

## **Pro-Integration: Disengagement from and life after extremism**

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### **Bio**

Dr Kate Barrelle is an Australian CVE consultant with almost 20-years of experience as an applied forensic and clinical psychologist in community, government and research arenas. Her PhD research was on disengagement from violent extremism and subsequent societal integration. In the past Kate has worked in private practice where she also undertook forensic assessments and treatment, and was a frequent expert witness in court. She also worked for the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade in the Counter Terrorism Branch before co-founding a social enterprise for disengaged youth called STREAT. Kate is a Vincent Fairfax Fellow (Ethical Leadership) and participated in the '2020 Summit' convened by the then Australian Prime Minister. She consults to community as well as government CVE projects, and conducts applied research in this area.

## **Pro-Integration: Disengagement from and life after extremism**

This paper presents new findings about individual disengagement from violent extremism in a Western context. 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 eventually 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.

Fifteen themes emerged directly from the transcripts of 22 interviews with former extremists from a range of different ideological backgrounds. These themes clustered into five domains which collectively represent the phenomenological essence of disengagement from extremism, including subsequent re-engagement with society. A key finding is that sustained disengagement is actually about the proactive, holistic and harmonious engagement the person has with wider society afterwards. Building on existing empirical research, this paper proposes a tentative five domain, three level model of disengagement called the Pro-Integration Model (PIM).

**Keywords:** disengagement, re-integration, Pro-Integration Model, violent extremism, social identity, radicalisation

The purpose of this article is to propose a new conceptualisation of disengagement called the Pro-Integration Model (PIM). Based on new empirical data gathered in a Western democratic context, PIM comprises five domains and three levels of engagement that provide a framework for understanding core aspects of subsequent societal reintegration after disengagement from violent extremism<sup>1</sup>. A sub-set of the 22 participants interviewed were non-violent extremists, in order to provide a comparison and deepen our understanding of disengagement. After a brief overview of the

knowledge gap regarding disengagement, a summary of the PhD research underpinning the new findings and the PIM model will be presented.

### **What we do not know about disengagement from violent extremism**

Most people who join extremist groups eventually leave (Bjorgo, 2013, p. 86). Despite this, we do not possess a good understanding of how or why people leave extremism behind, or what triggers an early voluntary exit, rather than a delayed or forced one (Horgan, 2009b). Nor do we have sufficient knowledge of what is necessary to facilitate a sustained return to society. There are less than 20 empirically based publications on individual disengagement in a Western democratic context; a precariously thin evidence base for understanding this phenomenon (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). Nonetheless it is well accepted that disengagement is one of the three broad phases in the life-cycle of radicalisation – ‘Becoming’, ‘Being’ and ‘Leaving’ – highlighting the relevance of identity in and the normality of disengagement (Horgan, 2008a, p. 3). Radicalisation spans the first and the second of these phases, whilst disengagement, as it is conceptualised in this paper, occurs during the third phase of ‘Leaving’ and extends beyond. Almost every first-hand account testifies to the problems of being involved with extremism (Bjorgo & Carlsson, 2005; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013; Ilardi, 2013; Jacobson, 2010; Kassimeris, 2011; Reinares, 2011; Siegel, 2003; Wahlstrom, 2001). The personal damage suffered by extremist group 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, 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 the impact of violent extremists on society; less obvious is that if former members are to disengage sustainably, it is necessary to support them as they reintegrate. 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 (Bjorgo, 2012; 2013, p. 44). In practice however, there are many variations on what disengagement might look like. 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 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 pioneers of this field who have conducted hundreds of interviews with former extremists, are forced to conclude that, “there is no clear sense to date of what disengagement even implies” (Horgan, 2009b, p. 29). 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, 2009b, p. 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 (Horgan, 2009a, 2009b).

## **Understanding the phenomenon of disengagement**

To investigate why people leave extremist groups, 22 former extremists from a range of ideologies and backgrounds were interviewed about their disengagement and reintegration experiences. There were 14 former members of violent extremist groups and 8 former members of nonviolent extremist groups. Inclusion criteria required that they were an active member of an extremist group for more than a year, and that they had left over a year ago, and had no outstanding legal proceedings.

The former violent extremists interviewed included former jihadists, former far-right 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. The inclusion of these participants enabled discussion of 'extremism' as a whole. Participants had been involved with their respective groups for an average of seven, a mode of two years, and a maximum of 20 years. The longest duration since leaving was 20 years, with a mean of 11, and a mode of six years.

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). The sample used in this study was no different in its heterogeneity. 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. Females were interviewed from all but the neo-jihadist ideology type, which is consistent with other findings (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.

Regarding commitment and personal investment, 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, plus scrutiny from authorities, the participants nevertheless reported extraordinarily high levels of identification at the time of their involvement. Sixty-one percent of participants indicated that during their group involvement their sense of self was almost totally merged with the group (rated as 90–100% identified). A further 22% rated their group identification to be very high (rated as between 81–90%), with the remaining 17% giving a high rating (between 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.

The present study approached disengagement from extremism as a phenomenon in itself, as opposed to a series of case studies. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a very effective form of analysis for ideographic qualitative data and the most appropriate method for “looking in detail at how someone makes sense of a major transition in their life” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 3). 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” (Dukes, 1984, pp. 200-201; see Smith et al., 2009, for detailed instructions). The 22 in-depth interviews were analysed using IPA, and the remainder of this paper is dedicated to presenting the high level findings.

### **Why did they leave?**

Participants were interviewed about 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.

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 simple system was employed of allocating three points per person for their primary reason for leaving, two points for their secondary reason and one point for their tertiary reason. The per person weighted average for each reason was calculated across all participants, and is presented in Figure 1.

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. Once disillusioned by in-group behaviour, burnt-out, repelled by violence, or frustrated with the lack of impact from radical method, 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 former jihadists and former far-right extremists,

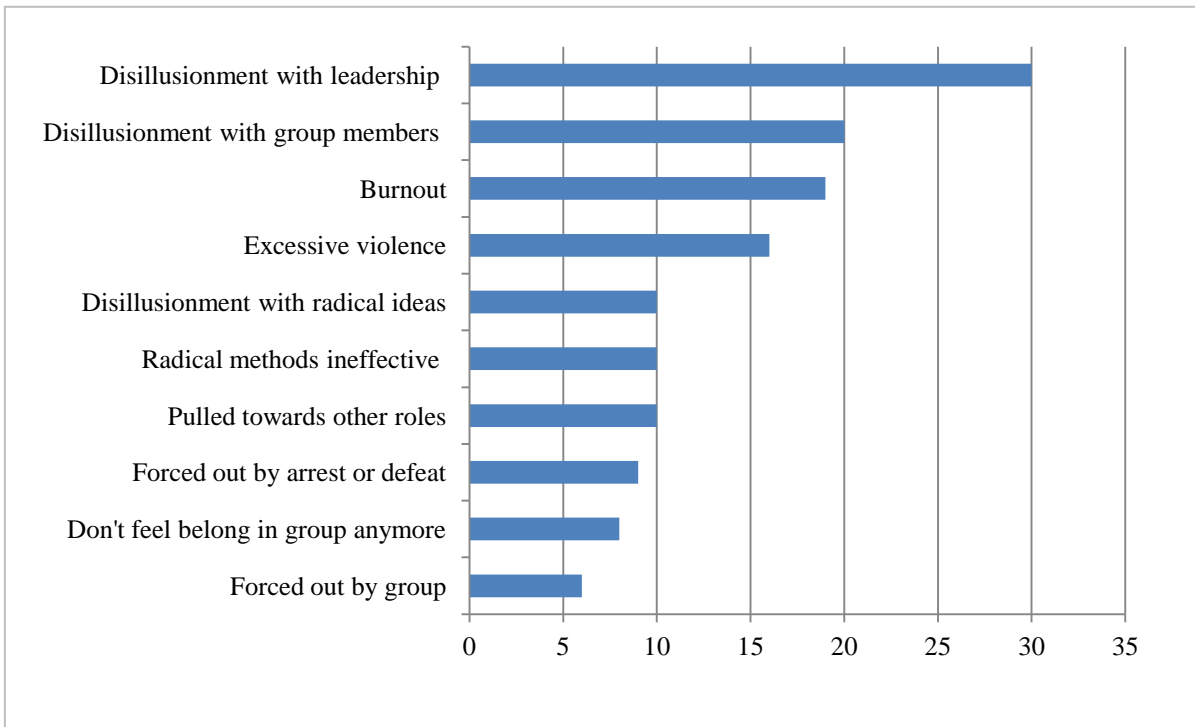


Figure 1. Reasons for leaving

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, not for political or ideological reasons, it is consistent that their reasons for leaving related more to social dimensions rather than ideological ones.

The fact that multiple reasons were provided by every participant indicates complex non-linear motivations, belying any simplistic 'reason' for leaving. In most cases there were major delays between 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. The experiences of the participants in this study make 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 as they left: a reduction in the intensity



of their connection to the extremist group, an emergence of their personal self, and finding something else to do or identify with. These processes involves 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. Conceptualising this process required the creation of a new analytical model.

### **Pro-Integration Model (PIM)**

The Pro-Integration Model (PIM) is a new conceptualisation of disengagement from violent extremism and reintegration into society that combines the relevant empirical and theoretical literature with five emergent themes resulting from this project. PIM 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.

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 1.

Ultimately disengagement is 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 themes. In one form or another, these themes 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. The findings support the idea that

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

Table 1. Domains and themes for leaving extremism and subsequent social integration

disengagement is not linear. Instead, it involves an interconnected process of change across five key areas of a person's life, and in many cases development within these areas occurs naturally over a period of years. 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’. These five themes relevant to sustained integration comprise the five domains of PIM.

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 engagement for all people. The five domains and the three levels result in a multi-level multi-domain model, illustrated in Figure 2.

Some people simply do not wish to engage with mainstream society, even if they have stopped using violence or other radical methods. This is termed a Minimal level of engagement. The Cautious level of 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. A Positive level of engagement represents full integration, and this occurs when a person enjoys healthy and functional relationships with people around them, irrespective of their group categorisations. Following IPA, the emergent structural properties of each domain were identified and will now be briefly summarised.

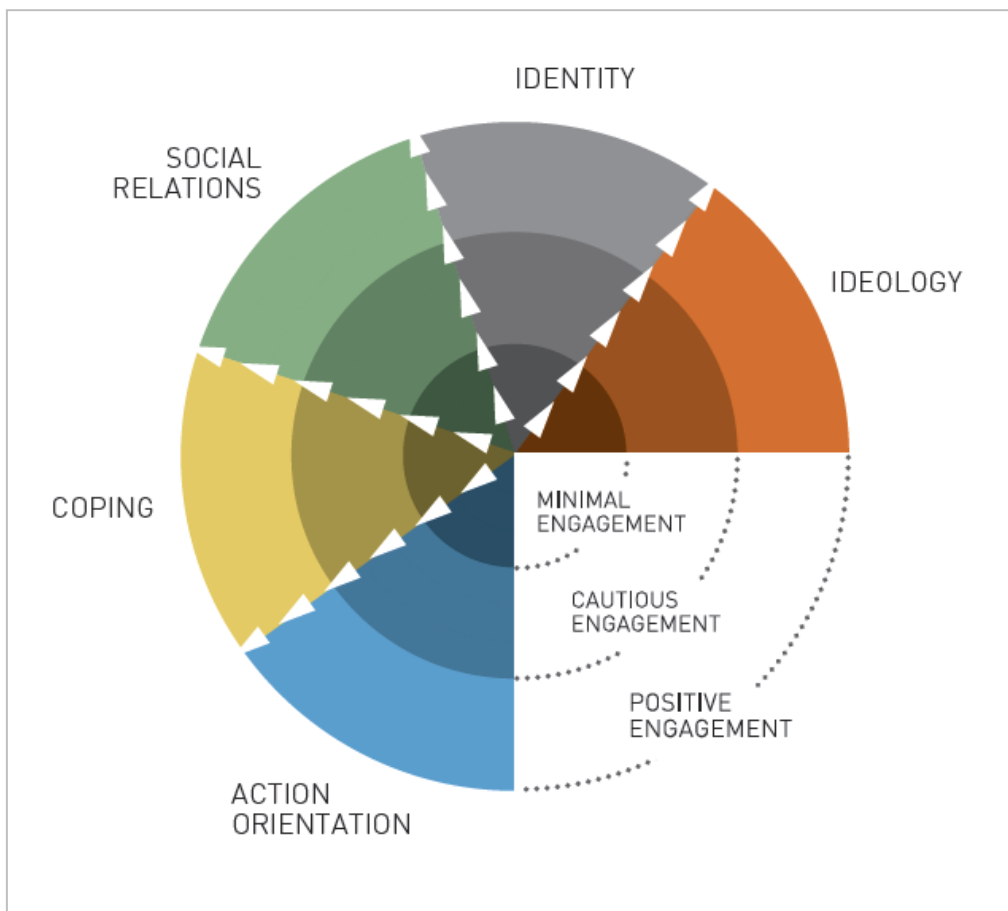


Figure 2. The Pro-Integration Model (PIM)

### *Social Relations*

The participants in this study indicated that in a tight-knit, underground, mission-oriented radical group, social relationships within the group and with out-group members are absolutely critical. Social relationships are critical not only to the formation and maintenance of the group as demonstrated by existing research, but also 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.

A young former right-wing extremist participant recollected the disillusionment she felt and how her social relationships began to change in the group when she realised her peers were way out of step with their very own ideology. It was when she concluded that probably did not even believe in the principles at all, that, in combination with the in-fighting, internal violence and alcohol abuse that her disillusionment peaked and she decided to leave.

*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.*

### ***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 every 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 reintegration. One former Tamil Tiger participant reported how her family attended to her physical injuries, whilst her sister provided critical emotional support.

*[We would] 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 ... 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.*

### **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. As already noted, the participants identified very highly with their respective groups at the time of involvement. 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: a reduction in the intensity of their connection to the extremist group, an emergence of their personal self, and finding something else to do or identify with.

Some participants reported that a critical incident 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, resulting in reduced identification with the group. There was large variation in what people did after they left and whether they could find other activities or people with which to spend their time. In most cases there were delays between noticing they did not belong in the group anymore, and having options or resources to enable an exit. The three 'Identity' domain themes are 'Reduction in Group Identification', 'Emergence of Personal Identity' and 'Alternate Social Identity'.

One former radical environmentalist rated his identification at the time as 100%, defining himself entirely by this group involvement: “[It was] *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*”.

### ***Ideology***

Participants 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. These findings 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 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. 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'. As noted, not everyone modifies their beliefs. One former neo-jihadist, fully disengaged in a behavioural sense, was adamant that he had not changed his views.

*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.*

On the other hand, a different former neojihadist explained just how different his views were now.

*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.*

### **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'.

Former extremists of the right-wing, the neojihadist and the militant Tamil separatists ideology groups referred to the ineffectiveness of violence. However it was a former (non-violent) radical environmentalist participant who best articulated the sense of futility in using direct action or illegal methods outside the democratic process. Here she reflects on the lack of connection of direct action to a broader movement of social change.

*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.*

### ***Bringing it all together***

Overall disengagement can be viewed as an identity transformation from outside to inside mainstream society across the five domains of the PIM. Social relations are the

vehicle through which most change occurs, so consideration of who a person spends time with is critical. Coping skills and self-care are necessary for an individual to move from surviving to thriving in society, this is especially so for former extremists and needs to be incorporated into any referral and support programs aimed at assisting or accelerating disengagement from violent extremism. Identity is core to who we are and where we belong, therefore safe opportunities need to be provided for disengaging individuals to explore their personal values and test out new places in society they might want to belong; this is best achieved through mediators that the person identifies with on some level. If beliefs, ideas and narratives remain important to the disengaging person then they will need to be learn how to respectfully challenge and question ideas, as well as educate themselves in their faith/ideology tradition in order to live harmoniously in wider society without hatred or conflict. Finally, 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. How long this remains so depends entirely on the changes in the other domains.

The essence of these five domains, at each level of societal engagement is summarised in Table 2.

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Minimal societal engagement</b>	<b>Cautious societal engagement</b>	<b>Positive societal engagement</b>
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 2. PIM domains across the three levels of engagement

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed to elicit the essence of disengagement as a phenomenon, by understanding the experience directly from the perspective of people who have lived this experience. The scope was deliberately restricted to consideration of individual voluntary disengagement in a Western context. By delving deeply into the phenomenon through the 22 disengagement-focused interviews with former extremists, and building on the foundation of existing empirical work, greater insight to the understanding of disengagement is gained. Disengagement from violent extremism is ultimately about finding somewhere else to belong. Interventions and support to assist those who want to leave violent extremism to do so, and to facilitate robust pro-integration for those who have already left, can be informed by this research.

Given the paucity of empirical data on this topic, the primary purpose of this PhD 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.

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 disengagement is an identity transition and 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. The essence of pro-integration is well captured by the words of a former Tamil Tiger fighter participant who, despite 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.

*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.*

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.

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## Endnotes

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1. Where grammatically sensible the term 'extreme' will be used in this paper 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' 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 article, the word 'radical' will be used to mean the same as 'extreme'.

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