 interviews that formed the basis of this study. The domains are: ‘Social Relations’, ‘Coping’, ‘Identity’, ‘Ideology’, and ‘Action Orientation’. Former extremists can settle or transition through three levels of societal engagement. For the purpose of the model these levels are titled: ‘Minimal’, ‘Cautious’ and ‘Positive’.

Accepting that disengagement is ultimately about engagement elsewhere means that leaving extremism and returning to the mainstream is an identity transition. Being in an extremist group is rarely good for one’s relationships, health, career or ability to fit into society. Transitioning from an outsider to an insider of mainstream society is a challenging task that involves proactively making change in the five domains of PIM as follows. Connecting into wider society requires spending time with different people, and relating to them as respected individuals rather than hated members of the enemy out-group (‘Social Relations’). It is hard for a person to function well and rebuild their life if psychological and physical issues are not addressed as a priority (‘Coping’). Identity is important to us all and so when a person steps away from a group that provides strong identity they can feel lost. They need to reconnect with old threads of personal and social identity, or in some cases develop these aspects of self anew (‘Identity’). Relinquishing or modifying an extreme ideology, and/or tolerating different ideas is a necessary task if a person is to live harmoniously in wider society (‘Ideology’). And finally, a person needs to adjust their action orientation away from criminality and violence and towards citizenry if they are to integrate positively (‘Action Orientation’).

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Having heard the collective voices of 238 former extremists about their experience of disengagement from extremism, we are in a better position to reflect on questions such as just what is involved in leaving an extremist group, and what happens in a person's life afterwards? What is the essence of disengagement and what conditions promote its natural advancement? These are the main areas of interest in this thesis. Despite pioneering work (for example, Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b) these research topics have not been examined in nearly the same detail as their counterpart phenomenon, radicalisation. This is surprising given that most people who join extremist groups eventually leave, and that most who leave do so voluntarily within a relatively short period of time. Further, most of the research on radicalisation and disengagement has been focussed on neo-jihadist extremism, often in conflict zones, and generally in non-Western states. The socio-political context is quite different in Western liberal democracies and a contextually relevant account of universal aspects of disengagement as a phenomenon is yet to be established. As two of the leading researchers in this area reiterate:

Disengagement from terrorism has been a neglected area not only in counter-terrorism policies but also in research on terrorism. This is despite the fact that disengagement remains potentially as complex a process as initial radicalization and recruitment to terrorism, and the issues raised by it provoke a number of interesting theoretical and empirical questions. (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009a, p.2)

Researchers are increasingly making the distinction between domestic and transnational terrorism (Sandler, 2013, p.1), but most disengagement studies still take the perspective of only one ideology group. Typically, the focus is on disengagement from neo-jihadist groups, but there are some studies specifically on disengagement from Right-Wing Extremist groups, and more recently from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam since their defeat in 2009. Understandably, access to specific data usually drives a singular focus (see Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009b for notable exceptions). Finding and convincing former extremists to participate in this kind of research is an ongoing challenge, which means a continued shortage of primary source data and associated analysis. There are currently less than 20 empirically-based publications about disengagement in Western democracies, leaving a narrow evidence-based platform upon

which to base policy and program decisions. Few conceptual models of radicalisation and/or disengagement are empirically based and many are neither guided by theory nor derived from systematic, evidence-based research. First and foremost, therefore, this study set out to generate new data in the form of in-depth interviews with former extremists. Participants chosen for this study were former extremists from a range of different ideological backgrounds in a Western context. They were interviewed about their disengagement and subsequent reintegration experiences. Identifying any fundamental enduring elements of disengagement was the second goal, so Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was the methodological and analytical approach of choice.

Thirteen other empirical studies yield a total of 216 interviews with former extremists about individual disengagement in a Western context. This current study conducted 22 similar interviews, utilised methodologies from, and built on the findings of this small but critical body of research. The current findings confirm much of what has been found elsewhere, specifically the domains of ‘Social Relations’, ‘Ideology’ and ‘Action Orientation’. Validation of existing findings, especially so early in the field’s development, is an essential component in establishing a reliable understanding of disengagement. By using in-depth interviews in conjunction with IPA, this study identified two additional domains, namely ‘Identity’ and ‘Coping’ that have been indirectly referenced but not fully explored to date in the literature. Understanding and enhancing natural disengagement holds enormous potential to reduce the overall impact of violent extremism in Western states. Therefore a third aim of this research was to note any discernible patterns regarding individuals who felt they had successfully negotiated societal reintegration after disengagement. These findings were compared to and then integrated with the general literature on the topic. Beyond contributing new empirical data, and some of the first in an Australian context, this thesis developed a new model of disengagement, the Pro-Integration Model, that organises the existing and the new domains in a coherent way to assist our overall understanding of disengagement from extremism and subsequent societal re-engagement.

This concluding chapter therefore provides a synthesis of the results from the current study in response to the research questions about disengagement posed by this thesis. The implications of this research and its outcomes for existing theories, models and the wider literature are discussed. The essence of disengagement, captured in PIM, is

outlined one final time. The contribution of this research goes beyond the theoretical; it also offers policymakers and program directors evidence-based reassurance on some fronts as well as new directions for interventions. As with research about all real-life complex phenomena, more questions were raised than answered, as the study was undertaken, so recognising the natural limitations of this type of research, some concise recommendations for future investigation are offered.

7.1 The essence of disengagement

This section draws together the main empirical findings of this thesis to address this study's two research questions from the perspective of former extremists themselves: what is the essence of disengagement from violent extremism and what are the conditions that promote its natural advancement?

Based on primary source data²⁹, the main findings and conceptual implications of this thesis provide a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of disengagement. The commonalities in the disengagement process from doubt, to exit, to adjustment and through to subsequent societal integration across the range of participants in this study give credence to the idea that there are enduring universal aspects of disengagement. If commonalities were not present across such a diverse range of former extremists, then this would have indicated that separate, unique policy responses were required for each different type of violent extremist group when considering disengagement. The findings of this study were consistent across different violent extremist ideology groups, and in fact were consistent across violent and nonviolent extremist groups as well. This means

²⁹ To recap, 22 former extremists from a range of ideology backgrounds were interviewed about their disengagement and reintegration experiences. There were 14 former members of violent extremist groups and eight former members of nonviolent extremist groups. The former violent extremists included former neo-jihadists, former right and left wing extremists, and former militant Tamil separatists. The former nonviolent extremists were previously members of direct-action radical environmentalist groups. Inclusion of the latter was in order to explore disengagement from extremism across the spectrum from nonviolent to violent. As emphasised in the body of the thesis, there was no intention to imply that radical environmentalists are dangerous in the same way as violent ideology groups, indeed they are not. The inclusion of these participants enabled discussion of 'extremism' as a whole.

the research about disengagement in Western social environments and associated policies and programs supporting disengagement can tentatively proceed using universal concepts, as outlined in this thesis, but noting that of course they must be tailored to individual cases. The emergent properties of disengagement are captured in the five domains of ‘Social Relations’, ‘Coping’, ‘Identity’, ‘Ideology’, and ‘Action Orientation’.

Not only does this study advance the existing understanding of disengagement, but also, by combining its IPA analysis with existing literature, new insights into patterns of reintegration emerged, and from this PIM was developed and presented in Chapter 6. Some participants progressed from ‘Minimal’ to ‘Cautious’ through to ‘Positive’ engagement. Some remained in one of the first two levels, and a few moved relatively swiftly to the ‘Positive’ level in multiple domains after an initial period of adjustment. As demonstrated in Chapter 6 with empirical examples, it is common that levels of engagement across the five domains for any given individual are uneven. A key observation is that whilst overall there was a wide range of societal engagement across the five domains, most participants described ‘Cautious Engagement’ or ‘Positive Engagement’ in several of the five domains. This provides strong support for the notion that sustained, positive reintegration after disengagement is a natural pathway in the life-cycle of radicalisation.

Social Relations

It seems a truism to say that people leave groups because they are disappointed with the social relations within them. There is strong empirical evidence in the wider literature that this is true of disengagement in many different forms of relationship, from marriages to workplaces to sporting clubs and it should be no surprise, in extremist groups also. This element of disengagement is evident in the themes within the ‘Social Relations’ domain of this study and well supported in the wider literature. Relationships are the primary vehicle for disengagement from violent extremism, and further, appear to be what most optimally enables subsequent engagement of a former extremist elsewhere in society. For this reason family and community based programs to assist individuals wishing to leave violent extremism are essential. Provision of parallel education and support to the families and communities of former extremists would in turn enhance their capacity to support the individual more meaningfully.

Coping

Whilst the transition in returning to mainstream society is sometimes smooth, most often there are significant disruptions and challenges. This is precisely why family, friends and community are so important, linking this domain to the ‘Social Relations’ domain above. A person who has left an extremist group may well need professional support for physical or emotional issues. It can take up to a year or longer to adjust emotionally after leaving a tight-knit extremist group. It is common for a person to be distressed by the loss of purpose, friendships, belonging and identity. Some people feel paranoid that the group will be looking to punish them; others feel, sometimes correctly, that the community they are moving back into rejects them. Depending on the individual’s history, problems with depression, anxiety, trauma, trust, and relationship issues may be present. Being in an extremist group is not good for one’s mental health, so significant personal and sometimes professional assistance is required to facilitate engagement in the new environment. Coping skills and self-care are necessary for any individual facing personal challenges to move from surviving to thriving in society, this is especially so for former extremists and therefore clinical and health services need to be incorporated into any support and referral programs aimed at assisting or accelerating disengagement from violent extremism.

Identity

Identity change is the cornerstone of disengagement. A strong finding from the IPA was that disengagement is a transformative identity process during which a person disconnects from the extremist group and reconnects elsewhere, re-establishing their own sense of self as they do so. Similar to radicalisation, disengagement is a process not an outcome; but unlike violent extremism, there is no identifiable or predetermined destination. The stability and cohesiveness of a former extremist’s personal and social identity underpins their ability to connect with others outside the group at both an individual and a group level. Some former extremists stop identifying with the extremist group well before they leave, others find it is only after they leave that their identification wanes. Even the commitment and identification of those whose identity was once completely entwined with the group decreases once they are no longer immersed in the group environment. The emergence and/or development of personal identity is a critical factor in well-being generally, and is a particular challenge for many former extremists, especially if they

have been in the group for a long time. The number of alternate social groups a person identifies with seems to be related to how connected into society they feel afterwards. Leaving an extremist group represents a critical time for personal reflection, and this can be overwhelming. Most former extremists need to develop multiple new threads of identity to determine where they belong. This means forming new friendships and testing out new ideas, with which friends and family and community can definitely help, though if family and associates are themselves involved in violent extremism it will be exceptionally difficult to develop alternative personal and social identities that are compatible with a conventional nonviolent lifestyle. Identity is core to who we are and where we belong, therefore opportunities need to be provided for individuals to explore their personal values and ‘test out’ new places in society in which they might belong; this is best achieved through social nodes that the person identifies with on some level.

Ideology

In the Australian example of disengaging from violent extremism, it is evident that ideology is most often adopted after joining, and is reasonably easily shed after departing from an extremist group. In the case of Western neo-jihadists and RWEs, this is because they tended to join for personal or social, and less so for political or ideological reasons. Correspondingly, they were rarely concerned by philosophical questions during or after their involvement. That said, a subset of those who join for non-ideological reasons do become interested in this dimension after their departure. In these situations, former extremists cited guidance about foundational/seminal knowledge in their faith or ideology tradition from a respected source as critical in their change of views. In the time immediately after leaving an extremist group an individual may be particularly vulnerable to replacing one extremist ideology with another. An ability to challenge ideas and beliefs in a respectful way is tremendously valuable, but rarely present in former extremists, representing another way to support the disengagement process. There is also a need for mainstream leaders in the different faith/ideology traditions to explicitly teach and demonstrate to their adherents how to live harmoniously in wider society without hatred or conflict.

Action Orientation

A person's action orientation typically changes when the person removes themselves from the radical social environment because the group influence no longer dominates, and generally results in a cessation of violence. However, depending on their socialisation prior to entering a violent extremist group, some individuals leaving these groups need extra help in finding constructive and lawful ways to pursue their cause, or even to live their life. Community groups and family members who are not involved themselves can be particularly helpful in assisting a person to make a shift in orientation from criminal and violent towards nonviolent methods. For some individuals who perceive there to be a genuine injustice at hand, it will be necessary for them to be shown nonviolent ways of agitating for necessary social change. However, the sustainability of any disengagement or desistance from violent extremism is interdependent on changes in the other domains, underscoring the importance of a multi-pronged approach to promoting disengagement that supports change in all five domains.

In summary then, disengagement is an identity transformation in which an individual moves from being outside to becoming a part of broader society. From the perspective of former extremists themselves, and supported by wider research literature, enduring and satisfying societal reintegration occurs when there is sustained change across the five domains of a former extremist's life. In brief, meaningful social relations with a range of people in mainstream society; an ability to attend to personal issues and sufficient resources to participate in society; stable personal identity as well as alternate social identities; a genuine softening or absence of extremist views; and a change in orientation towards nonviolent methods to achieve social and political change are required.

7.2 Theoretical implications

This section addresses the implications of the findings of this thesis with respect to the research questions and how they intersect with existing theories, models and understanding. As demonstrated in Chapter 5 and reiterated immediately above, this current study builds explicitly on the works of numerous applied researchers who have

led the way in conducting empirical interview-based research in the field of disengagement from extreme religious, ideological and political groups³⁰. The outcome of integrating the five domains and themes with scholarly precedents was the development of PIM, a five domain, three level model of proactive, holistic societal integration after disengagement from violent extremism, with potential for theoretical and practical usage in the field.

As indicated in Chapter 1, the term disengagement is used in this thesis in two ways. Firstly, it refers to the process of leaving, or disengaging from violent extremism; and secondly, it refers to engaging with mainstream society, and with a wide spectrum of possible pathways and outcomes following the act of departure. This includes, but is not limited to, no longer using violence as a political tool; modifying one's ideology partially or completely; accepting democratic methods; recognising the legitimacy of the elected government as well as the legitimacy of the state; and finally accepting pluralism as valid and interacting peacefully with those who hold different views.

The twin processes of radicalisation and disengagement are closely associated with social identity because both are about how a person identifies, or disaffiliates with the beliefs, values and norms of the extremist group. Therefore social identity and self-categorisation experts such as John Turner, Marilyn Brewer, Penny Oakes, Kate Reynolds, Alex Haslam, and others has been pivotal in this current study. Whilst not providing any new theoretical contribution to SIT *per se*, this thesis offers detailed examples of SIT processes in a rare context that SIT researchers may find interesting, not least because it indisputably illustrates many of the SIT concepts and frameworks.

Disengagement is a transformative process, relative to whatever form of engagement has taken place beforehand; in this study it is the phenomenon of disengaging from violent extremism that is under scrutiny. Participants in this study spoke of their immensely strong identification with their respective extremist ideology

³⁰ For example, but not limited to: Tore Bjorgo, John Horgan, Louise Richardson, Sophia Moskalenko, Arie Kruglanski, Ehud Sprinzak, Quintan Wiktorowicz, Clark McCauley, Donna della Porta, Kumar Ramakrishna, Froukje Demant, Marieke Sloopman, Frank Buijs, Jean Tillie, Peter Neumann, and Janja Lalich.

groups at the time of their involvement. SIT is implicated because of the relevance of its concepts of social categorisation, social identity and social comparison (S. A. Haslam, 2001; Oakes, 1987; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). A person incorporates a social identity into their sense of self when they feel they belong to a group. As already mentioned, group membership is a psychological state of self-categorisation (Hogg, 1992). As a result of this self-categorisation there are changes in a person's cognitions, emotions and behaviours. Policy makers should note that in researching exit from and entry to important identity groups, Ray and Mackie found that "an ex-member's desire to rejoin a former group is determined most proximally by the ex-member's commitment to the former group", again highlighting the relevance of social identity and SIT to the phenomenon of disengagement from extremism (Ray & Mackie, 2009, p.479).

In other words, when a particular social identity is salient because of the given social context, a person thinks, feels and acts from a basis of social group membership, rather than from the perspective of their unique personal identity. Conversely, disengagement is the process of dis-identifying with an important social identity group, which involves a reduction in identification. In the resultant identity gap, people either form new or further develop alternative social identities. Extremist groups, by their very nature, demand exclusivity and total dedication, and so by the time a former extremist is ready to leave, they are often low in alternate social identity capital, requiring the generation of new social identities, which takes time and considerable effort.

Disengagement is not a singular outcome, but rather a non-linear process with a unique trajectory for every person. As a phenomenon, disengagement envelops all possible behavioural, cognitive and emotional variations following separation from the extremist group, as well the nature of any subsequent societal engagement. Therefore deradicalisation, as a particular combination of psychological and behavioural disengagement, is included within this spectrum of variations. This represents a conceptual amendment to the 'disengagement versus deradicalisation' debate.

7.3 Recommendations for future research

As a direct consequence of the methodology used in this study, a number of limitations were encountered, including scale, type of data, and speed, which need to be considered. Firstly, access to active or former extremists is not easy to gain for obvious reasons of

trust and safety. A notable handful of experienced researchers have achieved this, but “few have bothered to examine the primary unit of analysis of this phenomenon – the terrorist himself or herself as an actor articulating complex social psychological dispositions” (Gottschalk & Gottschalk, 2004, p.38). Although this study had only 22 participants, it is, to the knowledge of the author, the largest study of former extremists in Australia, taking its place among the limited set of empirically based studies on the topic (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). Secondly, given disengagement is a complex psychological and social process ‘hard edged’ quantitative research methods are not viable, though there is often a presumption as to the superiority of these over qualitative methods. IPA experts recommend a modest number of intensive interviews³¹, with an ideographic focus that highlights the personal and unique experience of the individual in drawing out the essence of the phenomenon. In the Australian context it is unlikely that there will ever be large-scale quantitative studies conducted in this field, though a time may come when there is a sufficient accumulation of case studies and phenomenological studies that meta-analyses could be conducted. Finally, field research into this type of topic is usually conducted from numerous theoretical angles, over decades, before a good understanding is gained. For example, this current study alone took four years to complete. Given the desire of government to develop evidence-based policy and given the time it takes to conduct evidence-based research, this creates a natural pressure point.

To generate achievable policy strategies and program recommendations regarding sustainable disengagement, there is pressing need for much more primary source research to allow further assessment of local dimensions of this topic. Exploring the following areas will facilitate the attainment of this goal:

- If disengagement is the default, then study those who are the exceptions;
- Study those who disengaged before they really engaged to find out why;
- Engage in long-term follow-up with participants from this and other studies to understand their long-range trajectories; and,
- Validation of PIM in Australia and other countries.

³¹ To reiterate, the number of interviews in IPA work can range from one to 42 (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, p22).

Finally, a distinction has already been drawn between violent extremism conducted in international war and Western domestic contexts, and it has been made clear that this thesis addresses disengagement from the latter. What is becoming less clear, even in the time this current study was conducted, is the distinction between these two forms of political violence. Mass media coverage, ease of communication and the accessibility of global travel to expatriates means that people can psychologically and physically traverse both environments. It has become relatively common for second-generation immigrants from war-torn homelands travelling back to see family and/or assist in humanitarian projects to become involved in militant movements. Zammit's analysis shows that for two centuries Australia has never really had significant numbers of residents leaving to become foreign fighters (Zammit, 2013b). However, in the last two years this has changed and there are now thought to be around 120 Australian individuals actively fighting in Syria, most with neo-jihadi and other extreme Islamist militia like Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and ash Sham, and another 80-100 caught up in the conflict in Syria – with at least nine dead already – and no end to the conflict in sight (Zammit, 2013b). When these individuals return it will pose a new challenge for their families, communities and authorities. This will be a timely opportunity to mobilise families and community to help engage these men back into nonviolent life in Australia, and the five domains of PIM provide guidance.

7.4 Concluding comments

Quite simply, disengagement from violent extremism entails re-engagement elsewhere. Or rather, to follow PIM terminology, it is about pro-integration into mainstream society. To answer the opening questions of this chapter, disengagement is less about leaving *per se*, and more about travelling to one's next destination. Understanding what happens in a person's life after violent extremism is central to facilitating and supporting sustained disengagement. As already outlined, this has significant implications for researchers, policymakers and practitioners.

To understand the world, have an impact, find acceptance, and take a sense of identity from common purpose is normal. These desires have long been recognised as fundamental motivators of an individual's engagement with social change (Bandura, 1977; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943). It is the challenge of policymakers to

understand and respond to the socio-political conditions that trigger radicalisation. The interface between the individual and the social group, and interaction between groups is at the foundation of the SIT approach to intergroup conflict, and central to understanding disengagement from violent extremism. Above all else, disengagement involves an identity transformation such that the individual moves from identifying with a group that is against society, to identifying with groups within society. Given there is no likely antidote to the Richardson's "lethal cocktail" of violent extremism (2007, p.xxii), we need to be asking the question: how can good policy best facilitate this, and what would good policy look like in conception and implementation?

Disengagement is most usefully viewed within a life-cycle paradigm. Repeatedly joining and leaving important social identity groups over the course of a person's lifetime is natural. Some people join groups more intensely, and involvement in some types of groups has greater consequences, but the process of joining and leaving groups to augment our identities is deeply human. Disengagement potential exists, in one form or another, from the moment a person engages with an extremist identity group. Disengagement potential becomes activated when the individual recognises at some level that they do not belong in the extremist group. Disengagement potential gains momentum when there is a recipient community or even a single person who will support the transition process. The person flourishes when they find somewhere in wider society where they feel that they can genuinely belong. Often, but not always, this occurs when the individual no longer accepts violence and hatred as being legitimate and adopts a more pluralistic democratic alternative. And most often this modification in beliefs about the system mirrors, rather than precedes, a corresponding shift in other domain areas, particularly 'Social Relations', 'Coping' and 'Identity'.

Disengagement is traditionally conceptualised as a process that has two components: psychological disengagement (that is, a change in ideology) and behavioural disengagement (that is, a change in action orientation). This research project finds strong support for both of these, and expands this binary framework to include three other domains mooted as necessary for sustained engagement of a former extremist into wider society. The additional domains are a change in social relations, sufficient coping resources and a fundamental change in personal and social identity reflecting with what and whom the individual identifies.

This research contributes new primary source material, and adds depth to the existing literature by analysing the phenomenon of disengagement from the unique perspective of the former extremists themselves. In doing so the essence of disengagement and its five component parts was drawn out, and notably, is consistent across a diverse range of individuals and extreme ideologies. An additional outcome was the ability to go a step further and tentatively develop PIM, which offers guidance for research, policy and practice. Heeding Ilardi's warning about "spiralling of the literature that in the end, adds little to our overall understanding of terrorism" (Ilardi, 2004, p.215), this study has been conducted mindful of the need for not only research in this field to be evidence driven, but also for analysis to be positioned such that others can most fruitfully engage with it to develop and apply appropriate policy.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Conceptual models of radicalisation*

| Model | Stages |
|--|--|
| Borum (2003) FBI Four-Stage Model of the Terrorist Mindset | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Grievance – Injustice – Target attribution – Distancing/devaluation |
| Moghaddam (2005) Staircase to Terrorism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Psychological interpretation of material conditions – Perceived options to fight unfair treatment – Displacement of aggression – Moral engagement – Solidification of categorical thinking and the perceived legitimacy of the terrorist organisation – The terrorist act and sidestepping inhibitory mechanisms |
| Silber & Bhatt (2007) NYPD Jihadi-Salafi radicalisation model | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Pre-radicalisation – Self-identification – Indoctrination – Jihadisation |
| Precht (2007) European model of home-grown jihadi radicalization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Pre-radicalisation – Conversion and identification with radical Islam – Indoctrination and increased group bonding – Actual acts of terrorism or planned plots |
| Centre for Strategic and International Studies (2008) Expert panel | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The radical narrative filters the person's world view – Sociological factors compel a person to embrace the narrative – Psychological factors prompts a person to use violence in line with the narrative |
| Joint Military Information Support Centre (2008) Review | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Motivations include both push and pull factors – Socially facilitated entry via kinship or social institutions – Progressive escalation in decisions or actions that prime a person for the next more extreme step – In-group socialisation drives behavioural and ideological extremity and increased commitment – Ideology narrative that blames others for what is wrong – Perceived out-group threat binds the group together, which rationalises offensive action as defensive – Extremist groups provide identity and belonging for those who are seeking it |
| Ramakrishna (2009) The Radical Pathways Model | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Existential identity – Culture – Group context/Geopolitics/Ideology/Local Historical Forces – Individual personality |

* See Borum (2011) for detailed discussion on each model

Appendix B. Invitation to participate

MONASH University

Faculty of Arts
School of Political and Social Inquiry



Invitation to Participate in Research

Hello,

My name is Kate and I'm doing research about people who have left or changed their involvement with radical or activist organisations. You have received this invitation to participate in my research from a colleague of yours who has already participated in the study.

Any previous involvement in radical or direct political activism means that you are in a unique position to contribute to this research project.

This research aims to understand what it is like for people who leave radical organisations. I will be doing similar interviews with 20-30 people. Rarely do people who have been at the frontline get to contribute, mostly it is 'experts' writing about you. I want to speak directly to you rather than looking at media reports, websites or news stories. So participating in this research means you can tell your story, and make a contribution to research which aims to improve our understanding of this topic.

Participating in this research would involve an interview as well as some questionnaires. It will probably take three meetings of up to two hours each, at a time that is convenient for you. I'd be very grateful if you would participate in this research.

After reading this letter I hope you will contact me on [REDACTED] or by telephone on [REDACTED]. When you do, I'll give you more details and/or make a time to meet.

Sincerely,

Kate Barrelle

School of Political and Social Inquiry
Building 11, Monash University
Clayton, Victoria 3800, Australia
[REDACTED] Facsimile +61 3 9905 2410
www.arts.monash.edu.au/schools/psi
ABN 12 377 614 012 CRICOS provider number 00008C

Appendix C. Consent form

MONASH University

Faculty of Arts
School of Political and Social Inquiry



Disengaging from Political Activism Consent Form

NOTE: This consent form will remain with the Monash University researcher for their records

I agree to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the Explanatory Statement, which I keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that:

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| I agree to be interviewed by the researcher | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I agree to complete some questionnaires | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I agree to the interview being audio-taped | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I need (and request) a translator | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I agree to be contacted if required in the future | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

I understand that my involvement is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage without any negative outcome.

I understand that any information I provide is confidential and that any reports or published findings will not, under any circumstances, contain my name or identifying characteristics.

I understand that any notes from the interview, as well as the questionnaires and audio-tape will be kept in a secure storage and accessible only to the research team. I also understand that the data will be destroyed after a five year period unless I consent (below) to it being used in future research.

I agree to for my data to be used in research beyond five years Yes No

Signature _____

< insert participant's name & date >

Anonymous identifier for research purposes: _____

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Appendix D. Explanatory statement

MONASH University

Faculty of Arts
School of Political and Social Inquiry



Disengaging from Political Activism Explanatory Statement

Hello,

I am doing PhD research about people who have left radical organisations. This is being conducted with Professor James Walter in the Department of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University

This research aims to understand what it is like for people who leave radical organisations. I will be doing similar interviews with 20-30 people. Rarely do people who have been at the frontline get to contribute, mostly it is 'experts' writing about you. I want to speak directly to you rather than looking at media reports, websites or news stories. So participating in this research means you can tell your story, and make a contribution to research which aims to improve our understanding of this topic.

You will not be identified in the research. Everyone interviewed will be referred to as 'Participant A', 'Participant B' or by an explicitly false name. I will not write anything that could identify you through personal information unless you would like me to and give me written permission to do so. If your details have already been in the public domain however, then it may be possible for someone who has seen that, and then reads my research, to guess it may be you.

There will be a couple of interviews up to two hours each. This is an important topic and I need time to understand you properly. I will ask about life before, during and after any radical groups or political activism. I will also ask you to complete some questionnaires and give you the results. I need to understand your beliefs and attitudes, and what you think needs to change to improve society. I am interested in how your involvement has changed you, and what it was like to leave it all behind.

I would like to audio tape our discussion for accuracy. If you are uncomfortable with this you can just say no. You also have the right not to answer any particular question, and to stop the interview at any point. It is important that you do not give me operational details of any illegal activities – this is because if you provide any information relevant to a criminal investigation that is later subpoenaed, I would have to comply with the Court orders to provide this information. Also, whilst I have no knowledge or expectation of covert surveillance, sensitivities around radical activities do mean that people under suspicion are sometimes the subject of such surveillance.

Storage of my notes and tapes falls under the rules of Monash University. Everything will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at Monash University or in my office for five years. Although I don't expect anyone to be upset in the interview, contact details of a free support service are listed overpage. Also, if you want to contact the university about this research, or make a complaint about how it has been conducted, relevant contact details are overpage.

Thanks for your time, I really look forward to talking with you.

Sincerely,

Kate Barrelle

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Clayton, Victoria 3800, Australia
Facsimile +61 3 9905 2410
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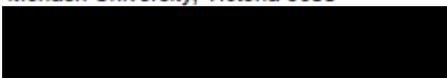
MONASH University

University contact details



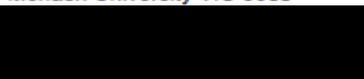
If you would like to contact the researchers about any aspect of this research please contact the Chief Investigator, Professor James Walter at:

Head of School of Political and Social Inquiry, Faculty of Arts
Building 11, Clayton Campus
Monash University, Victoria 3800



If you have a complaint concerning the manner in which this research (reference number: CF10/0424– 2010000197) is conducted, please contact:

Executive Officer, Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans (SCERH)
Building 3e Room 111, Research Office
Monash University VIC 3800



The project results will be available at Monash University library in thesis format, in approximately three and a half years time, and if any articles are published, then these will be in professional journals in the years following.

Counselling service

Lifeline 13 11 14

The Department of Human Services website is: <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/home>

This information sheet is for you to keep.

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Clayton, Victoria 3800, Australia

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ABN 12 377 614 012 CRICOS provider number 00008C

Appendix E. Range of radical environmentalist actions*

| | |
|---|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Type I</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil disobedience • Trespassing • Protesting without a permit • Open animal rescue • Hanging banners • Blocking logging roads • Pulling up survey stakes • Tree sitting • Spray-painting slogans • Gluing locks • Smashing windows | <p style="text-align: center;">Type II</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Destroying logging equipment • Torching sports utility vehicles • Setting fire to research laboratories • Tree-spiking • Large-scale animal rescue • Use of fire-bombs/incendiary device |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Type III</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mail threats • Bomb hoaxes • Placing harassing phone calls • Rigging mail with razor blades • Publicizing personal financial data • Staging demonstrations at private homes • Defacing private homes with graffiti • Pelting people with tofu pies • Leaving dead animals on dinner plates | <p style="text-align: center;">Type IV</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions intended to cause personal injury • Actions causing personal injury • Beatings • Murder • Bombings <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Hypothetical</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biological attacks • Poisoning of aquifer |

*From Liddick, D., R. (2006). *Eco-Terrorism: Radical Environmental and Animal Liberation Movements*. London: Praeger, p73.

Appendix F. Participant reporting of domains and themes

| DISENGAGEMENT FROM EXTREMISM AND SUBSEQUENT SOCIETAL RE-ENGAGEMENT | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|------|----|------|-------|--------|--------|-----|-------------------|-------|------|------|-------|------|--------------------------------|---------|--------|-------|--------|---------|-------|------|
| Themes from participants | Radical Environmentalists (8) | | | | | | | | Neo-jihadists (6) | | | | | | Militant Tamil Separatists (5) | | | | | RWE (3) | | |
| | Dean | Eric | Ed | Sean | Nadia | Daphne | Barrie | Rob | Kalim | Bilal | Jari | Bari | Bakar | Taqi | Oli | Thennan | Bagyam | Wasan | Oppila | Rick | Freya | Lena |
| SOCIAL RELATIONS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Disillusionment with leadership (12) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Disillusionment with group members (14) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Change in relations (12) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| COPING | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Physical & psychological issues (18) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Social support (18) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Resilience, skills & coping (20) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| IDENTITY | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Reduce identification with group (16) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Emergence of personal identity (20) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Alternative social identity (22) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| IDEOLOGY | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Disillusionment with radical ideas (16) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Find own beliefs (22) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Acceptance of difference (9) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ACTION ORIENTATON | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Disillusionment with radical methods (14) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Stop or reduce radical methods (15) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| • Prosocial engagement with society (19) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Appendix G. Participants referenced in analysis

| Domains & themes | Number & percentage of participants reporting each theme | | Number of participants referenced | Number of former enviro extremists referenced | Number of former neojihadists referenced | Number of former pro-LTTE extremists Referenced | Number of former RWE referenced |
|--------------------------------------|--|-------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|---|---------------------------------|
| Social Relations | 22 | 100% | 10 (45%) | | | | |
| Disillusionment with Leaders | 12 | 55% | 3 | 0 | 2 - Bilal, Bari | 1- Wasan | 0 |
| Disillusionment with Group Members | 14 | 64% | 3 | 0 | 2 - Kalim, Bari | 0 | 1- Freya |
| Relations with 'Others' | 12 | 55% | 4 | 1- Sean | 1- Kalim | 1- Oli | 1- Freya |
| Coping and Self-Care | 22 | 100% | 12 (55%) | | | | |
| Physical and Psychological Issues | 18 | 82% | 3 | 1- Daphne | 1- Bakar | 1- Oppila | 0 |
| Social Support | 18 | 82% | 3 | 1- Barrie | 1- Bakar | 0 | 1- Rick |
| Resilience, Skills and Coping | 20 | 91% | 6 | 0 | - Taqi | 4 - Oli, Thennan, Bagyam, Oppila | 1- Lena |
| Identity | 22 | 100% | 9 (41%) | | | | |
| Reduction in Group Identity | 16 | 73% | 3 | 1- Eric | 1 - Bakar | 1- Wasan | 0 |
| Emergence of Personal Identity | 20 | 91% | 3 | 1-Dean | 0 | 1- Oppila | 1- Freya |
| Alternate Social Identity | 22 | 100% | 3 | 0 | 2- Jari, Bari | 0 | 1- Lena |
| Beliefs, Ideas and Narratives | 22 | 100% | 12 (55%) | | | | |
| Disillusionment with Radical Ideas | 16 | 73% | 5 | 2 - Rob, Dean | 2 - Kalim, Bilal | 0 | 1-Rick |
| Find Own Beliefs | 22 | 100% | 4 | 1-Daphne | 2 - Bakar, Jari | 1- Oli | 0 |
| Acceptance of Difference | 9 | 41% | 3 | 0 | 1-Kalim | 1-Wasan | 1-Freya |
| Action Orientation | 22 | 100% | 11 (50%) | | | | |
| Disillusionment with Radical Methods | 14 | 64% | 4 | 2 - Nadia, Eric | 1- Jari | 1-Thennan | 0 |
| Stop Using Radical Methods | 14 | 64% | 3 | 0 | 2 - Kalim, Jari | 0 | 1-Freya |
| Prosocial Engagement in Society | 19 | 86% | 4 | 2 - Daphne, Rob | 1-Taqi | 1-Wasan | 0 |
| TOTAL | 110 | | 54 (49%) | | | | |

Appendix H. Empirical publications about Western individual disengagement

| Publication type | Author, date and title | Participant types |
|------------------|--|---|
| Book | James Aho (1994) This Thing of Darkness. A Sociology of the Enemy. | RWE |
| Book | John Horgan (2009) Walking Away from Terrorism. Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Groups. | RWE, Irish separatist, neo-jihadist |
| Book Section | Tore Bjørgo (2009) Processes of Disengagement From Violent Groups of the Extreme Right in Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, eds., Leaving Terrorism Behind. Individual and Collective Disengagement. | RWE |
| Journal Article | Gaetano Ilardi (2013) Interviews With Canadian Radicals. | Neo-jihadist |
| Journal Article | Fernando Reinares (2011) Exit From Terrorism: A Qualitative Empirical Study on Disengagement Among Members of ETA. | Basque separatist |
| Journal Article | Lorenzo Vidino (2011) The Buccinasco Pentiti: A Unique Case Study of Radicalization. | Neo-jihadist |
| Journal Article | George Kassimeris (2011) Why Greek Terrorists Give Up: Analyzing Individual Exit from the Revolutionary Organization 17 November. | Left-wing revolutionary |
| Journal Article | Anne Aly and Jason-Liegh Striegher (2012) Examining the Role of Religion in Radicalization to Violent Islamist Extremism. | Neo-jihadist |
| Report | Tore Bjørgo and Yngve Carlsson (2005) Early Intervention with Violent and Racist Youth Groups. | RWE |
| Report | Froujke Demant, Marieke Slotman, Frank Buijs, and Jean Tillie (2008) Decline and Disengagement - An Analysis of Processes of Deradicalisation. | Neo-jihadist, RWE, left-wing radicals, activist Moluccans |
| Report | Jon A. Olsen (2009) Roads to Militant Radicalization. Interviews With Five Former Perpetrators of Politically Motivated Organized Violence. | RWE, left-wing extremist, radical environmental and animal right extremists |
| Report | Michael Jacobson (2010) Terrorist Dropouts, Learning From Those Who Have Left. | Neo-jihadist |
| Cited in booklet | Karl-Olov Arnstberg and Jonas Hallen (2000) Smaka kanga; cited in Katja Wahlstrom. (2001). The Way Out of Racism and Nazism. | RWE |

Appendix I. EXIT Program – Stages of disengagement from RWE

| Stage | Description |
|---------------|---|
| Motivation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Still in the group but having doubts – Contact with support person who has gone through exit process |
| Disengagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Decides to disengage from the group – Can be a chaotic period – Support in form of talking, financial or practical help moving away – Contact person hooked in with authorities |
| Settlement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Break is complete – Has place to live, income, and job or training – May be socially isolated, empty and lonely – Trying to establish normal life – Group discussions can be useful |
| Reflection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Begins to free from violence, crime, radical ideology and hatred – Some people have anxiety, depression, psych issues, sleeplessness or alcohol abuse – Might need therapy – Abandon radical ideas |
| Stabilisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Normal life: work, study and maybe own family – Afraid past will ruin future, often experiences guilt and shame – Formal program no longer active but many maintain contact with support person |

Appendix J. Questions relevant to each domain of the Pro-Integration Model

| Domain | Questions |
|------------------|--|
| Social Relations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How many friends do they have? Close friends who understand them? Any long-standing friendships? – What are positive and negative aspects of relationships with the family of origin and/extended family, spouse, partner, and in-laws? – Are any family members involved in concerning activities or hold radical or violent ideas? Especially relevant is any family conflict arising from residual adherence to an extreme ideology and/or any expectations that family members should share the same views. – How are relationships with others in their immediate environment? Do they have many social relationships? Are they positive relationships? Are any friends involved in violent or illegal activities; do any hold non-mainstream religious/political ideas? – How engaged are they with their wider environment? Do they use mainstream services? Do they use mainstream shops, professional services, social services, sport, coffee shops, and libraries, etc.? – How does the person interact with out-group members? Who do they choose to spend their time with? Do they have friendships or interactions with non-group members? – Do they have a sense of belonging and contributing to wider society? In what way do they feel they belong? Are they working, studying and if in the community, perhaps caring for children/parents or doing volunteer work? How do they spend their time? Is it satisfying and do they feel they are contributing and their contribution is valued. |
| Coping | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Do they have sufficient social support? What level of personal and social support outside their previous extremist circle? From who? Examples include community services, neighbours, friends and family. – Are they aware of and dealing with any personal issues? Mental health issues including anxiety, depression, trauma, paranoia? Physical health issues? Psychological or social issues – anger, decision making, relationships? Alcohol or other substance issues? Do they acknowledge issues and actively engage in support or treatment for them? – Can they tolerate uncertainty? Are they able to deal with ambiguity and shades of gray? Can they accept that others have different beliefs? – Do they function in society with independence and dignity? Are they healthy in mind and body, with good social networks and satisfied with their faith and contribution in society? – Do they have a sense of purpose and direction in life? Do they have a sense of moving forward? Can they articulate what they want in life? Do they have or are they working towards a professional or family/community role? |
| Identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What level of identification and commitment do they have to the former extreme group? Is it stronger or weaker than previously? Does the group still have any influence? What signs are there that they are making decisions and thinking for themselves again? Does this change depending on who they spend time with? Are there alternate influences that are more constructive and less likely to lead to concerning activities or offending behaviour? |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do they have a good sense of who they are? Do they have a sense of their beliefs, values, strengths and weaknesses? Are they easily influenced? Are they re-discovering or developing their identity for the first time? - Have they integrated positive as well as negative aspects of previous identities into their current sense of self? - Do they feel they belong to any other group that is now more important to them? Which social groupings seem to be relevant or important? For example, family, ethnic, religious, work/professional, political, gang, community leader, etc. - Do they still view the world in terms of 'us and them'? Are they overly concerned whether someone is the same as them or not? Do they make judgments of who is good and who is evil depending on whether a person believes the same as them or not. This is most evident in a person's language and who they blame for what. - Do they interact with several different identity groups as well as having a personal sense of self? Does their overall sense of self hang together so that their personal views have weight, and at the same time all the identity groups that they belong to are aligned enough so that they don't have to cut off from one to belong to another? Are any of the new groups/identities extreme? - What do they want for their future? Can they imagine life beyond their current situation? How realistic are these goals? Are they able to identify and execute next steps? |
| Ideology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do they hold a non-extreme life philosophy, ideology or faith? If yes, what is it? How do they respond to discussions about these topics? - Have they critically engaged with their beliefs? How deep is their knowledge of their current faith/knowledge tradition? Are they genuinely devout/committed? Would they be able to challenge extremist interpretations? What do they think of their previous beliefs? - Do they endorse the use of violent or illegal methods to support their beliefs? If yes, how do they justify this? - Have they changed their beliefs? Either to become more hostile towards wider society, the government or specific groups; to become neutral, or to become more liberal, more accepting and peaceful. Does this affect their behaviour and interactions with others? - Do they accept that different ideological beliefs and cultural practices are valid in Australia? |
| Action Orientation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do they accept the 'system' and government as legitimate? Do they think the laws apply to them? Do they see mainstream society in extremely negative terms? If not, how do they see society, 'the system' and the government? - Have they stopped involvement in any violent activities? Are they spending time with other people involved in these activities? Are they involved in non-political crime unrelated to their beliefs? - Have they disconnected from extreme group members with whom they were previously associated? - Are they opposed to others using violence? Is it conditional or unconditional? Do they speak out against violent extremism? - Do they vote? Are there any local issues they are concerned about and how are they involved in making positive change? - Are they engaged in civic activities or community activities? Are they involved in any social change activism? Are they involved in any prosocial or voluntary activities? |

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