Doing the hokey-cokey: everyday trajectories of activism

Social movements do not consist of ‘one hero, accompanied by an undifferentiated crowd’ (Castells, 2012: 12) but of rounded individuals whose diverse trajectories in and out of activism are embedded in personal life stories. These individuals are neither born nor aggressively recruited into EDL activism. They are neither duped by a charismatic leader nor spring from the earth as authentic, working-class anti-heroes. Their trajectories in and out of the movement are prosaic rather than heroic.

This chapter opens with a broad-brush portrait of the socio-demographic profile of activists in this study contextualised in existing data on the composition of support for, and activism in, far right organisations. The chapter then considers routes into (and often out of) the movement and the costs and consequences of participation. While space does not allow the detailed profiling of all respondents, the individual stories of eight activists are included as short vignettes. In this way, it is hoped to evoke characters who are recognisable and ‘live from chapter to chapter’ rather than reducing respondents to ‘a bunch of disembodied thoughts that come out of subjects’ mouths in interviews’ (Duneier and Back, 2006: 553).

This attention to individual agency (motivations, choices, turning points) requires embedding in the socio-economic context of those lives at a more structural level; while macrostructural determinants may not be immediately visible to the ethnographic eye, they remain ‘inscribed in the material distribution of resources and social possibles’ (Wacquant, 2008: 10–11). Realising this aspiration is problematic in this study for two reasons. First, it would require detailed discussion of the history and (post-)industrial development of the area in which the study is located, which would reveal the geographic location of the study and thus compromise the anonymity assured to research participants. More pragmatically, while respondents mainly come from a single region (in terms of EDL organisational structure), they were resident in different parts of that region (up to ninety miles apart); this made it impossible to conduct ethnographic observation of respondents’ everyday interactions with the formal and informal institutions through which resources such as employment, education, housing and welfare are accessed. Structural factors shaping paths into (and out of) EDL activism are addressed here, therefore, only in so far as they are articulated by respondents.
themselves in interview or conversation. This nonetheless provides some insight into the deeper social structural forces shaping participation in the movement beyond individual ‘motivations’.

‘Who are you?’ EDL activists in profile

The EDL is said to be composed of mainly poorly educated, white, working-class young men (Copsey, 2010: 5; Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 79). Against such broad-brush portraits of EDL activists, the socio-demographic profile of respondents in this study is painted here in finer detail and set in the context of existing literature and more statistically representative data. For the purposes of this book, the ‘respondent set’ (see Appendix 2) are considered to be those who took part in recorded interviews, although the number of people who contributed to the researcher’s understanding of the movement is much larger. They consist primarily of EDL activists from divisions within one regional organisation who travelled to demonstrations. Exceptions are: three members of the more extreme ‘Infidels’ organisation, who were from the same region and attended some EDL events whilst being critical of the EDL as a movement; two respondents who were members of a football firm of a nearby town and identified primarily as Casuals but participated in events organised jointly with the EDL; three respondents from a different part of the country interviewed after one of them was met at a national demonstration; and one respondent who was a family member of a key informant and who did not travel to demonstrations but was an EDL sympathiser.

Age

The EDL is described as a ‘young’ movement by Demos, whose Facebook-hosted survey suggested that 72 per cent of its supporters were under the age of 30 (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 17). This contrasts the primarily ‘grey-haired’ support for the BNP (Goodwin, 2011a: 137) and UKIP (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 175) and is in line with what we know more generally about the greater appeal to young people of subcultural or direct-action movements linked to the extreme right rather than formal political parties (Mudde, 2014: 4). In this study too, almost three-quarters (74 per cent) of respondents were under 35 years of age (see Figure 3.1).

While this might appear to confirm the youthfulness of the EDL suggested above, in fact young people were significantly less visible in the movement than expected and the achieved age distribution was driven by the focus of the larger MYPLACE project on youth activism and receptivity to radical political agendas (see the Introduction). Ethnographic observation suggested, in fact, that the proportion of those aged under 30 among active members of the EDL is significantly overestimated in the Bartlett and Littler study; almost certainly a result of the fact that the survey was conducted via Facebook, which is used more frequently by young people (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 17). In contrast, the current study may have underestimated the proportion of virtually active young people since
it recruited respondents primarily through face-to-face acquaintance at demonstrations and meetings. Although many young supporters enjoyed the ‘buzz’ of demonstrations (see Chapter 7), their participation was inhibited by travel costs (Connor, Tina, Rob) and the crackdown by the movement on violence (Ray, Chris, Connor). Respondents also recognised that young people are disinclined to join the movement because it is represented in the media as racist (Ray, Connor). Indeed a recent Extremis/YouGov survey found that, of those who had heard of the EDL, only 5 per cent of 18–24 year olds said they would consider joining, while 13 per cent of 40–59 year olds could contemplate doing so.¹

### Gender and sexuality

Studies to date have shown that women are significantly under-represented in all extreme right groups from relatively moderate radical right parties to the most extreme neo-Nazi groups (Mudde, 2014: 10). This study confirmed that men significantly outnumbered women in the EDL; 77 per cent of the respondent set was male and 23 per cent female. This mirrors Klandermans and Mayer’s study of extreme right activists in Europe where, even after deliberate oversampling of women activists, the proportion in each country sample ranged from a fifth to a third (Team Members, 2006: 52). It concurs also with the Demos survey of EDL supporters, which found 81 per cent to be male and 19 per cent to be female (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 5). Although sexual orientation was not something that was asked when socio-demographic data were collected from interviewees, three respondents (two men and one woman) were open about being gay or lesbian (see Box 3).

When asked whether their minority position in the EDL concerned them, women activists in this study said they felt comfortable, accepted and equal in a male environment and that having men around made them feel safer (Tina, Rachel). Women were visible in the EDL online and physically in many ‘admin’ roles and as stewards and speakers at demonstrations. Women were included among the inner circle of Regional Organisers (Gail Speight) and top leadership

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¹ For further details see Chapter 7.
Box 3: Declan

When I first met Declan, at the muster point for an EDL demonstration in Manchester (March 2013) he was reluctant to give me his mobile phone number. He had, he said, had previous experience of being ‘exposed’ by a journalist. Yet, surrounded by EDL supporters, he had no qualms in telling me he was gay.

He had joined the BNP in 2005 at just 13 years of age – his parents were both BNP members – but, in 2009, he left and joined the EDL because he found it more open towards him as a young gay man. When we met for interview in March 2013, however, it was at the flat of a division organiser in a town neighbouring his home town. It transpired that a few weeks earlier, his own local organisation had held a recruiting day at which some members of the division had called him ‘an embarrassment being a gay EDL member and said that the EDL should not allow gays’.

Declan is as much anti-communist or anti-left as he is anti-Islam and he criticises left-wing groups opposing the EDL for failing to be consistently critical of homophobia ‘wherever they find it’. Due to an implicit hierarchy of oppression he suggests that the left fails to challenge Islamic teachings which say ‘gays should be taken to a top of a mountain and thrown off’. At the end of 2012, Declan was

3.2 Declan: standing proud
asked to take over heading up the LGBT division and he was visible at almost every national, and many local, demonstrations carrying his rainbow flag amidst the sea of St George’s crosses.

When I interviewed Declan he had recently lost his job at a DIY superstore and was living on benefits of £112 per fortnight. Both his parents were long-term unemployed and the only member of his extended family working was one cousin. He had applied for over fifty jobs that week and joked ironically that he was competing with his own parents for jobs, since they applied for the same limited opportunities in their area. The situation was materially difficult; ‘the house is clean you know what I mean but in the fridge there’s very limited food … the bills are piling up, the rent’s going up’. Besides, he said, ‘I can’t not work. I’m just not that sort of person.’

(Helen Gower); a sharp contrast to the findings of Ezekiel’s (2002: 54–55) study of neo-Nazi and Klan groups in the United States, where women were never encountered in leadership roles. Women activists demonstrated a range of trajectories into the movement, defying the stereotype of ‘following a man into racism’ (Blee, 2002: 10). Indeed a number of women had joined the movement on their own, or with other women, and did not develop long-term partners within it (Rachel, Lisa).

However, the authenticity and integrity of women’s activism is nonetheless subject to question and dispute. Women are often described as ‘girlfriends’ of male members (Rachel) (see also: Ezekiel, 2002: 54; Kimmel, 2007: 207) or ascribe themselves a primarily ‘supportive’ rather than active role. Casey, for example, describes herself as ‘on the side line’ but she agrees with and supports her partner (a divisional leader) by managing his correspondence with the police because ‘he’s shit at things like that’ (see Box 4).

Women in the movement are undermined above all, however, by claims that their participation is motivated by the desire to find a sexual or romantic partner:

Box 4: Matt and Casey

On the coach on the way back from my first demonstration, a local division organiser takes the microphone. He has an important question; will his girlfriend marry him? From my seat, and amongst laughter and taunts about ‘how gay is that?’ I don’t hear Casey answer Matt’s question, but the clapping suggests it is a ‘yes’.

When I first met them, Matt and Casey lived together with Casey’s 11-year-old daughter, two Staffordshire terriers, an impossibly large rabbit and a veritable menagerie of snakes, spiders, scorpions and tropical fish. Towards the end of the fieldwork the family grew again when they had a baby daughter together. Casey attended demonstrations when she could but saw her role primarily as to ‘support’ and ‘help’ Matt especially with organisational matters and sorting catering for meetings and socials.
3.3 Matt and Casey: teamwork

Matt has a strong sense of stigmatisation. His mum raised him and his brother alone and, although it is not talked about openly in the family, he suspects his dad was violent towards her. He thinks that being a one-parent family was why he and his brother got ‘blamed’ for low-level crime in the area (thieving, graffiti) and classed as the local ‘rogues’.

Matt still strongly identified with his football hooligan past. At 16 he had started to support the local city team and become part of its firm. This had landed him in prison when he was younger but he said he had put all that behind him and not been in trouble with the police for more than three years. During the fieldwork, however, he was convicted of ‘common assault’ after an argument on a bus and served four weeks of an eight-week prison sentence.

Matt was very conscious that ‘my face is known’ locally, to the police because of his football past, and to the wider community because of his EDL activism. He had received a series of threats via Facebook and had a ‘petrol bomb’ thrown at him in the street.

Neither Matt nor Casey was in paid employment when we first met, although Casey later got a job in a school kitchen. Matt is often rushing around ‘seeing a man about a dog’ although he never tells me how he makes money. Two litters of puppies are sold in the course of the fieldwork, however, suggesting that, in this case, the metaphor is more literal than one might imagine.
‘Most of the EDL lasses are in it for cock. I will put it straight; I do think some of them are slags’ (Connor). This is a discourse, moreover, to which women contribute; Michelle proposes that ‘sticky knicker brigade’ would be a more appropriate name for the women’s division than ‘Angels’. When set alongside the observation that sexist ‘banter’ – language and jokes – is routine to the point of being invisible to many women activists (Tina), this suggests that despite the visibility of women in the EDL, they retain what Kimmel (2007: 207) terms a ‘relegated status’.

The question of why women are less active is difficult to answer on the basis of a small ethnographic study. Respondents often referred to their responsibility for children meaning they had ‘no time’ to go on demonstrations (Carlie) or that the children simply ‘came first’ (Casey). In informal conversation, however, female respondents claimed other women in the movement were prevented from attending demonstrations by their male partners (field diary, 29 September 2012). There is also some evidence from data on electoral support for the extreme right that, in general, women are less attracted to radical right-wing parties, and more inclined to back the welfare state, due to their roles as primary caregivers and their more vulnerable labour-market positioning (Kitschelt, 2007: 1199).

### Educational experience

Figure 3.4 details the current or achieved educational level of respondents (in absolute numbers of respondents) and paints a somewhat different picture to the findings of the Demos survey from which it was concluded that EDL supporters were ‘more educated’ than many would assume. Against a national higher-education participation rate of around 45 per cent and Bartlett and Littler’s (2011: 18) finding that around 30 per cent of EDL members surveyed via Facebook were ‘educated to university or college level’, in this study only 6 per cent of respondents (two respondents) had completed, or were currently studying for, a higher-educational degree while 28 per cent had taken the vocational education route. Most striking of all is that almost 20 per cent (six respondents) had not completed secondary education, having left or been excluded from school before completion of exams. Two respondents had been educated, at least partially, in the private education system; both were members of the more radical ‘Infidels’ splinter group and self-identified as ‘national socialists’.

![Educational status of respondents](image_url)
Everyday trajectories of activism

Based on a respondent set of thirty-five, these figures are not representative of EDL activists more widely but they are indicative of some of the troubled educational experiences that dominate personal narratives. Nine respondents talked about their own exclusion or temporary suspension from school or college for a mixture of behavioural and political reasons. Sean was expelled in Year 10 ‘for blowing the science lab up’; he was, he said, ‘bored’ but ‘good at practical work’. Michelle too felt that she could ‘learn quickly’ when it came to practical skills (she would have liked to train as a car mechanic) but had found school, where you have to ‘sit down with a pen and pencil and piece of paper’, deeply frustrating. Other stories were more directly linked to political views, although it is not always clear whether these incidents constituted a cause or effect of anti-Muslim views:

when I was in [names school] a few years ago, Year 8, a Muslim lad smacked me over the head with a chair so I grabbed his head and smashed his head on the table. I got kicked out the school for it, and it was on camera him hitting me over the head with a chair. … I got kicked out of school for a racial attack. … I had to move school. (Brett)

At the time of interview, Connor was just 15 but neither in school, training nor employment because, he explained, when pupils were reallocated, following the closure of the school he was at, other schools in the area refused to accommodate him because he was known to be an EDL supporter (see Box 5).

More routine, but equally life-shaping, experiences involved low educational achievement due to the failure to complete school or truancy. For Ian, everything

### Box 5: Connor

Connor was just 15 years old when I first met him at an EDL demo in Bristol with two other members of a local EDL youth division that they had founded. Soon after, when Chris was given a prison sentence and Ray, Connor’s older brother, was too busy with college to continue organising the division, Connor took on leading the division himself. His enthusiasm often got him into trouble with older members of the movement but he was also effective in bringing younger people into the movement. He made his own poster and set up his own Blog Talk Radio show which he hosted in late 2012.

Connor was very active on Facebook, using it for personal issues, to access, and sell, things cheap as well as for EDL-related posts. At the start of fieldwork he also attended demonstrations regularly, but thereafter he was often absent. Sometimes he simply had no money to travel. Other times he blamed the negative attitude of older members to the younger ones’ loudness for a decision not to travel with the older members of the division anymore. Periodically he also posted that he was fed up with ‘backstabbing’ or lack of seriousness in the movement and was ‘taking a step back’ from the EDL.
had started to go wrong when his granddad, who he described as ‘basically my
dad’, had died when he was 14 and he ‘just stopped going to school, started
kicking off at football matches’. He now regrets not attending school since ‘I know
if I’d have gone to school more I could have done a hell of a lot more.’ Richard
reflects that he had the romantic belief he was going to be a professional footballer
and did not need to do well at school. He left without any qualifications as he
was excluded before his GCSE exams. Richard, who worked as a refuse collector for the local council, laughs that ‘one of my teachers said if you don’t try hard at school you’re going to be a bin man [laughs]’. While Richard is one of the few full-time employed respondents in this study and happy with his job conditions and prospects, he also recognises the stigma it attracts; you get ‘labelled a tramp’ if you handle rubbish.

An important dimension of stories about school or college is personal experience of being bullied. Five respondents in this study said they had been bullied at school and their accounts of this experience are discussed in Chapter 6. Studies of participants in ‘EXIT’ programmes in Scandinavia and Germany also found that ‘bullying was a common unifying theme’ (Kimmel, 2007: 209) suggesting the role of bullying in the stories of young people’s paths into extreme right activism, alongside domestic and sexual violence (discussed below), is an important and under-researched question.

**Employment**

The most striking dimension of the socio-demographic profile of respondents in this study regards their employment status (see Figure 3.6). While in the Demos survey, just over a quarter (28 per cent) of EDL supporters were unemployed (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 5), in this study the figure was almost half (49 per cent).³ A further 20 per cent were in either part-time or ‘irregular’ employment, which covers a range of statuses, including seasonal and occasional work, cash-in-hand employment or semi-legal and illegal trading activities. In contrast only 11 per cent were in full-time employment.

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³.6 Employment status of respondents
There is a widespread assumption that unemployment, both at the national (macro) and the individual (micro) level, is correlated to extreme right attitudes since it is believed that marginalisation leads to political frustration and consequent extremism (Mudde, 2014: 8). Qualitative studies of extreme right activism also often reveal circumstantial evidence of the connection. Ezekiel’s (2002: 58) study of members of a white racist group in Detroit showed most of the members to have no jobs and no prospect of work while those who did work, earned low wages or found occasional, manual work on an informal basis. However, there is also a growing body of evidence that support for extreme right parties and movements emanates not from the poorest groups but the lower middle class and skilled manual workers (Blee, 2002: 25; Kimmel, 2007: 207; Rhodes, 2011: 115).

Respondents in this study identified themselves as working class, or as Tina put it ‘the normal working class that are struggling to get by’ (Tina). Older respondents survived on a combination of benefits (often as a result of ill health) and informal work or irregular earning opportunities and everyday conversations frequently concerned material issues, debt and bills, benefit claims and sanctions. Younger respondents found themselves moving rapidly between insecure and low-paid jobs, in a similar trajectory to the ‘downwardly mobile’ young men in Kimmel’s (2007: 207) study. Declan explains the competition for even low-paid jobs in his local area as ‘if there’s one job advertised they’ll be 900 people applying for it and only 10 would get an interview’. Declan is no stranger to unemployment; his dad had been unemployed for 12 years and his mum had not worked since losing her job when he was a child. Tim, whose dream was to work in a job caring for animals, describes how, since the closure of a major employer in the area, work had become precarious. Despite being only 25 years of age, he had moved already between a series of construction and service industry-related jobs, for most of which he had no previous training, and from which he appeared to be laid off, conveniently for the employer, just before they would have been obliged to offer some form of redundancy payment (Tim). For Jordan, the fact that ‘the work’s not out there’ explained why seven of his close friends had joined the army.

That the EDL commands more support from lower-class strata is confirmed by the Extremis/YouGov poll which found that, of those who were aware of the movement, people from the working classes and on benefits were more likely to agree with the values (although not methods) of the EDL (31 per cent) than those from the upper and middle classes (18 per cent). This is not to explain away extreme right attitudes as the necessary outcome of either working-class status or deprivation; many more people in these structural locations do not align with extreme right views. Still less is it to suggest a direct connection between the unemployment and poor job prospects of these people and immigration flows. However, it is to recognise the intertwining of persistent unemployment and the permanent settlement of immigrant populations within patterns of ‘advanced marginality’ (Wacquant, 2008: 163).
Family status and background

Socio-demographic data on the family status of respondents captured basic information about whether respondents were married or living with a partner (29 per cent), single (54 per cent) or divorced/separated (17 per cent). The high proportion of ‘single’ respondents clearly reflects the skew towards younger people in the respondent set. Family background and childhood experiences were found to be very significant in shaping the lives and political trajectories of respondents and are considered below.

Ethnicity

Respondents were asked how they usually referred to themselves when declaring their ethnicity (for example when completing official forms). Figure 3.7 shows that 51 per cent referred to themselves as ‘White-English’, while 23 per cent called themselves ‘White-British’. This identification as ‘English’, ironically, is slightly less than for the general population; 2011 census data show that three-fifths of the population in England do not identify with a British national identity, and only see themselves as English (Jivraj and Simpson, 2013). In interview, moreover, the insistence on ‘Englishness’ is not as pronounced as anticipated from the name and symbolic representations chosen by the EDL. The main concern expressed is a resentment that, while other national groups in the British Isles routinely consider themselves to be ‘Welsh’ or ‘Scottish’ rather than ‘British’, it is considered ‘taboo’ or even ‘racist’ to declare yourself to be ‘English’ (Ed). This is echoed in Clarke
Loud and proud: passion and politics in the EDL

and Garner’s (2010: 203) study of white residents in Bristol and Plymouth who viewed enviously other constituent nationalities of the UK, whose identities were ‘celebrate-able’ without guilt. A particularly contentious issue is that on official forms, where you are required to state your nationality, there is no option to state you are English rather than British while it is possible to say you are Scottish and so forth (Ed). Both Ed and Ian complained that forms they had filled in had been returned because they had put ‘English’ where asked to state ‘nationality’ (field diary, 21 April 2013). Others acknowledge that although they consider themselves ‘English’, the use of the term in the name of the organisation is ‘controversial’ and might give the wrong impression (Tim). Moreover, among respondents there were equally strong commitments to the importance of maintaining a united Britain (Nick), feeling a primary allegiance to the Union Jack rather than the St George’s flag (Lisa) and rejection of the special status of ‘Englishness’, seeing it as synonymous with ‘British’ (Kane) or viewing the differentiation between the two as a recent phenomenon (Lisa).

It is worth noting also that two respondents insisted on having their ethnicity recorded as either ‘British’ or ‘English’ but not as a subcategory of ‘White’ on the grounds that ‘colour makes no difference to being British/English’ (Declan, Carlie). Of course this is not the case for all. For other individuals, ‘whiteness’ was a key marker of identity:

I grew up in a white community. I went to a white primary school. … Then all of a sudden I’ve gone to a secondary school and it was full of ‘em. … I looked at the class and I was thinking, ‘Wow, there’s so many different colours’ … it was a shock, I was just like, no I’ll never forget that. (Jordan)

The only respondent of mixed ethnic origin was Lisa, who has African (on her father’s side) and Italian (on her mother’s side) heritage (see Box 6). Lisa had had a difficult childhood, spending several years in care and her contact with her dad had been intermittent and difficult, problematising her own knowledge of her heritage. Indeed, she said, since her dad ‘was a Barnardo’s kid’, he was not sure himself of his origins. What he had told her was that he had been born in Islington, that his mum was from Mauritius and his dad from Somalia and that he had been ‘adopted out by a white family’ whom he lived with until he ‘ran away with the fair’ at the age of 14 (Lisa). Damon also tells me that he has Polish Jewish heritage – his family had fled to Britain from pogroms at the end of the nineteenth century and settled in the East End of London.

The socio-demographic profile of respondents in this study has identified a range of shared social characteristics and structural positions; respondents are predominantly White British/English, male, not in stable employment and with low educational achievement. Such factors are not determining, however; more people sharing these individual and environmental factors choose not to participate in, or to actively oppose, such movements. In the second half of this chapter, we thus consider what leads particular individuals to become active in the EDL.
Box 6: Lisa

I met Lisa at her first EDL demonstration (September 2012). She was nervous – not because of any potential risk (she had served in the British Army for four years and completed a tour in Bosnia) but was apprehensive about how she would be received ‘because of my colour’. She also described herself as ‘quite shy’ and found social interactions that were heavily alcohol-fuelled difficult; she had stopped drinking herself following alcohol-related problems. After the demonstration she said that her colour ‘wasn’t an issue’ and after ‘about an hour’ she had felt comfortable with other division members.

Lisa had had a difficult childhood. Her dad had been largely absent in her early years when she had been physically abused by her mum. When her mum attempted to kill her, at the age of 7, by giving her an overdose of tablets, she was taken into care and then fostered. When she was 12 her dad reappeared and she lived with him – although he was in and out of prison – until the age of 19 when she joined the army.

Lisa had been prosecuted twice for racially aggravated offences. The first occasion had been more than a decade ago when, after an argument with her dad, a brick she threw at his house had smashed a window of a West Indian club next door. She was prosecuted for racially aggravated criminal damage because she

3.8 Lisa: seeing red
had called her dad a ‘black bastard’ in the course of the argument. When we met she was being prosecuted for racially aggravated harassment following an argument in the street with some Polish neighbours; she was convicted and given a two-year suspended sentence. When narrating these episodes she does so with irony, pointing out her own experience of racism – ‘When I was a kid we got chased by the BNP when they were all skinheads.’

Lisa reads widely and is critical of the haphazard form of EDL divisional meetings. She is keen to extend the kind of activism undertaken, suggesting producing leaflets that could be put through letterboxes locally.

Lisa does not work due to long-term mental health issues. She lives with her partner who encouraged her to join the EDL to ‘channel the anger’ that she was experiencing but whose own job in the public sector prevented her having any personal association with the movement.

Paths into the EDL

Explanations of receptivity to far right extremism at the individual level have sought to identify vulnerable personality ‘types’. Theories of a fascist personality type, first found in the work of Reich and Fromm and later operationalised by Adorno et al. in their classic study of The Authoritarian Personality (1950), identified propensity to fascism (among ‘ordinary’ individuals) and attributed these psychological traits primarily to upbringing, especially relations with parents; the authoritarian is assumed to repress resentment against his or her parents and this resentment forms the basis of later prejudices (1950: 38). The authoritarian personality thesis has been robustly critiqued for suggesting inter alia that the contradictions of fascism are contradictions which exist within individuals rather than between individuals within movements (Billig, 1978). Later developments of the theory away from ‘fascism’ and towards a wider notion of propensity to ‘authoritarianism’ have suggested typologies of the ‘open’ versus the ‘closed’ mind (Rokeach, 2015) and the need for dichotomous categories to order the world (Allport, 1979); approaches that have come to underpin understandings of prejudice and Islamophobia. According to Billig (1978: 59–60), however, these theories rest on a central paradox of the concept of authoritarianism (as described by Adorno et al.), which defined the potential fascist as threatened by ambivalence and complexity but measured this through approval of F-scale statements that were essentially ambiguous. Thus, the potential fascist, far from being totally intolerant of ambiguity, is constituted as requiring ambiguities to express their intolerance.

The uncomfortable reality is that there is not one ‘type’ of person that is attracted to a movement like the EDL; rather decisions to start, continue and draw back from activism are set within a complex web of local environment and personal psychodynamics and family dynamics. Joining the EDL is not an ‘end point’ – the formation of the individual subject as part of an extreme right fringe of society that the latter tolerates as a ‘pathological normalcy’ of democratic
society (Mudde, 2014: 8) – but one dimension of largely ‘normal’ lives and one that shifts in its importance to individuals as life circumstances change.

Using life-history interviews with thirty-six extreme right activists in the Netherlands (1996–98), Linden and Klandermans (2007) suggest there are three ‘paths’ into extreme right activism. These trajectories are characterised by: ‘continuity’ (where activism is a result of prior political socialisation and expresses itself in the life-long commitment to a movement, in the case of ‘revolutionaries’, or movement between organisations, in the case of ‘wanderers’); ‘conversion’ (where activism marks a break with the past); or ‘compliance’ (when individuals are persuaded to become active by those already committed). For Linden and Klandermans these trajectories map on to three underlying motives for participation in social movements: *instrumentality*, characterising the ideologically motivated ‘revolutionary’ but also the angry ‘convert’ who seeks to fight injustice; *identity*, characterising both the ‘wanderer’, who is in search of a political home and like-minded others and the ‘compliant’ who remains in the movement primarily through identification with others there; and *ideology*, motivating those who want to express a view. What brings people to movements depends on which trajectory activists have taken and which ‘type’ they constitute.

While, as ideal types, these constructs are useful, both movements and individual participants combine elements of more than one type. In the case of members of the EDL in this study, while the prominent ‘type’ would appear to be the ‘convert’, drawn to the movement in pursuit of a struggle against perceived injustice, fringe members (including the three Infidels members) conform more to the ‘revolutionary’ type. Moreover, perhaps because the Linden and Klandermans’s typology emerged from a life-history study, the notion of ‘convert’ places too much weight on a life-changing moment to accurately render accounts in this study. While some respondents narrate their pathways into the movement through particular instances of injustice, these are set within a strong pre-existing discontent or discomfort with the world around; a particular experience may provide a tool for narration of their path into activism but does not mean that it motivated it. Indeed, as Blee (2002: 33) notes, studies of right-wing extremists are prone to the assumption that dramatic life outcomes must have dramatic causes when, in practice, racist activism typically has quite mundane beginnings, and motives attributed often after the event should not be taken at face value (2002: 33). Moreover, while ‘conversion’ for Linden and Klandermans (2007: 185) marks ‘a break with the past’, often associated with critical events in individual life-histories, in this study paths into the movement are marked by significant continuity in respondents’ wider lives rather than a radical break in them. Equally, while none of the respondents in this study could be described as primarily a ‘compliant’ – almost all had actively joined the movement through their own personal desire – a number had reached a point where they felt little ideological stimulation from participation and remained primarily because of the affective bonds they had formed.

Recognising the complexity and ‘messiness’ of individual narratives, I propose to consider below not ‘motivations’ for joining the EDL but the *contexts* in which individuals first became involved in the movement. This focus reflects the
situational rather than life-history approach of the study and allows attention to questions of: environmental factors – locality, housing, material circumstances – which constitute important contexts for decisions to become politically active; socialisation, in particular whether the choice of political direction is shaped by a family ‘tradition’ of far right activism; and personal and family dynamics – family background, experience of violence and abuse, health and social integration – that emerge as central to the accounts respondents give of their whole lives.

‘Seeing Islam’: environmental contexts

When recounting how they became involved in the EDL for the first time, individuals often recall events that had been important in shifting their perspectives or making them want to be active. However, in distinction from the ‘converts’ in Linden and Klandermans’s (2007) study, the kinds of stories told are not usually of a dramatic turning point in life-histories but of how particular, often external, events release a deeper, simmering anger or resentment that leads them into activism.

Some respondents associate their decisions to become active with a response to national and international events such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the USA or 7/11 in the UK or the more recent murder of British soldier Lee Rigby (May 2013).

Kane: It’s been about a year and 3 months now. My first demo was Leicester. You know I got involved in that for just like seeing Islam. Just seeing, just look at it, first 9/11, then the double decker bus in London, then that making soldiers die in the streets, having their heads chopped off, that’s Islam. Heads being chopped off. I’ve seen live videos in Pakistan of kids that have been randomly battered for no reason, age 3, being battered. It just makes me feel sick pretty much, just seeing a 3 year old being battered, slapped, punched across the room. That was on a live video thing that was. It just made me feel sick.

Int: So it was just kind of seeing stuff like that then?

Kane: Yeah and then I remembered the English Defence League got mentioned to me. I looked into it and … them fighting for the kids, them fighting for everyone. Them just trying to make this country a better place for our kids to live in.

The viewing of images and videos on the Internet, often shared through social media, is an important factor in framing fear and anger and identifying the EDL as a way of expressing it. However, individual events, as refracted through the media, do not cause but actualise longer-term frustrations. This is evident from both Tina’s and Lisa’s explanations of how they first got involved in EDL activism:

I was just getting so annoyed with how the country’s going. And … then obviously when Lee Rigby died, the EDL was on the TV, and that’s the first time I’d heard of the EDL … I looked them up on Facebook. I liked their page, found out about the Birmingham demo, me and my partner went. (Tina)

I was getting angry basically or frustrated, I should say, not angry, well yeah it was turning into anger and my partner was saying, you know, I think I saw it on TV and I said that’s who I’m going to join, EDL … So, I got in contact with EDL. (Lisa)
In both cases respondents do not become aware of the EDL through social media but use it to ‘look up’ and make first contact with the movement once particular events or personal experiences had evoked an interest.

Longer-term frustrations and accumulated ‘anger’ may be locally framed as a feeling of resentment towards the increasing visibility of Islam in the community. Chas had joined after encountering an EDL demonstration by chance while in the city centre and finding what he heard resonated with a feeling he had that ‘I’ve seen this happen.’ It is in these lived local environments that interest in the EDL is activated. These contexts are described as ‘rough’, ‘poor’ and dogged by crime and ‘gangs’ such that ‘I don’t feel safe walking around the streets anymore’ (Sean). For many young respondents, the locality was ‘dead’, offering little prospect of either employment or leisure. As Ray put it, ‘The best thing you’ve got in our area is the swimming baths. … And that’s two foot deep and that’s the deep end.’

The primary dimension of locality as narrativised by respondents in this study, however, is its relative multicultural or monocultural nature; a shift from the latter to the former is frequently the prompt for discussing this. These ‘changed’ environments are described as ‘not English … It’s like driving somewhere else. In another country’ (Brett). For Tina this is expressed through the changing ethnic composition of those on a particular bus route in her home district (see Chapter 4) while others experience ‘shock’ when they themselves move from one environment to another, as in Jordan’s description (above) of his experience of moving schools. In his case this resentment is embedded within nostalgia for ‘strong communities’ in the past – before they became multicultural – found also in studies of BNP supporters (Goodwin, 2011a: 149).

It was a rough area, poverty. If you asked people at [names district] they would say it was a shit hole. To be honest it was but the community I lived in everyone looked out for each other but you can’t find that anywhere to be honest now. (Jordan)

However, younger respondents in particular can also be critical of monocultural environments, which they describe as ‘racist’ (Tina, Peter, Kyle, Ian). Peter notes that his home town is so racist that racist comments are directed even ‘towards their own football players’. Both Peter and Kyle explain this as a product of residents’ fear of change. For respondents in large urban conurbations too, however, the environment appears to be changing dramatically around them. The fear it evokes is exacerbated by the feeling that they themselves are static as their mobility is constrained by their dependence on the social housing system. Of the twenty-one respondents in this study living independently, 57 per cent (12) were living in social housing compared to 17.5 per cent of the population in general (2011 census data). Moreover, getting access to social housing for many had been a long and frustrating process; two single mothers complained of having to wait more than ten years to be allocated a house by the council. For Tina in particular this experience framed her vision of a society in which others’ needs were being prioritised over hers and underpinned her EDL activism: ‘Every single property that I went to view, Somalis got it, you know … it really got me...
angry.’ Tina’s story (told more fully in Chapter 6) is familiar from existing literature on support for populist radical right and far right parties. At the individual level, it echoes respondents in Linden and Klandermans’s study (2007: 194) who ascribe their ‘conversion’ to anger about their own treatment by the Dutch social security system when ‘those foreigners get everything’ while, at the wider community level, it is reminiscent of Rhodes’s (2011: 108) analysis of how BNP voters in Burnley constructed particular ‘Asian/Pakistani/Muslim’ areas of the town as receiving ‘a disproportionate share of council monies’.

‘Them are EDL so best we’re EDL’: socialisation and solidarity

There is some evidence that family histories of voting for far right parties and growing up in extreme right families are important in forming racist views (Nayak, 1999; Simi and Futrell, 2010). As noted above the Linden and Klandermans (2007: 184–5) study identified one type of trajectory into activism as being the result of prior political socialisation (‘continuity’). In this study, there are a small number of cases where there was a strong family tradition of far right support leading to participation in extreme right groups in early teenage years. The clearest case of this concerned brothers Connor and Ray whose father, and subsequently their uncle, had run a local EDL division: ‘that’s where we get our incentive from. Well, them are EDL so best we’re EDL.’ (Ray). However, even in this case, the boys had experienced a diversity of influences, not least because they had been brought up by their grandparents who were, according to Ray, ‘dead respectable’ and would discuss concerns they had about the movement with them.

Other respondents had backgrounds in older far right parties and movements. Declan had joined the BNP when he was just 13. His grandfather had been a National Front member when it was first formed and both his parents had been BNP members. However, he had come to his own decision to leave the BNP for the EDL when ‘I was starting to realise that I was gay and I came to realise that I couldn’t be gay and in the BNP’ (Declan). Jordan had been strongly influenced by his grandfather who had been a National Front member while Kane also talked about an influential grandfather who had always supported the BNP.

However, other respondents who had become active in their early or mid-teens (Chas, Ollie, Nick) did not have a family history of far right support. This is a pattern identified also by Blee (2002: 27) who found that more than a third of the women she interviewed identified their parents as Democrats, progressives or even leftists while many of the other two-thirds described their parents as moderate or non-political, and only a handful called them ‘right-wing racist’. Indeed among this EDL respondent set, there were cases where respondents’ views or activism were not only not supported at home but caused worry, embarrassment, arguments and tension: ‘If I talk politics at home, I’d either end up scrapping with Dad, or Mum would call me racist’ (Peter). Chris, 18 years old at the time of interview, reported having been thrown out of the parental home and having to move into a hostel ‘because my mum’s against EDL. … [M]y mum don’t agree with it.’
Surprisingly few respondents cite the influence of peers or friends in becoming involved in the EDL; the movement appears, rather, as a site for making new or ‘real’ friendships. This is in sharp contrast to Blee’s (2002: 52) findings that both men and women come into organised racism in the USA primarily through social networks in the form of a friend or acquaintance (as well as a family member) and to Kimmel’s (2007: 210) suggestion that points of entry into the neo-Nazi movement for teenagers in Sweden was often through social activities with friends, peers or relatives. However, some respondents noted that they had first heard about the movement from friends (Chris, Sean, Michelle, Rob, Kane) and attended first events together with them. Making a personal contact in the local movement was also instrumental in Lisa’s route to activism. Although, as noted above, she had registered her support for the group via Facebook, she did not become active until she was approached directly by another member, Rachel, who identified her as a potential supporter from a hoody she was wearing around town bearing the slogan ‘British jobs for British people’. As Lisa explained, her own lack of social confidence meant that without this personal contact, it is unlikely that her interest would have turned into active participation in EDL events.

Another common route to the EDL was via an existing crowd; the football firm. A number of respondents had previously, or currently, participated in football-firm activities (Matt, Peter, Kyle, Ian, Connor, Jordan, Richard). Rob had consciously replaced the ‘buzz’ of football hooliganism with EDL activism:

> ROB: just as I got banned from football the EDL started so guys that I knew that were banned as well says ‘come along Rob, it’s the same sort of thing’. …
> INT: So what’s the connection then? What makes it similar?
> ROB: Erm the singing, the drinking, the shouting, the chanting, the camaraderie, just being part of a family again, do you know what I mean? It just fell in line for me perfectly. I got banned one week and about 3 month later the EDL kicked in. So I thought, ‘Oh I’ll have a try at this.’

Finally, a number of respondents had pre-existing solidarities with the armed services, which they evoked to explain routes into EDL activism. Four respondents (Lisa, Ed, Jason and Mike) had served in the army themselves, and another two (Peter, Rob) had signed up but not passed basic training. A number of others expressed a desire to join the army either in the past or in the future. For Kane the army was a ‘family tradition’ – his granddad, dad, uncles and aunt had all served – and he himself had ‘wanted to follow in my granddad’s footsteps’ but had been deterred because he suffered from asthma. Six respondents mentioned close friends or family who were serving in the army and four said that they had friends or family who had been killed or injured in combat. For Jordan, the loss of a friend in Afghanistan was central to his unconcealed dislike for Muslims (see Chapter 5) because, he said ‘what killed my friend in Afghanistan were Muslims’ (Jordan).
Personal and family dynamics

Even where family is not a direct or primary force in political socialisation, still less the training ground for the authoritarian personality, it remains central to the contexts that shape trajectories into the EDL. Family contexts described are rarely ones of stable, strong and protective environments. Two respondents had grown up living in a mixture of parental homes, children’s homes and foster care. Rachel’s story was particularly striking; despite having been separated from her siblings and having grown up largely in care due to her mother’s alcohol problems, it was she who nursed her mother through terminal cancer (see Box 7).

Four respondents had been brought up by their grandparents rather than parents and another had lived with his mother and grandfather. These grandparents were talked about fondly and a number of respondents expressed appreciation of mothers or fathers who they felt had ‘been there’ for them even if familial circumstances had not been perfect. However, even Chas, who made one of the few positive references to his family being ‘strong’, noted that what he had gained from that was, ‘You are taught how to fight for yourself’ (Chas).

Box 7: Rachel

Rachel talked straight and always from the heart. It was infectious. I met her for the first time a few days before my first demonstration; within half an hour we had shared personal information that nobody but close friends knew. This was not strategic on Rachel’s part – she was not testing me nor did she use what she knew against me – it was just how she was.

Rachel is separated from, but has a good relationship with, her husband. She has two grown-up children and three grandchildren about whom she is fiercely protective. She is also affectionately called ‘mum’ by Sean, a childhood friend of her son, who had a deeply problematic relationship with his own family and found a ‘safe’ space at Rachel’s. She lives on her own in a one-bedroom flat, which was always immaculately clean and tidy. She scraps by on benefits and casual employment. She enjoys her independence, going to music festivals and on holiday with female friends, although she occasionally tested the market for a new long-term relationship.

Rachel regularly attended demos and meetings and undertook much background organisational work to ensure a ‘turnout’ from her area. She was asked to become divisional ‘admin’, taking over responsibility for the website and organisation of travel to demonstrations. She later became an admin on the regional ‘Angels’ division page.

During a long car journey to a ‘meet and greet’ at the other end of the region, Rachel told her story. She and her three siblings had been taken into care as children (she was 7 years old) although subsequently her two brothers were adopted and her sister was taken back by her mother. She had only recently traced her brothers. Wanted by neither her own nor the adopting family, Rachel had stayed...
Everyday trajectories of activism

The family thus often constituted in practice an all-too-thin layer of protection between internal and external worlds and is often narrated as a site of trauma and resilience. Experiences of abuse and violence within the family and family deaths appear as key influences in shaping respondents’ lives. Eight respondents in this study talked about abuse they had experienced or witnessed in the family. One respondent was sexually abused by family friends, another had been sexually abused while in a foster family, and one respondent reported his sister had been in care. Despite this, it was Rachel who looked after her mother through the cancer that eventually caused her death.

Rachel’s kind-heartedness could be abused and during fieldwork she ended a friendship with another division member who had started to exploit her generosity. Struggling financially herself, towards the end of fieldwork reluctantly she had taken ‘a step back’.

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Loud and proud: passion and politics in the EDL

a victim of a local grooming gang. In the first case, the perpetrators had been prosecuted and the process of the trial and associated publicity had taken its toll on the respondent’s mental health: ‘when it all came out … I went through post-traumatic stress, depression’ (Ryan). Two respondents had been physically (and psychologically) abused by their mothers when they were young children. One had been beaten by his father and traumatised by witnessing domestic violence between his parents:

I mean I used to sit at the bottom of the stairs and listen to my Mom get beaten up and everything. … Seriously. He used to beat the shit out of my Mom. … Seeing my Mom wearing a pair of glasses walking to school. No. Taking a baseball bat to me at 13 years old. (Sean)

It is hard in the context of a research project to be able to draw any concrete connections between childhood abuse and trauma and trajectories into the EDL; discussions are fragmentary, not conducted by a trained psychologist and the experiences often still raw and unprocessed by respondents themselves. Here, just one case is highlighted as an example of how traces of these early experiences might seep through into the meanings attached to current activism. Kane recounted a series of violent and abusive episodes from his childhood in such a vivid way that it left no doubt that these memories remained very much part of his present.

I think I was about 5, 6 but the memories are still there in the back of my head. There’s memories that I’ll never forget. I watched my Mom try to kill my Dad in the car just coming back from the cemetery from seeing my nan … it’s hurt me keep having these memories come back and come back and it’s changed me in a way cause of my temper cause I snap sometimes, now and again … like in Year 3 in primary school, say about 8 years old, my mum went on a chat website and she met a Muslim and started talking and that and the next thing he come down and started talking as a family friend, Dad day seen nothing of it, and he says, my mum turned round after he went and says ‘I wanna go and live with him’ … and after that they started living with each other. And Mom tried to kidnap me with him, both chased me in the car. (Kane)

Kane’s articulation of his route into the EDL was noted already above when he recounted a connection he made between violence towards children seen in radical Islamist videos on the Internet, which had made him ‘feel sick’, and activism in the EDL, which he saw as ‘trying to make this country a better place for our kids to live in’. At a non-rational level, however, the EDL had become for him also the safe family space that he had missed in his own life:

I do have flashbacks to what has happened in the past. That’s the only thing that gets me down is stressing and everything. But I feel more safe with the EDL than what I do at home most times. Cause what I go through at home, it’s unbelievable. … Mom is the evil one to me. Hers abused me Mom has and then still today she works with kids. (Kane)

Kane’s profound desire to protect other children is expressed frequently, stamped indelibly on his body in the form of the names of four of his nieces and his
favourite aunt tattooed on his chest and is even projected into the future as he talks about his activism as motivated by the desire to make a safer and better society in which ‘my kids’ will grow up. While one might assume that the centrality of assaults on the body found by Blee (2002: 36) as central to women’s stories of their routes into activism might be gender-specific, Kane’s story shows that such experiences may be found among male activists as well. In discussion of childhood abuse, violence, sexuality and the breakdown of relationships there emerges a recurring theme of the EDL as a surrogate family and a focus for channelling feelings of anger or hopelessness.

Family deaths were also traumatic experiences discussed by respondents. Tina, her partner and her four children had shared intimately in the final months of her father’s life when the family was forced to move in with her parents while she waited for council housing. This traumatic experience subsequently became crucial to her interpretation of contemporary society being run as a ‘two-tier system’ (see Chapter 6). Jason also expressed an anti-system view as emanating from the experience of his granddad’s death (he had been brought up by his grandparents), blaming the lack of funding in the NHS for his granddad not having been properly cared for in the final days before he died of cancer. Tim had lost his mother when she was just 50 and Richard had lost his dad (who had brought him up after separating from his mother) at 18. Neither blames these losses directly for their own state of being ‘out of control’ but both talked about these difficult periods in their lives and their impact on their education and future prospects. For Jason and his partner, the loss of twins (stillborn) was a life-changing event and the date of their still birth was tattooed onto the back of Jason’s neck. Ian ascribes a complete change in his trajectory to the death of his granddad (see above); he found his death emotionally difficult to manage since he had never known his father and, while his mother worked to support the family, it was his grandfather who had looked after him.

Other personal problems or traumatic experiences that respondents link to their trajectories include: being bullied (discussed above), being socially challenged, being socially unskilled or feeling ‘different’ or ‘judged’. This was articulated in an extreme form by Andrew, an Infidels member who also empathised with Anders Breivik and considered that they had ‘a lot in common’. Andrew felt isolated in the community and at college and that he didn’t fit in anywhere.

I feel as if I belong in the 1920s … I feel as if, as if my values and my way of looking at life isn’t the same as what it is in this in this day and age, I feel like, [exhales] I feel as if I’m in the wrong place, as if I was born in the wrong time period. But I know, I know deep down, that this isn’t our true culture, this is this is something that has degenerated over time, this isn’t how things should be now, today. … [I]t shouldn’t be like this, it’s not me who’s out of place, I have to keep reminding myself – it’s not me. (Andrew)

Six respondents have serious ongoing mental health issues. In two cases there has been a diagnosis but other respondents talked of struggling with trauma from childhood: ‘I’ve got demons to fight still’ (Sean). In addition to the violence
experienced as a child, Sean’s demons include issues related to an ongoing drug addiction and the temptation to slip back into his former criminal life.

In contrast, although prison experiences were common, they were recounted largely pragmatically and never as a ‘turning point’ in life. At the time of research all the respondents who had served time in prison had done so for non-EDL related offences, although towards the end of the research, Jack was convicted of ‘violent disorder’ following the violence which took place at the EDL demonstration in Walsall (September 2012) and sentenced to thirty-six months in prison (see Box 8). This demonstration, the ensuing prosecutions and how it confirms visions of society as unjust and weighted against ‘us’ are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

### Box 8: Jack

On 17 December 2013 Jack was sentenced to 36 months imprisonment after his conviction for ‘violent disorder’ during the EDL demonstration in Walsall in September 2012. I had been sitting next to Jack on the bus from the station that day and he had asked me what kind of guy I thought he was. I responded ‘a family man, a man passionate about what he believes in and honest’.

Based on what I saw of the violence at Walsall, what the CCTV showed (or failed to show) during his trial and what I knew of him from other events, I would
not change that description. When he pleaded not guilty and repeatedly said that he was not violent towards the police or counter-demonstrators nor had he incited anyone else to violence, I believe he was telling the truth. But, as he admitted himself, he had been an idiot to join those reacting angrily to counter-demonstrators when they became visible on the other side of the police lines and not to move away when missiles began to be thrown and police in full riot gear were deployed.

On the way to the demo, Jack had talked, as he usually did, about his partner and their 2-year-old daughter, for whom he always found a small present to take back with him. His partner had grown up in care and suffered domestic abuse in her previous relationship. She had never been abroad and he dreamed about getting married and taking her on honeymoon to the Caribbean. But he told me also that he would be ‘prepared to die’ for the EDL. Just over a year later, as the news came through in the midst of his trial that its leaders had just resigned and joined Quilliam, he rued the day they had formed the movement.

The fact is that, an individual is guilty of violent disorder even if they did not use or threaten violence themselves if violence involving more than three people is proven and the individual’s actions can be said to have incited others to violence. What previously might have been interpreted as routine banter between demonstrators and counter-demonstrators, in the context of violence, becomes incriminating. He should have moved away. He didn’t. He has just been released from prison on tag.

Finally, while in no case do respondents themselves connect their material circumstances with their trajectory into the EDL, it remains an important context for understanding life decisions. Respondents in paid employment were in the minority and those on benefits described how difficult it was to survive on benefits or (in the case of young respondents) how they were not entitled to any kind of benefit and rendered completely dependent on parents or other carers. Rent arrears were a problem faced by a number of respondents and three had been evicted, or were in the process of being evicted, from social housing in the course of the fieldwork due to rent arrears. One of these was Kurt whose situation had been compounded by wider circumstances (the death of his father, loss of job) and he had simply not taken in how imminent crisis was (see Box 9).

Gradual payment schemes to repay debt are discussed by many respondents and daily problems of keeping the household in food by some. It goes without saying that activism is profoundly affected by this; the inability to travel to demos or meetings because individuals do not have cash for public transport or the coach is a routine problem, for example.

**Paths out of the EDL: ‘stepping back’ and the costs of activism**

While the far right literature approaches withdrawal from activism as ‘exits’ – often risky moves requiring support and facilitation – movement in and out of the EDL was much less definitive, often articulated as ‘taking a step back’ for a period
When Jack is convicted of violent disorder and awaiting sentencing, Kurt gives him a ‘going away’ present; he has turned his own prison phone card into a key ring and inscribed it with Jack’s name. It reminds me, with shock, that Kurt had also served time – four years – after he violently attacked the man he found his girlfriend cheating on him with. Kurt is the last person you would have expected to have a prison record. He is mild and affable although with a sharp sense of humour and ability to story-tell in an engagingly self-deprecating way. Recognising his struggle with modern communication technologies, he says of mobile phones, ‘My method is to stamp on them.’

He was known by everybody by his nickname, which reflected that he always carried the division flag, mounted on a fishing rod inherited from his dad and always a few feet higher than any other flag. At one demo, even a police officer complimented him on it.

3.11 Kurt and the infamous flag
Unlike many other respondents, Kurt had had too much rather than too little parenting while growing up. He had four siblings and had been brought up in a strict Jehovah’s Witness household which he described in ways that suggested physical abuse had been replaced by emotional cruelty.

When I first met Kurt he had been working as a quality inspector in a factory producing parts for high-end cars. He was a natural engineer – anything could be made or adapted to function in his hands – and in any practical crisis, he would have some item in his pocket that would ‘fix it’.

Towards the end of the fieldwork, Kurt’s life got increasingly difficult. His parents had separated and so when his dad became very ill and in need of extensive care, Kurt looked after him. It meant he frequently missed work and was eventually sacked. He survived financially because a long-awaited injury compensation claim was settled. But in a depressed state he failed to keep on top of bills and rent or sign the paperwork to transfer his dad’s place after his death. When he missed a court appearance, he woke the next morning to find the locks on his door being changed. He was evicted with a carrier bag holding what he needed for that night.

Kurt moved back to his mum’s, is finally getting therapy to help deal with his depression and structures his days by volunteering at a food bank.

of time rather than a once and for all departure. Chas described his relationship with the EDL as doing the ‘hokey-cokey’, he had moved in and out so often.

Such stepping back is often an outcome of the very high costs of EDL activism. Tim describes how he had ‘stepped back’ when he found himself ‘getting in a lot of trouble’ and his dad had become anxious that he would end up in prison. Others pulled back from participation for similar reasons – because bail conditions included a ban on attending EDL marches (Jack) or because they were too risky an environment to be in when on police charge or tag (Chas). This reflects Kimmel’s (2007: 215) finding that the most common reason for leaving the Swedish neo-Nazi movement was ‘burn out’ due to the demands of drinking, fighting, constant arrests and violence. In this sense while other forms of political participation demand too little involvement, movement participation over a sustained period requires too much (Jasper, 1998: 419–20).

The costs or consequences of activism are cited frequently by respondents. Loss of, or being disowned by, family and friends because of their disapproval of the respondent’s activism in the EDL is common (Chas, Chris, Ed, Jason, Tim). Respondents are also conscious of the ‘worry’ that their activism causes family, partners and friends who fear they will end up in prison or physically injured (Euan, Ed, Tim, Jordan, Kane, Lisa, Nick). This leads many to avoid discussing their activities with partners and families in order to protect them and to adopt a strategy of ‘sorting’ issues without involving anyone else. Thus when Chas is given a council flat and is able to move out of the family home, it is above all a relief: ‘I don’t want any trouble on anyone’s door step. Now I feel much more secure now. I’ve got my own doorstep now’ (Chas). Although it had not happened to anybody in this case study personally, respondents also talked about the threat of Social
Services removing children from their care because of their EDL activism. This was something they claimed had happened to others in the movement (Jason, Casey, Matt) and isolated cases have been reported in the media.\textsuperscript{10}

Other consequences of activism that led to ‘stepping back’ included losing jobs and contracts. Andrew had been suspended from his post as a teaching assistant following the newspaper reports of his support for Anders Breivik and was told subsequently he would have to resign. Jordan was also first suspended and then forced to resign from his job at a supermarket chain because of material found on his Facebook page. Others mention friends who have lost employment due to association with the EDL (Declan, Euan, Jason, Matt), keep their own activism quiet at work for fear that the same fate would befall them (Jason, Tim) or take measures to prevent being identified on YouTube videos at demonstrations (Michelle). A number of respondents had been excluded or suspended from school or college for EDL-related activism or as a result of accusations of ‘racism’. In addition to Connor’s case (see above), Chas had been suspended for two weeks for wearing an EDL hoody and Tina chose to keep her affiliation quiet at university for fear she would be excluded. Kane had been thrown out of a supermarket store because of his ‘offensive’ hoody and the local library where he did much of his ‘research’ into EDL-related issues.

Physical injury or threats thereof were also a real concern for respondents. Brett reported that his brother’s house, in a Muslim area of town, had been set on fire because, he claimed, ‘he had the England flags on the front of his house’ (Brett). Concern was expressed over the death threats received by Tommy Robinson and, in particular, the ‘intimidation’ of his wife and children (Declan) and attacks on his family home that had forced him to move house (Jack). Euan claimed Tommy Robinson routinely ‘has the shit kicked out of him’ if he goes out at night while Kane called him ‘a dead man walking’.

Accounts of respondents’ own or friends’ physical injury were common. Most related to injury from clashes with the police, mainly associated with the Walsall demonstration (Connor, Jack, Rob, Declan, Tim). Others relate to ‘opposition’ or counter-demonstrators. Declan recounted a particularly emotive story about a 12-year-old boy having his ‘head cracked open by a UAF brick’ at the Manchester demo and his own actions to get him medical treatment:

\begin{quote}
I didn’t see the brick hit him. I just saw him after he was on the floor. Literally got him in my arms like this and [he] had all blood coming down here and took him out of the march. The police medic came along and I said to this police medic right ‘you better see to him or that is gonna be it and I’m gonna lose it’. I had him literally in my hand like this. … He got taken to hospital and I don’t know how he got my number but he rung me up a couple of days afterwards saying ‘156 stitches’ in his head. (Declan)
\end{quote}

Ed recounts how a quiet and reliable member of the division had been beaten up by a group of four to five men in the HQ pub on the eve of the Bradford demonstration after being approached and asked, ‘You’re EDL ain’t yer?’ (Ed).
Threats were also a cause of concern. Ed had been issued an Osman warning\textsuperscript{11} and many respondents had been made aware of their own vulnerability to attack following the prosecution of two men for attempting to plant bombs at the EDL demonstration in Dewsbury in June 2012 (Kane). Tina said she got nervous prior to demonstrations because she feared she would ‘get stabbed or petrol bombed’. Indeed Matt reported having had a petrol bomb thrown at him from a moving car as he walked through a district of the city. Members of one local youth division routinely received threats of violence towards them via social media. Connor laughs these off: ‘I get phone calls and everything me. I just answer them and take the piss out of ’em. Don’t really take no notice of ’em. Don’t bother me anymore.’ Explicit death threats such as that received by Brett (see Chapter 2) were, nonetheless, shocking.

Finally, as discussed further in Chapter 7, the strong emotional dimension of activism that binds and sustains social movements can also work to undermine them (Jasper, 1998: 419–20). A number of activists had left the movement due to personal disputes, frustration or disillusionment. Others were simply overwhelmed by work commitments, personal problems or ‘life’ in general. Of the thirty-five participants listed in Appendix 2, I know six to be still active in the movement, nine are active only occasionally or have taken ‘a step back’ while they prioritise other aspects of their lives and seven have left for ideological or personal reasons.

**Conclusion**

The previous chapter provided an understanding of the EDL as a movement; this chapter has focused on its constituent grassroots activists. Whilst prioritising individuals and their trajectories, however, the analysis undertaken here has eschewed the attempt to discern ‘the motivation of someone who becomes an extreme right-wing activist’ (Klandermans and Mayer, 2006: 7). Rather it has traced shared social contexts and life experiences among EDL activists. This is, first, because classic psychological models explaining receptivity to movements such as the EDL as rooted in the formation of an ‘authoritarian personality’ as a result of particularly strong modes of parental authority are not substantiated by individual narratives in which parenting is often chaotic or absent rather than intrusive and constraining. Second, while more sociologically oriented ideal types of trajectories into extreme right activism suggested by Linden and Klandermans (2007) are useful for distinguishing between experiences, evidence from this study suggests that both movements and individual participants combine elements of more than one type. Moreover, the most appropriate ‘type’ for the majority of members of the EDL participating in this research – the ‘convert’ – places too much weight on a life-changing moment in charting paths into the movement. In practice, while some respondents narrate those pathways through instances of injustice, it would be inaccurate to conclude these are direct motivations for it.

It has been suggested here that there is not one ‘type’ of person that is attracted to a movement like the EDL; rather decisions to enter into, continue and draw
back from activism are set within a complex web of local environment and personal and family psychodynamics. These environmental factors are captured both in the socio-demographic profile of the respondent set as well as in their individual narratives, which highlight, in particular, the importance of their perceptions and experiences of change in local communities. It is acknowledged that structural factors are underplayed in this analysis since the ethnography was not based in a single locality or neighbourhood and the respondent set is not sufficiently large to discern meaningful patterns in socio-demographic characteristics. However, these factors – the places individuals live, work, hang out – are nonetheless understood as indicative of more than the sheer ‘accident’ (Blee, 2002: 30) that draws people into extreme right activism. These sites constitute the structural contexts of trajectories into – and often out of – activism.

Personal and family psychodynamics are also explored through the narratives respondents construct of their lives. Traumatic and abusive experiences in childhood, as well as bullying, are identified as strong markers of individual pasts. Family histories of support for the extreme right are found to be present in some cases but not in others; thus both continuity and radical breaks in political socialisation are identified in different cases. One finding is that in this respondent set the emphasis on pathways into the movement through friends and acquaintances identified in other micro-level studies is not fully confirmed. Rather the movement appears to be a site for the formation of new affective bonds (of ‘family’, ‘friendship’, ‘loyalty’ etc.). This is returned to in Chapter 7.

Finally, in relation to trajectories out of the movement the study indicates a rather different pattern among EDL activists than found in classic far right movements. Rather than decisive entrances and exits, engagement with the EDL, as Chas puts it, resembles a ‘hokey-cokey’ in which members engage fully and ‘step-back’ as they marry the costs and consequences of participation with their wider, and largely normal, lives.

Notes

2 In one case this was a result of placement in an independent boarding school by the local authority due to the respondent’s Asperger’s condition.
3 This includes three respondents who were not employed because they were looking after children.
5 In addition to the eight respondents declaring themselves ‘White-British’, two respondents who identified as British rather than English are recorded separately because they also reported as being of mixed race or refused the label of ‘White’.
6 Only one respondent describes his locality as ‘middle-class’ (Ollie).
7 The standardised socio-demographic data collection conducted included only whether respondents lived independently or with parents rather than whether they owned/
rented or were in social housing. The housing status of the remaining five living independently is unknown as is that for the fourteen respondents still living with parents or grandparents.

8 The ONS census data show 17.5 per cent of the population to be living in all forms of social housing while 9.4 per cent live in local authority rented housing (‘council housing’). See www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/detailed-characteristics-on-housing-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/short-story-on-detailed-characteristics.html. Accessed: 29.05.2015.

9 Ezekiel’s (2002: 57) study also revealed three of twenty respondents to have lost parents in childhood due to death or other unexplained circumstances.

10 Darlington Borough Council was criticised by a judge of the Family Division of the High Court for removing a child from his father on grounds of his connection with the EDL See www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tees-31509391. Accessed: 26.08.2015.

11 A warning issued by the police when they have credible evidence that an individual is a terrorist target.